



Anyone can make a difference: A Librarian's story.

Location: Tamaki

Theme: [Leading in and leaderful](#)

In Glen Innes, the library is an important local facility for both adults and children alike. The way it is run, what it offers and who is there is supporting a growing sense of community caring, as illustrated when a librarian uses her own cash to feed hungry children on a Saturday.

Glen Innes library is located in the heart of the community and provides after school care for approximately 20 primary school aged children on weekdays between 3 and 5 pm. Afternoon tea is provided and the children do homework using the computers provided.

The writer was visiting the library on a Saturday and noticed a happy “swarm” of about 15 young children around a table. On close inspection I could see they were eating a huge pile of hot chips from a newspaper. A woman was passing them a bottle of tomato sauce and a jug of water and drinking glasses. Later, I realised the woman was a librarian and as I checked out my books, I asked her about it.

She explained that these children had been there all day and while some had money to buy food, several did not. She went to the shop next door and purchased the chips with her own cash. This was not the first time. As a mother, she felt concerned for the children who had nothing to eat and she knew she could do something about it. So she did.

She said many of the children came every weekend for the whole day. On the weekends they can access the games on the computer, while during after school care on weekdays, they have to do homework. This is a huge attraction!

When the librarians open the door at 10 am there is often a group of primary school aged children waiting, sometimes with pre-school siblings. Most stay until the library closes at 4pm. She was brought up in nearby Point England and she can remember strangers who did kind things during her childhood. She says

“Many of the children are hungry on Saturdays. They are like ravenous wolves. It makes me really sad. I am brown, I am a local and you do not have to be a muppet, you can live an honest and decent life. It makes me insanely happy working here. This library is absolutely vital. If these children were not here, they would be across the road at the internet café where they are not monitored and not safe. At least here we can give them a bit of guidance.

People have told me they feel comfortable coming here when they see my brown skin.

There are a lot of librarians who have been here longer than me and they do lots of good things too.”

As former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden has said, “when you improve a little each day, eventually big things occur... Don’t look for the quick, big improvement. Seek the small improvement one day at a time. That’s the way it happens – and when it happens, it lasts.” (in Heath and Heath, 2010:144). Such small acts of kindness are key planks for the future development of these children.

Equally important is the space from which the librarian acts. Growing people, as Chip and Dan Heath say, is critical to achieving positive change: “People are receptive to developing new identities [and] new identities grow from small beginnings. Once you see yourself as a ‘concerned citizen’, you’ll want to keep acting like one” (2010:161).

This knowledge of the power of identity and its link to action has been well proven in business (eg Toyota, Honda, Braslata) and, in these librarians, Auckland Council has staff who are confident to use their personal abilities and their workplace positions, to make small differences beyond the brief of their job descriptions that help foster connection, caring, value and respect. This is at least partly because they identify with their community, and care about it. It is also because they are empowered to act through the small kindnesses that have happened to them, through the recognition of their position in the community and because they have a place in which to act.

Intent:

The librarian could see the children were hungry and so she purchased food for them.

Learnings:

- Making a significant difference can happen in very small ways which are not always obvious or measurable.
- Maximising the potential of community facilities and their staff may be outside of the core intention of that facility and its staff. Ensuring there is always room to respond to locally identified opportunities can create significant positive change over time, as well as ensuring the facility is useful and relevant to the community in which it is located.
- Demonstrating positive and supportive ways of living can be far reaching: when a person has experienced random acts of kindness in their past, they feel valued and respected by the wider community. They may also be encouraged to do it themselves.

Outcomes:

- Locals feel welcome and comfortable using the library because there are people like them working there, and this atmosphere as well as the facilities on offer means young children have somewhere safe to go on Saturdays where they are cared for.
- The librarian is empowered in her position as a member of the community as well as in her work to make leaderful decisions that can maximise the positive impact of the facility in which she works.
- A caring community is nurtured.

Reference

Heath, Chip and Dan (2010). *Switch: How to change things when change is hard*. Random House, New York.

Story by Stephanie Burgess, a community member who witnessed this and chose to write about it.

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