

From the President of RUSA

Finding Joy in Libraries 24/7/365

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As I write my final column as RUSA President in April, I am struck by how fitting it is to do so during a month when library workers pause to celebrate our profession and the impact our libraries have on the communities we serve. Reflecting on the 2026 National Library Week theme, "Find Your Joy," I find myself considering not only the role that libraries of all types play but also the role they have played in my own life. While National Library Week is the designated week for us to celebrate, I find joy in libraries 24/7/365. The "Find Your Joy" theme invites each of us to consider where and how we experience joy in our libraries and in the work we do every day as library workers. For me, that reflection begins with my "why."

My Library Origin Story

My library "why" prompts me to think of my library origin story. My love for libraries began as a child in my hometown at Norfolk (Virginia) Public Library's Blyden Branch. I remember the sense of excitement and possibility I felt each time I walked into that library as a young girl: the sounds of children talking while doing homework, pages turning, and the quiet hum of discovery as I navigated the card catalog and browsed the bookshelves. During the summer months, the librarians planned activities for us, often with cookies and punch afterward. I loved those cookies. Those small moments are some of my favorite and most vivid memories. I felt joy, but just as important, I felt welcomed, safe, affirmed, seen, and heard.

Some of my fondest memories center on my interactions with the library workers, especially the librarian, who happened to be Black, just like me. She was one of the smartest people I had ever met. No matter what question I asked, she always had an answer. She was kind and caring, and she showed deep compassion for the people who used the library. My admiration for her remains today, although at the time, I never imagined I could one day become a librarian myself.

At the time, I did not have the language to describe what I was seeing, but I now understand that representation matters. Seeing someone who looked like me in a role centered on information, curiosity, and service left an impression on me that I carry with me every day. The Blyden Branch was a place where I felt welcomed and valued, where adults treated the children in my neighborhood like we mattered.

What I did not know as a child, but later learned as I became immersed in librarianship, is that the Blyden Branch holds a special place in Norfolk's history. The branch opened on July 19, 1921, in a single room of the original Booker T. Washington High School. In that room, the library provided library service to the city's Black residents as the first municipally supported public library in Virginia created specifically to serve the Black community during segregation.¹ Today, the library's more than century-long legacy stands as a reminder of the resilience of Black communities and the importance of access to knowledge.²

In many ways, the values I carry with me today as a library leader, including curiosity, access, belonging, and service, were quietly taking shape during those early days at the Blyden Branch.

The Joy That Stays with Us

When I think about the theme “Find Your Joy,” my mind immediately returns to those early days at the Blyden Branch. The joy I experienced was not just about books, although I certainly loved discovering new stories. I derived joy. But the joy was also about the people who worked there and the environment they created. They made the library feel like a place where curiosity was encouraged, where questions were welcomed, and where young people like me felt we belonged.

Now, as a library leader, I understand that the joy I experienced in libraries as a child continues to shape how I think about the way I want people to experience my library today. For me, finding joy in the library is rooted in curiosity, a sense of belonging, and the idea of the library as a safe and welcoming space. I want my library to also be rooted in what I refer to as the *thrill of the hunt*. For my own information-seeking behavior, I always love the excitement of finding the needle in a haystack. I am rewarded by and find great satisfaction in helping individuals do the same.

I also find joy in seeing people feel comfortable in the library, viewing it as a third place where they can simply be themselves. Libraries are places where people can gather, reflect, explore ideas, or lose themselves in a good book. As a young reader, I often found myself drawn to stories about women and girls whose lives were very different from my own. Their cultures, experiences, and journeys opened my eyes to worlds I had never encountered.

Another source of joy I have found in libraries is the ability to get lost in a good book. Several books remain especially vivid in my memory. I remember being captivated by *Princess Sultana's Daughters*. I was deeply moved by *The Color Purple*, and I was also drawn to stories like *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Joy Luck Club*. What these books had in common was that they introduced me to women whose lives and experiences were shaped by cultures, histories, and circumstances that were different from my own. Whether the characters looked like me or not, their stories expanded my understanding of the world and deepened my appreciation for the power of storytelling.

While my own journey into librarianship began with those early experiences, filled with curiosity, belonging, and discovery, I know that each of us who works in libraries carries our own story about what brings us joy in this profession. As I reflected on the theme of finding joy, I found myself wondering how others experience joy in libraries and library work. I invited members of the RUSA Board to share a few words about how they find joy in libraries and in library work. Their responses were thoughtful, inspiring, and deeply personal. What follows are reflections from colleagues across our profession, shared in their own words.

Finding Joy: Voices from RUSA Leaders

“Over the past 29 years of working in the library world, one constant source of joy has been the opportunities I have had to work with my RUSA colleagues from all types of libraries. Their passion and commitment to serving library users have informed and inspired my work, and my life has been better for knowing them.”

Barry Trott

Editor, *RUSQ: A Journal of Reference and User Experience*
Library of Virginia

"I find joy in libraries when I see how much of a difference the library makes for students. Even if it's just being able to check out a book, find a source for a paper, or grab lunch with friends, I can tell it means something to them. It reminds me of how important the library was for me, and makes the work feel full circle."

Ilana Stonebraker

RUSA Past President
Indiana University Libraries

"Joy arises from the daily, meaningful interactions librarians have while catering to patrons of diverse needs, interests, ages, and cultural backgrounds. These encounters offer immediate positive feedback and emotional reciprocity, which bolsters a librarian's sense of social and ethical purpose. The impact of these interactions implicitly fosters compassion satisfaction. It results from doing meaningful work, leading to the deep, enduring fulfillment that comes from helping others and experiencing the gratitude and appreciation patrons express in return."

Kay Coates (she/her)

RUSA RSS Representative
Georgia Southern University

"Finding joy in library work often comes from the quiet realization that we aren't just managing buildings or collections, but cultivating ecosystems where people feel seen, heard, and empowered. For me, joy is found in the humanity of our service. It is in the transformative moment when a librarian trainee realizes their potential, or when a community's oral history is preserved, ensuring that the voices of our streets are never lost to time. There is a profound sense of fulfillment in building "future-ready" spaces—not just through technology, but through an unwavering commitment to equity and inclusion that makes every neighbor feel they belong. The heartbeat of this work lies in resilience and mentorship. Whether it is navigating the complexities of a system-wide transition or guiding a graduate student through the intricacies of collection management, the reward is the same: seeing the next generation of leaders rise. My joy is rooted in the belief that libraries are essential pillars of social impact, and being able to champion that mission alongside a dedicated workforce is the greatest professional privilege."

Taina Evan

RUSA Secretary
Brooklyn Public Library

Together, these reflections remind me that while our paths into librarianship may differ, the joy we find in this work is deeply rooted in connection, purpose, and the communities we serve.

Joy in the Work We Do

Another important dimension of this conversation is the role of joy in our work. In a profession deeply rooted in service, care, and responsiveness to the needs of others, finding space for joy sometimes feels difficult, especially during challenging times. Yet there is growing recognition that joy, meaning, and engagement are not separate from our work. They are essential to sustaining it.

Often, I read LinkedIn posts in which individuals reflect on the importance of finding joy in their work and the role it plays in sustaining passion and purpose. These reflections remind us that joy is not just a fleeting emotion but an ongoing privilege that can be cultivated through connection, meaning, and a sense of progress.

Popular conversations about joy in work have also entered the broader cultural landscape. Marie Kondo introduced the concept of “sparkling joy.” I remember enjoying episodes of her Netflix series *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* and being drawn in by the individuals with whom she worked as they used her KonMari method for tidying and decluttering their homes. I will be revisiting her method this summer to organize and declutter my home office to reflect on what brings me joy. In the series, Kondo explains that the goal of tidying is to learn to cherish what you have by gathering items in one place, recognizing their abundance, and choosing to keep only those that spark joy.³ She later expanded this approach into the workplace in *Joy at Work: Organizing Your Professional Life*, coauthored with Scott Sonenshein. Their message is simple but powerful. When we can identify what brings us joy and aligns our environments and practices, we create space for greater clarity, purpose, and fulfillment.⁴

A growing body of evidence demonstrates the tangible impact of joy in the workplace. Research shows that cultivating joy at work contributes to increased employee engagement, stronger teamwork, and a greater sense of belonging. Joy is linked to improved productivity, enhanced creativity, increased resilience, and reduced burnout. Organizations that intentionally foster joy are more likely to retain employees, strengthen workplace culture, and support long-term success.⁵

Importantly, joy is not something that happens by accident. It is cultivated through environments where people feel valued, supported, and connected to the larger mission of their organization. Leadership plays a critical role in setting the tone through clear communication, responsiveness, and modeling of behaviors that prioritize well-being and engagement. At the same time, joy is a shared responsibility across the organization, shaped by how individuals support one another, build trust, and create moments of connection in their daily work.⁶

For those of us in libraries, this shared responsibility is especially important. Our work centers on supporting others, often during moments when they are seeking answers, navigating uncertainty, or pursuing new opportunities. The ability to find and sustain joy in this work is not a luxury. It is a necessity, allowing us to show up fully for our communities and for one another.

A Moment to Reflect

In closing, I invite you to take a moment to reflect on your origin story in libraries and what sparks library joy for you. No matter how you are celebrating National Library Week or what your origin story in libraries may be, I hope you will pause to revisit your “why.” What first drew you to this profession? What moments, people, or experiences sparked your love for library work?

For many of us, the past few years have been challenging. In the current moment, it can sometimes be difficult to remember why we chose to work in spaces dedicated to information access, intellectual curiosity, and connecting people with the knowledge they need at important moments in their lives. Yet our work matters. The care we bring to serving our communities matters. And each of you showing up every day to do this work matters.

Libraries continue to serve as places where people seek answers, discover new ideas, and find connection. They remain spaces where curiosity is encouraged, voices are heard, and communities come together.

So, as we celebrate National Library Week in April 2026 and the theme “Find Your Joy,” I invite you to reflect on the moments that remind you why you do this work. What brings you joy in the library? And how might reconnecting with that joy help you recenter, refresh, and renew your love for this profession?

In doing so, we not only sustain ourselves, but we also strengthen the environments we create for others.

And perhaps in doing so, we create the conditions for the next generation of library users to discover that libraries are places where they can find information and experience environments that bring them joy.

References

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