

Still Crabby after All These Years

A Crabby Librarian Origin Story

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The Crabby Librarian has her roots in the Collaborative Summer Library Program (CSLP) product catalog my co-workers received in fall 2005 before I even started working at Madison (OH) Public Library in January 2006.

The theme for summer 2006 was “Paws, Claws, Scales, and Tales.” At that time, if you wanted to guarantee delivery of items in the catalog several months before summer started, you needed to order in the fall. My colleagues (that I didn’t even know at the time) thought these crab hats looked cute and “someone would use them for something,” so they purchased them.

The hats arrived a few months after I started as the new head of the children’s department. My new co-workers were sure *I* could do something with the hats, since they decided *they* didn’t want to wear them.

The director at the time was expecting me to revitalize our relationship with our local school district and grow our summer reading program through visits to the schools, which they had never done before. And thus, the Crabby Librarian was born.

I love plays on words. I thought since the stereotype of librarians (often) was that they were grumpy, mean, and didn’t like children that wearing a crab hat and being grumpy, mean, and stating I didn’t like children in the library would be a fun juxtaposition.

Off I went in June 2006, crab hat in hand, to pretend to be the Crabby Librarian at local elementary schools. We had a good number of children sign up and participate in summer reading that year, and a few children mentioned they had seen me visit their school. But I really didn’t think more about the Crabby Librarian until early 2007.



"Crabby Librarian" Melanie Lyttle and her colleague at Madison Public Library, Shawn Walsh.

In early 2007, I had a Boy Scout troop in the library for a program, and one of the boys yelled out, “Aren’t you that lobster lady that came to my school last year?” That was the first of many times I would be called that over the years. But this group of boys all started talking about how funny the skit was and how much they enjoyed me coming to school and, most importantly, was the character going to come back to school again that summer?

Over the next two or three months, more kids said they remembered me as “that crabby lady who came to my school,” and I



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began to wonder if the Crabby Librarian was getting a bit bigger than I had originally intended.

From the summer of 2007 through 2011, different staff members came to the school with the Crabby Librarian as a sidekick. The kids loved how the Crabby Librarian was thwarted in her various dastardly plans of keeping kids from the library, from attending her super fun programs, and from winning awesome prizes. But by spring of 2012, the library had acquired a new full-time staff person named Shawn Walsh, who developed the role of the Crabby Librarian's nemesis.

While he was just "Mr. Shawn" to the kids, he was actively working against whatever grumpy plans the Crabby Librarian had, and the kids loved it. Shrieks and cheers for Mr. Shawn happened at every presentation. He brought the idea that the kids were "in on the joke." They knew that the person playing the Crabby Librarian wasn't really mean, but she was pretending.

After posing as the Crabby Librarian for at least eight years or so, something unexpected started happening. High school kids coming to the public library would see me and yell, "Where's your crab hat? Why aren't you dressed as the Crabby Librarian? How come we never get any fun visits anymore?"

My favorite experience happened at a local pizza shop. For several years in our summer reading program, readers could earn "crabby cash" for prizes. I was in line to pay for my pizza, and the

girl at the cash register asked me if I was the crabby lady from when she was in elementary school. Then another employee said, "You can't pay for your pizza in crabby cash. You'll need real money today." I thought I was going to tear up right there in line. I couldn't believe these kids remembered that!

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Then COVID-19 hit. In 2020 and 2021, we barely had summer reading programs. I donned my crab hat for a few pictures, but there were no big programs, fun prizes, and certainly no promo visits to the schools.

Summer 2022 came, and we now were in the middle of a grant that funded programs focusing on our new mobile maker space. Our summer promotions to the schools needing to focus on books and maker space equipment. It didn't seem like the Crabby Librarian had a place anymore.

But the 2022-2023 school year saw Miss Bailey join the Madison Public Library staff. I credit Miss Bailey's younger sister, Morgan Brotz, with the vision for summer reading promotion for summer 2023. As a younger sister, no matter what your age, it's fun to get your older sister into potentially embarrassing or silly situations.

Morgan had the idea that Bailey needed to be the Crabby Librarian's sidekick, Bailey, complete with bee costume and wings.

Bailey Bee and the Crabby Librarian did presentations to classrooms of children between kindergarten and fifth grade. Bailey

Bee was cheered as she chastised the Crabby Librarian for not demonstrating good school behavior. Bailey Bee was famous, and everywhere Bailey went in the summer of 2023 kids came up to her and said, “Hi Bailey Bee! Do you remember me from school?”

I really wasn’t sure the Crabby Librarian was still worth hanging on to after her COVID-induced hiatus. But as I walked down the halls of the elementary schools this year I heard, “Hi Crab Lady. I really like your hat,” and so, at least for now, the Crabby Librarian lives on. &

Crabby Takeaways

Over the years, I have been asked if the Crabby Librarian is the library’s mascot. And she absolutely is most definitely NOT! What this character functions as is primarily a marketing tool.

- The Crabby Librarian is an inside joke between the kids in schools and everyone else. She is a subversive entity that the children understand and the adults in their lives may not.
- The Crabby Librarian is both memorable and predictable. She comes to visit every spring and provides a novel ten-minute skit when the kids don’t want to be in school anyway talking about the awesome things that are going to happen in the summer giving the children something to look forward to.
- The Crabby Librarian is something to discuss. She can entice people into the library building. Over the years, parents have come to the library with children in tow very confused about this person their children were talking about that was so mean, and often these adults were concerned that the library had sent someone to the school who blatantly didn’t like children. The circulation staff particularly enjoys explaining to people the “secret” of the Crabby Librarian.
- In 2010, the Crabby Librarian got her own Facebook page, even before the library did, because who really knew if Facebook was going to last! Then people started following her—not just local people but other librarians and people around the county. She had branched into a very deliberate use of “reverse psychology.” Whatever she said, it truly meant the opposite.
- In 2010 and 2011, the Crabby Librarian was the star of some of the library’s very first YouTube videos. We went to the studio at the regional library system to have them professionally recorded and edited. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AjEFNfrEul> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Rv5GLWsUow> Lots of parents and kids tuned in!
- In 2011, the Crabby Librarian even got her own theme music, when my sister, Allison Lyttle, wrote a piece for a college composition class entitled “Reverse Psychology,” and it played in the background of the video. Now we didn’t have the same royalty free music as everyone else!
- A whole summer reading economy was built around the Crabby Librarian, where kids could earn Crabby Cash to exchange for prizes.
- In a small town, it’s all about personal engagement and relationships. The long-term success of the Crabby Librarian also depended on the humans playing the larger-than-life characters being known to the kids. The kids know that the actual humans in the skit respect and adore the kids and genuinely want them to be part of the library; otherwise it wouldn’t be ridiculous and funny.