

It's been a long season of online graduate school as a part-time student for the past two years. While I was grateful to be productive during COVID with coursework, I was ready to connect in person to the school library professional community. The VAASL conference was slightly surreal but overall, a very welcome and inspiring experience.

In late October of this past year, I was selected as one of the recipients for the 2021 Old Dominion University School Library Leadership Mentor grant at the 2021 VAASL conference. As a first time attendee, I was indeed grateful to attend a dinner with current and past AASL and VAASL leadership, and with full coverage of the conference fee. At the dinner, I connected in person with Dr. Elizabeth Burns, associate professor at ODU and my academic advisor, and Mary Keeling, former head of library services with Newport News Public Schools, as well as several ODU library science students. I would later come to realize that Mary Keeling would be the professor for a final course in library instruction. I was able to bring the strategy, wit and wisdom from that conversation to the challenge of developing a collaboration unit during this spring semester. I was so grateful to make some important connections in person at the dinner.

On Friday, I attended two special speaker sessions. The luncheon speaker was Jeff Zentner, author of young adult fiction. He spoke eloquently of the value of learning empathy and compassion through literature. He added that there is a need to encourage empathy and to give a narrative of humanity. In the power of narrative, he encouraged the librarian community to push for the winning narrative and to overcome false narratives.

The keynote speaker was Rodney Robinson, a 21 year Richmond Public School educator and the 2019 National Teacher of the Year. Rodney shared how he uses literature curriculum to connect with marginalized and underserved learners.

I also attended four valuable sessions related to school librarianship. Dr. Audrey Church from Longwood University was the presenter of the first session that I attended on the "*Top Ten Topics and Trends for Love,*

*Literacy, and Learning in Libraries*". In a solid hour, Dr. Church inspired and challenged a full ballroom of attendees at the Williamsburg Inn by highlighting 7-10 online and print resources for each of the AASL school library standards. After the conference, I used the resources on neurodiversity in library spaces for several assignments and in a job interview. I'll continue to reference back to these resources for more ideas.

Another ODU library science program alumni, IdaMae Craddock, modeled how to build a creative community in the library. After creating blackout poetry in pairs, we shared our funny and dramatic creations. IdaMae also talked about the use of paper bridges and towers, and keva planks for creating a safe space for creativity in a school library. While the project examples are helpful examples, the discussion of encouraging vulnerability and creativity in the library was even more impactful.

Nan Carmack from the Library of Virginia shared the wide range of resources in the Find It Virginia database, including the digital multi-user options from the Junior Library Guild, SORA, and Novelist Plus. The database is clearly a valuable resource and helpful to include in a library Canvas page.

Finally, Sam Florer from Virginia History Day presented project-based learning ideas for school librarians. Complete lesson plans, project ideas and contest information was all shown on the Virginia History Day website.

Beyond the sessions, I was able to connect in person with librarians from my school district and with other librarian professionals. It was good to connect with other library professionals to glean perspective and to learn from their experiences. Conference volunteers and fellow attendees were generous and kind with any questions. As someone new to the field, I was encouraged by the professionalism, warmth and accessibility of people at the conference.

In a very full 24 hours, one thing became crystal clear: the VAASL conference was well worth it. Without a question, I will be back next year,

ready to connect with other librarians on the theme of “Library Out Loud: Amplify Student Voices”.

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