Leah Plocharczyk
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Nominated by: Matthew Conner

1. In what ways does the nominee go above and beyond in their role as librarian?
Leah Plocharczyk has developed a foundation as an exceptional librarian in her assigned roles onto which she has steadily added extraordinarily original, inspired, community outreach projects from her immediate community up to the national and international level, making people’s lives better at every stage. She arrived at the Library of the MacArthur Campus of Florida Atlantic University (FAU) in Jupiter, FL in 2009 after earning an M.A. in Sociology from Florida Atlantic University and an M.L.S. at the University of South Florida. As one of two librarians, she provided reference service, taught library instruction sessions, and supervised staff. In addition to her comprehensive duties at MacArthur, her work took her regularly among other campuses of FAU at Boca Raton, Ft. Lauderdale, Davie, and Harbor Branch. Due to her managerial skills, she was appointed as Assistant Director in 2012 which she transformed into a thriving organization full of loyal staff eager to volunteer for projects. This experience led Leah to produce a peer-reviewed article on conflict resolution. Yet, these increased duties did not prevent Leah from initiating a highly creative series of outreach programs. With the faculty status of FAU librarians, Leah qualified as a Faculty Owl Leader, a group of faculty selected to offer campus-wide discussion groups and presentations on leadership topics. (The Burrowing Owl is FAU’s mascot.) Leah chose a book that explained leadership in terms of dog behavior: Andrew Kruger, Get the Cookie, Paco: Valuable Lessons in Leadership from My Dog. Based on her own love of dogs, this text presented the material in terms that students could relate to and emphasized the importance of empathy and emotion in leadership. This approach and its successful outcomes became the basis for another published article on library outreach and pedagogical techniques.

Leah participated in another creative form of outreach. To explore how libraries could assist in scientific research, she participated in an experiment by a cetacean biologist to tag dolphins to study their migration patterns. Leah spent hours at sea with scientists, observing dolphins and contributing to the research data. Based on her work, Leah was recommended by her supervisors to attend the Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians held at Harvard University in the summer of 2016, which she completed successfully.

While engaged in another program with the university’s Academy for Community Inclusion (ACI), Leah was inspired to a new direction in her career. The Academy for Community Inclusion (ACI) is a specimen of Post-Secondary Education (PSE) programs which provide a college experience for adults with intellectual disability (ID). During an orientation for ACI, while reflecting on her own experience as a
Faculty Owl Leader, Leah spontaneously proposed to run a book club for the students. That is, to use the library to engage their minds as well as bodies. The ACI coordinator, Mary Lou Duffy, instantly recognized this as a unique and original proposal, which it has proved to be. No academic library offers book clubs in any of the 165 PSE programs for four year colleges listed by ThinkCollege!, an organization which compiles data on this subject. And while libraries have long recognized and sought to support disability, the efforts to help those with ID have been limited. The paradoxical challenge of this group is that the nature of their condition, which deserves support, also inhibits the reading skills necessary to use the library.

After researching the field of special education and literacy, Leah, along with two of her staff whom she recruited, joined The Next Chapter Book Club (NCBC). This organization is the brainchild of the former Director of Disability Studies at the Nisonger Center at Ohio State University, Tom Fish. Somewhat against the drift of research, Fish decided to simply put those with ID and books together in an informal book club and see what happened without expensive funding, elaborate pedagogy, or other mediation. The results astonished everybody. In a low-key environment that combines reading and socialization, those with ID thrived, improving in both areas. Through social media, NCBC has assumed international proportions. It now lists 230 clubs in the United States and another 60 overseas with the majority in Germany. One of the few requirements for hosting such a club is an informal public space such as a bookstore or community center. Curiously, libraries, the social institutions for gathering and using books, were initially avoided by NCBC. When asked the reason, one of NCBC’s administrators held his finger to his lips in the stereotyped “shush” gesture of librarians. However, since its early days, NCBC has changed its policy and accepted libraries as sites for their book clubs. Currently, 60 public libraries host NCBC clubs. However, no academic libraries are included, and Leah’s club at FAU introduces a whole new category of libraries to the PSE programs to provide badly needed resources.

Merely running a book club in her circumstances would have been an accomplishment. But Leah made major innovations in its operation which was envisioned as an informal discussion of a book. Using her experience with campus reading circles, Leah began in a highly structured manner, posting recordings of herself reading passages from the assigned books and distributing discussion questions. But the students did not respond. Switching tactics, she tried other, less formal modes of discussion and instituted activities. These activities, consisting of games as well as more structured social events such as pizza parties for movie viewings, proved highly successful. The hour long sessions evolved into two parts with the first half devoted to reading and discussing the book and the second devoted to games. The club has run very successfully for three years at this writing with the opening of additional sections to accommodate interest.

Much of the reading depended on the choice of book. Here Leah engaged in extensive experimentation as well as research on reading material for those with ID. Some researchers hold that this population is best served with Hi-Lo books which present subjects appropriate for adults at a simple reading level. Others hold that children and young adult literature are more appropriate starting points. Leah’s experience in selecting books over the years provides a valuable trove of information about book selection to educational researchers. In sum, no paradigm has proven entirely successful. The students’ interest seems largely context dependent. Leah produced an article and a forthcoming book on her work and will continue to add to the research literature on the subject as her data grows. Her work also represents an
important resource for libraries in their collection development for those with ID about which there is almost no information.

The games in the sessions also furnished an arena for innovation. There are few if any games designed for those with ID, so Leah and her staff actively searched for appropriate games and, in many cases, invented new ones. As with reading selection, her experience with games represents an important source of information that will be mined for publication. One of the most successful games was one of their own invention. Based on an old TV quiz show, it was given the name of “One Word.” An individual is given a topic and asked to provide a one word clue to get the audience to guess the topic. Other successful games were Pictionary and Charades, especially when questions were chosen to match the readings. The book club experimented with a great deal of other games, including quiz games about items in the students’ backpacks, games to complete words and phrases, games for tossing around a beach ball and answering questions on the panel facing the recipient, Bingo, crafts and much more. Leah’s book club has pioneered the use of educational games in NCBC book clubs.

With her pedagogical innovations, Leah also intervened in the scholarship on learning theories for special and general education. Special education has mirrored general education in changing from drill-based, centralized learning to methods that are more interactive, cooperative, and context-based. These changes have been systematized in the form of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Universal Design is an architectural concept for designing facilities and spaces for the common use of all populations without treating those with disabilities separately. Curb cuts are a paradigmatic example. The success of this movement made some wonder if this concept could be generalized to an abstract system of education that could be inclusive as well, and the result is UDL. Culminating trends in educational theory, UDL holds that learning styles play a more important role in learning than native ability. Thus, instruction should seek to accommodate the greatest diversity of learning styles through pedagogy, environment, and interaction among the students. The library profession, as witnessed both in its scholarship and recent programming for the Association of Research and College Libraries (ACRL) Annual Conference, is deeply interested in UDL. Through her students with ID, Leah’s book club provides a valuable new way for studying UDL for all educators as well as librarians.

Such an original new concept lays particular stress on assessment which is another major concern for libraries. For Leah’s book club, it first needed to be formulated without any precedent to draw on. Utilizing various methodologies, Leah created an assessment of her work that is presented in her forthcoming book. In brief, the program was an enormous success with maximum attendance rates, the creation of a second book club, and extremely positive feedback from participants. Librarians will want to know to what extent this activity transferred into other use of the library by the book club members. Leah and her staff have observed students entering the library on their own, and Leah, herself, has personally mentored three of the book club members as part of their PSE. This has put them on an equal footing with new librarians, whom Leah has regularly mentored as part of her professional work. Through innovation in multiple fields, both administratively and in her hands-on work with students, Leah has made a unique contribution to the library profession and serves as a resource for librarians wishing to follow her path.

2. How does the nominee make their community a better place?
Leah has improved every community that she has participated in as a librarian. With her appointment as assistant director in 2012, she was tasked with improving the organization and environment of the MacArthur library which she succeeded in doing. Her effectiveness can be seen in the intense loyalty of her staff, who took active, enthusiastic roles in her book club on a volunteer basis, and in her recent promotion to Interim Director of the library. Dr. Benito Rakower, an FAU faculty member writes: “During the years I have known Leah Plocharczyk at the FAU Jupiter Campus Library, she has been one of its 'stars.' In her official capacity, and through her expertise, Ms. Plocharczyk has helped me often in my scholarly and academic work as a member of the faculty. Her pleasantness and patience enhance her thorough professionalism with sensitivity.”

While actively engaged in administration, Leah did not neglect the personal touch, actively mentoring other librarians. Jessica O’Neil, Technical Services Librarian at Mandel Public Library, whom Leah mentored writes: “Leah was assigned to me as a mentor during my time at FAU and she was a wonderful influence. She provided me with valuable insight into the promotion process and also helped me on the Promotion Criteria Committee. Our mentoring relationship evolved into a treasured friendship after I was no longer her mentee. Leah is a model librarian that is the pinnacle of professionalism and sincerely assists colleagues, faculty and students with poise.”

Leah’s book club constitutes an intersection of local, national and even international interests. She has materially improved the experience of the ACI students and enhanced the program’s offerings with a unique resource. As such, she has contributed to the diversity of the MacArthur campus. On a larger scale, she made a profound innovation for both PSE Programs and the NCBC by showing how academic libraries can contribute to both.

3. How has the nominee improved your life or the lives of others in your community?
As co-author of our forthcoming book on library service to those with ID, Leah has been an outstanding colleague and an inspiration to me. I met Leah after finishing my first book, The New University Library: 4 Case Studies (ALA, 2014) in which I discussed professional trends in academic libraries. While I acknowledged the importance of outreach to new populations, Leah’s own work far exceeded anything I had imagined. When I asked her how she came up with all of her creative ideas, she replied, “It’s all about love.” At first, I balked at this. It wouldn’t do for publication. But I gradually realized that she was right and that her great compassion and sensitivity put her far in advance of theory. She backed up her insight with enormous industry, organizational skills and attention to detail. On top of running the book club on which our book was based, Leah compiled spreadsheets of data, conducted extensive interviews, and formulated and conducted assessment. Often when discussing a new research finding, I would learn that she had found it already. And she wrote and edited drafts with the highest standards of clarity.

Along with her accomplishments in multiple areas, Leah has improved the lives of others on the way, which is not always true for high achievers. Her own staff are extremely grateful for her improvements to her library’s procedures and morale. One colleague and fellow leader of the book club, Marilee Brown, writes:
When Leah accepted the position of interim library director in May 2019, she started building a positive environment where everyone’s opinion matters. Leah has a great way to make sure all her staff feels valued and that is what motivates us to work better as a team. I feel fortunate to have a job that I
thoroughly enjoy and Leah is a big part of that. Her enthusiasm and support make it a pleasure to come to work every day.

It is a sign of the loyalty that she inspires that her staff were willing to volunteer extra time for the book club without which it could not have taken place. Not only did Leah secure the ongoing commitment of two of her staff, Marilee Brown and Linda Lesperance, but her staff also volunteered to help with her research. A staff member named Cookie Davis revealed a special talent in this area.

On Leah’s contributions to the staff and students of ACI, Angelica Downey, Curriculum and Training Specialist for the program writes:

When I think of a librarian that I want to be a role model to my students at Florida Atlantic University, I think of Leah Plocharczyk and the dedication she has displayed not only as a librarian, but as a member of the University as well…. The students look forward to seeing her every week and she has become a vital component of the development of our students here at FAU ACI. Without her, our program would be lacking the appropriate support that our students require academically and socially from the FAU Library. Leah consistently ensures that the students have all of their needs met within the club and in the library setting…. The students in our program truly feel respected and welcomed by her.

Gwendolyn Carey, Curriculum and Training Specialist in ACI, also testifies to Leah’s enduring impact on her program and the campus:

Leah has been and continues to be a driving force in the inclusion of my students. Leah and her library staff were the first department to reach out and offer their support. Leah hosts a weekly book club geared to the reading level and interests of my students. Leah also mentored students with ID for the past 4 summers. Leah is the type of librarian who promotes a love of learning and literature in all students. She is also a valued member of our campus community.

Finally, the students attending the book club have also expressed their appreciation of Leah. Daniel Adelman writes: “What I like about book club is when we read. I like playing games. I also like the movie and pizza that we have every year for the last book club.” Deanna Baldwin, who recently graduated from ACI and attended the book club for all three years of the program, writes: “I spent time in book club we did read the book and play some games and hang men and act something out and guess the question. We have a snack in book club. Read the chapters and talk about it. And drawing on the whiteboard pick something out and drawing it and guess the question. End of the year pizza party and movies party. See you later.” For a program designed to foster learning and socializing, these students demonstrate success.

As part of her research, Leah traveled to McComb, Mississippi, to see Miss Mattie Rials, founder of the oldest library program for those with ID in the country, which has been operating in the McComb Public Library since the 1980s. Rials received an ALA award for public service in 1974 with her innovative programming. For Leah to travel to see her, study her methods and explain their importance to a new generation and a national audience was enormously gratifying for Rials. The town of McComb published a newspaper article on Leah’s visit.

4. What makes the nominee a leader in their community?
Leadership is often contrasted to management. Managers are detail-oriented, practical, organized, and conservative about maintaining a status quo. Leaders, on the other hand, are bold, visionary, inspirational and change-makers. Managers often come off worse in the comparison, but the fact is that both are necessary since nothing will happen unless vision is grounded in the practical. Leah demonstrates this truth by combining the best of both types along with qualities of determination, integrity, and, most of all, compassion. To renew the culture of the library for which she was appointed assistant director, Leah began by listening to her staff, addressing their concerns and establishing trust. Much of this was done by showing that she, herself, was willing to do anything that she asked of her staff. As noted, she commuted a great deal to different campuses on top of her leadership role at the MacArthur campus. Leah also demonstrated leadership as a Faculty Owl Leader. By boldly choosing a text that went against the grain by focusing on emotion and empathy in leadership, Leah offered a valuable new perspective to her students.

But it is in her book club for those with ID that Leah’s blend of vision, managerial skill and compassion truly realized itself. Much of her success was built on her sense of detail that applied from the very beginning. For the first meeting of the club, she and her assistants decorated the meeting room in owl-themed images to make a connection between the students’ book on conservation of a burrowing owl and their college identity through the campus mascot. Each student’s book had a book mark that said, “Owl keep your place.” Every minute was accounted for with games, ice-breaking activities, as well as treats and goodie-bags to make the students feel welcome. Of course, not everything went well in such new territory. The students did not respond to her carefully-typed list of discussion questions or the audio recordings of the books that Leah had stored for them on Blackboard courseware. Most teachers would have quit. After all, the students’ presence on a college campus was highly experimental. But Leah did not quit. She tried ways of getting the students interested in reading, encouraging them and finding new modes of participation, and she respected them when they wished not to participate. And where the literature merely proposes the creation of tailored games for those with ID, Leah and her assistants created and administered games which became great successes.

It is a special blend of intelligence, integrity, courage, compassion and determination all bound together by love that underpins Leah’s accomplishments and ensures that she will be a positive, powerful force in the profession for years to come.