

May 17, 2016

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Brian Mackenzie

Chair, Little Free Library®

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Dear Mr. Mackenzie,

I am writing to formally withdraw my book exchange from the Little Free Library organization. I have removed the charter sign from the book exchange, and have left the Facebook group. This is a letter intended to explain why I am withdrawing. It is an open letter that I will be sharing.

In September 2015, I began a year-long sabbatical leave where my main focus of study was the LFL movement. I had been aware of the organization for quite some time, and followed many stories about it in the media. As a professional librarian, I was always somewhat irked by this coverage; public libraries would rarely be mentioned, and when they were, they were usually dismissed as being too far away, requiring a card, late fines, etc. Something about this didn't sit right with me. As a result, I felt a critical examination of the phenomenon was due. I installed one myself, joined the Facebook group and immersed myself in this world. Having read extensively on new literacy studies, community-led library services, the non-profit industrial complex and civic crowdfunding, I am now ready to extricate myself from the LFL movement and explain why I am doing so with the hopes that the board of directors considers what I have to say.

I would like to offer some constructive criticism of your organization. I hope it is taken at face value, and not dismissed defensively. I do genuinely believe that LFL has the best of intentions to support literacy within the community. I do, however, take umbrage with the goal to install Little Free Libraries in places that do not have a public library - so-called "book deserts". I also believe that the organization could do more with steward support and outreach, in an effort to encourage respect for patron privacy, anti-censorship and community relations.

There is a significant amount of existing literature on the community-led library. This is an ethos that embraces the notion that the community knows best what resources they need.

Community-led service is not something that is done TO people, rather it is representative OF the people. In the context of LFL, creating partnerships with community organizations to ensure sustained stewardship is crucial; so too are partnerships with organizations that are able to provide sustained literacy training. Books are certainly an important part of that equation, but books in the hands of someone who can't read them or are not interested in the material is not

supporting literacy development. The [Books Around The Block program](#) is a promising step in the right direction, however, I feel as though it could be bolstered with the adoption of some community-led principles; furthermore, the reach of this program is not evident on the website. It could be highlighted more prominently in order to maximize the outreach to neighbourhoods most in need. Specifically, I recommend that your organization carefully examine the tools outlined in **Section II** of [this guide](#) to community-led service. As an example of what I consider to be an ideal LFL promotion by a public library system, please see the [Winnipeg Public Library](#) - they have prioritized low-income neighbourhoods and will be providing ongoing support to volunteer stewards. Partnerships with local literacy support organizations such as [Calgary Reads](#) are also laudable - providing access to educators **as well** as books is key.

Section III speaks of qualitative assessment to help ensure that the community is, indeed, benefitting from the service that has been implemented. I see reference to “impact” throughout the LFL narrative, but do not see significant evidence of purposeful evaluation and assessment, or even how impact is defined by the organization. Lovely steward stories and notes left by happy kids are great for the media and for feeling good but they are relatively benign if they are not part of a comprehensive assessment framework. For example, has anyone asked the kids in the communities being served by the [Kids, Communities and Cops](#) program how the LFL has impacted them? Have bridges been built with the parents of those kids through the LFL? What does success actually mean in the context of this program?

I have also come to see LFLs as a form of civic crowdfunding. The literature on civic crowdfunding is clear about the potential pitfalls of DIY civic services. Absolving governments of their responsibilities to provide services to the citizenry through volunteering is a short term solution to a long term problem. Specifically, the mission to install LFLs in places that do not have a public library is a slippery slope. I recommend that your organization instead work to partner with local governments and community organizations to advocate for the level of service required as determined by evidence based research that will ensure the most effective civic outcome. Clearly there is a significant amount of goodwill and passion for literacy that LFL has inspired - it would be a missed opportunity if that energy was not harnessed for the fullest potential. As has been stated in several places on the LFL website - these book exchanges are not libraries - thus, we cannot assume that placing one in a town that does not have a public library is the best course of action. It can inadvertently send the message that the LFL will suffice in a public library's place. I hope that LFL is proactively doing the utmost to ensure this is not the message that is received.

Libraries are value-driven organizations. Librarians and library workers are the people who embody those values. Prominent among those values are a duty to protect the privacy of our patrons, and a duty to not engage in censorship by providing free access to a wide spectrum of ideas. It has been my experience as an LFL steward that the organization could do much more to encourage these values in the steward community, both through the material produced and distributed by the organization for stewards and in the administration of the Facebook group. Cases in point:

1. Stewards should be discouraged from photographing people using their LFL. It would be absolutely unheard of for a library worker to take pictures of patrons browsing the stacks in a library. Unless there is an explicit agreement from the person being photographed, under no circumstances should a photo be posted to social media - especially when children are involved. This is an egregious invasion of privacy, and one that I see all too often in the Facebook group. Even if faces are not visible, it is a practise that should be actively discouraged.
2. In the steward [support documentation](#), there is a brief mention of supporting free expression, however, it is followed by the suggestion that a proliferation of religious or political materials is undesirable. This is counter to a true anti-censorship mandate. It is true that stewards may have whatever they like in their LFL, however, material should never be removed for any reason other than lack of interest. It is not the steward's (nor the library worker for that matter) responsibility to keep inappropriate material out of the hands of children, it is the parents. A commitment to the free exchange of ideas means a non-judgmental approach to information provision. It is up to the reader to decide how they feel about the information.

On the [Press Resources](#) page on the LFL website, there is an unsubstantiated claim that “The vast majority of public and school librarians fully support the concept and role of Little Free Libraries as outreach and inreach tools for library success.” Since I started disseminating the results of my research, I have heard from a good many librarians and library workers that they have had similar reservations about the movement, but were unsure of how to articulate them without making it seem like they were anti-neighbourhood book exchange. I do not claim to speak for all library workers, and indeed, you have the support of many as evidenced in several partnerships, but, for the reasons I have outlined here, you do not have the unreserved support of all.

Again, I hope that this letter is taken constructively and not defensively. Your organization has struck a chord and inspired many citizens to share books with their neighbours. But the use of the word “library” comes with some gravitas. It is said that it was purposefully chosen as an homage to Andrew Carnegie. The sentiment behind that fact is understood, however in this modern world of surveillance, corporatization and systemic prejudice, the library is a refuge - a commons for the people, regardless of colour, creed, gender, ability, or class. It represents so much more than an exchange of books - it is a lifeline for many communities, and one that cannot be taken for granted.

Sincerely,

Jane Schmidt
Formerly Charter #26958