Profile: Matthew Bingham

Librarian Supervisor & Web Services Librarian
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Describe your early background.

I was born in Port Alberni, British Columbia, a small logging town about 200 kilometres north of Victoria on Vancouver Island. My parents split up when I was three years old, and soon after I moved to Victoria where my mother had grown up. I settled in Victoria with my mom and my sister, and when I was eight my mother married my stepfather, who factored significantly in my life and my career choice. I attended public school in Victoria and then stayed for my undergraduate studies, going to the University of Victoria and getting my BA in History in 2002.

After working for a few years, I got engaged and moved to London, Ontario, with my new bride, where I received my MLIS degree from the University of Western Ontario in 2007. I worked for the Faculty of Information and Media Studies' Graduate Resource Centre (translation: the library school's library) during my time there, which was a great experience for me!

What (or who) influenced you to pursue a career in libraries?

I came to libraries at an early age because my stepfather began working for the Greater Victoria Public Library when I was eight or nine years old. I recall visiting him at work when I was a little boy and loving the library. He used to bring books and music home from work for me all the time; I was a voracious reader and a huge music junkie. When I was sixteen I began to work for GVPL as a page, and I continued that work for the next seven or eight years, taking me through high school and my undergraduate degree. When I was a page, I remember one of the librarians telling me that I should become a librarian. My response was to arrogantly scoff at him and tell him that was "way too dorky" for me.

When I left GVPL, I worked in child care, and while I had some good times doing that, I realized that it didn't hold much of a future for me, nor was it a good long-term fit. I began looking into going back to school, and the siren call of the library was there. I realized that my perception of librarian stereotypes was the only thing holding me back from pursuing librarianship, and the rest is history.

I was recently asked, "What would you be doing if you weren't a librarian?" I had no answer outside of "Writing about great beers or playing guitar on stage with Pearl Jam," which means I made a good career choice!
Where are you working now, and what do you like best about your current job?

I work for the Greater Victoria Public Library in a dual role: I'm the Librarian Supervisor at the Central Branch as well as the Web Services Librarian for the entire library system. The best thing about my job is its diversity: I have a mix of public service work and behind-the-scenes project work. I have the opportunity to learn new things every day, to be challenged by various problems and situations, and to have a more large-scale impact through the choices I make. I often tell people that you need to be a bit of a “cowboy” as a public librarian: because things change so quickly, it often feels a bit like the Wild West. That can be daunting, but I also find it exciting.

What is your most memorable library experience?

My most memorable library experience thus far was my participation in the Northern Exposure to Leadership Institute in December 2010—my only regret is that I was sick for most of that week! NELI was an incredibly challenging and rewarding experience: I spent a week around like-minded librarians at similar points in their career, I had the opportunity to learn from amazing mentors, and I made connections that I know will last me the rest of my career. I learned a lot about my strengths as a leader, and it made me more self-aware. It was an exciting time, and I'm still so thankful that GVPL sent me!

Name one person you admire, and explain why.

This is such a tough question because of the number of incredible and supportive people I have in my life, so I'm going to actually name three.

Professionally, Patricia Eaton (GVPL's Director of Public Services and my first supervisor as a librarian) and Judy Moore (GVPL's Core District Coordinator and my present supervisor) have each had an inestimable impact on my development as a professional. Patricia believed in me right off the bat, trusted my instincts as a “rookie”, and let me run with my ideas, which gave me an incredible boost of confidence. She constantly encouraged me, let me make mistakes, and always made time for me to discuss issues and find solutions. Judy has taught me so much about professional conduct, effective communication, and how to view things from a different perspective. She is a bold leader, a visionary, and a non-stop whirlwind of energy. She pushes me to be better, doesn't ever allow me to be complacent, and constantly makes me laugh, which helps in those times where work is a bit more stressful! I can't thank either of them enough for their investment in me!

In my personal life, my best friend Andy is someone whom I admire for so many reasons. His patience, his grace, his kindness, and his integrity, among many other qualities, are so evident and characteristics to which I aspire. He is the Executive Director of a non-profit organization and has a family, so he's incredibly busy, yet he somehow is still one of the most energetic people I've ever met. We've been friends for twenty-five years, and that's been a huge blessing in my life.
**What do you do for recreation?**

Recreation? What's that?? I'm the father of two young boys, a two year old and a six month old, so personal recreation happens very, very seldom! However, if I was given some free recreational time you would likely find me doing one of the following: writing, running, playing the guitar, reading, cycling, sampling different craft-brewed beers, listening to and arguing about music with my friends, or cheering insanely for Liverpool Football Club (hopefully with said craft-brewed beer firmly in hand!)

**Name an interesting book or article you’ve read recently. What appealed to you about it?**

As mentioned previously, I'm a bit of a music nerd. I recently read *Deeper Than the Darkest Sea: The Search for Nick Drake*, which is a fascinating look at the singer-songwriter who made just three albums, achieved virtually no acclaim in his relatively short life, fell prey to mental illness, and then overdosed and ended his life. His influence on subsequent generations of musicians has been huge, and he has become quite a cult hero since his death. He was a true musical genius, and his story is a heartbreaking example of the tolls of mental illness and a life that ended far too soon. I love Drake's music, but as a personality he is very much shrouded in mystery, which was the appeal for me. I really wanted to learn more about him.

**Is there anything else you’d like to mention that might interest Partnership readers?**

At GVPL, I am usually the person to whom people who are interested in librarianship are referred when they want to interview a practicing librarian. A question I habitually get is, "What do you look for in a librarian?" My answer usually follows these lines: you can have all the reference skills, technical skills, and collection development skills in the world (and those things are great and necessary), but if you don't like helping people and you don't have a natural curiosity about the world, then you will find less success as a librarian. Curiosity is such an undervalued commodity, and part of the reason I've had any success, outside of having fabulous mentors, is that I'm a person who asks questions and is extremely curious about how things work. Curiosity and customer service skills are two invaluable weapons in a librarian's arsenal!

**What accomplishment are you most proud of?**

The accomplishment I'm most proud of thus far in my career is piloting our own in-house chat reference service after AskAway, our provincial chat reference service, was discontinued. In cooperation with our IT Department, we found an open source instant messaging software, for around $50, which had some of the same functionality as QuestionPoint (canned responses and canned links being the most important), which is specialized chat reference software. From there, I created the public service infrastructure for the service and facilitated staff training. The resulting service, which
we dubbed Ask Now, is still operating. It was hard work, and there were many roadblocks along the way, but in the end it was a truly rewarding experience. I had the opportunity to work on something in which I’m very interested and also to be creative—what more can you ask for?!

**What issues do you think will have a big impact on libraries in the next few years?**

I don't feel like my answer to this question is going to be particularly original, but content format changes will continue to be huge with the physical books vs. ebooks debate, streaming video and music, etc. Continuing financial pressures and the need to "do more with less" to meet our users’ expectations will continue to drive us to be more innovative. I've found that, as a profession, we will need to be increasingly creative in our problem solving to remain relevant. Honestly, I could talk about this for ages, so I'll leave it at that.

**If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go?**

If I could travel anywhere in the world, I would likely return to Switzerland. I backpacked Europe for three months with my wife right after finishing my MLIS, and while we loved the entire experience, we were especially smitten with Switzerland. The Alps are unrivaled in their beauty; the people are friendly, and the trains are *always* on time, which completely appeals to my Type A nature and love of precision. Throw in the cheese fondue and we were hooked. We truly relaxed while we were there and felt completely at peace. It was one of the most tranquil times in my life. I'd love to go back.