

TRUSTEES OF FORBES LIBRARY
Interview with Lisa Downing
for the Position of Director, Forbes Library
October 24, 2016

Present: Mr. Carrier, Ms. Hess, Ms. Sheirer, and Ms. Wight. **Also Present:** Members of the Search Committee Dylan Gaffney, Martha McCormick, Molly Moss, and Serena Smith.

The meeting began at 4:05 PM in the Coolidge Room.

Ms. Hess introduced the Trustees, members of the Search Committee, and the candidate, Lisa Downing. Ms. Downing has been the Assistant Director and Patron Services Librarian at Forbes since October 2004. From May 1999 to September 2004, she was a Reference Librarian at the South Hadley Public Library. From February 1996 to May 1999, she worked at the Macdonald DeWitt Library at Ulster County Community College in Stone Ridge, NY. Ms. Downing received a Masters in Library Science in 1999 from the University at Albany, and a B.S. in Education in 1994 from the College at New Paltz, NY.

Mr. Carrier explained that Ms. Downing would first give a presentation on why public libraries matter in the age of the internet. Then the Trustees will ask ten questions, followed by questions from the search committee. Members of the audience will then be invited to ask questions of the candidate. Paper forms were made available at the meeting to solicit feedback, and feedback can also be sent by email to the Trustees. The Trustees will consider the feedback when making a decision at a special meeting on November 10 at 3:15 PM.

Presentation

Ms. Downing thanked the Trustees and members of the audience for this opportunity. She said that libraries are an important part of our cultural heritage and provide economic value by serving the community. She said that libraries are a cornerstone of the American tradition of equal opportunity. The internet has been a game changer in the delivery of information, but has not changed the need for free and open access to information for all. Libraries are the great equalizer. They offer inspiring physical spaces, where people can come together around ideas. They enlighten our spirits and inspire us to think big. Isolation is a threat in the digital age, and libraries bring people together where they can discuss issues face to face. Libraries connect people with knowledge through lectures, discussion groups, readings, workshops, and trainings. Librarians are true public servants and help interpret information. Libraries exist for all groups of people, providing a safe place for children in the summer, a place where job seekers can take the next step, and where the elderly can find companionship and reading material. Libraries can also serve immigrants and refugees. They provide a warm place in the winter and a cool place in the summer. The internet is powerful, but not everyone has access or the required technical skills. Libraries provide free wireless, software, and training to fulfill the information needs of the community. It provides a safety net, and physical and moral shelter from the storm. It is a quiet oasis to catch your breath, to learn and think about what to do next. The internet provides a great opportunity, and also presents a great challenge. The American Library Association's code of ethics supports intellectual freedom, and champions net neutrality, freedom of expression, and freedom from censorship. Libraries

Presentation (continued)

safeguard intellectual freedom when corporate interests try to limit how information can be accessed and they provide free access to all. Special collections, including the Coolidge Museum and local history collection, connect researchers with primary sources that are owned locally. Library staff have the knowledge to preserve and bring these resources to light. Change is happening at unprecedented rates, and libraries need to redesign themselves to defend their relevance. Libraries provide a critical component now and will continue to do so into the future.

Trustees Questions

1. Describe your present and previous work experience and how it has prepared you for this job.

Ms. Downing said that libraries have been a part of her life since childhood, and she worked as a library page in high school. She is a generalist and is interested in many different things. Libraries provide a profession where she can be interested in a thousand different things all in one day. She earned her library degree in 1999 and worked in a community college library where she learned about circulation, reference, and technical services. After that, she worked on a public service desk at the South Hadley public library for five years before joining Forbes. Her experience at Forbes has prepared her for the position of Library Director. She has had the great fortune of working with someone who has given her the opportunity to grow. As Patron Services Librarian, she has fallen in love with the community, and gained experience with programing, community engagement, and grant fundraising.

2. What is your management style? What do you see as the most difficult task in being a manager/director?

Ms. Downing said that her management style is based on mentoring and modeling. She believes in a collaborative team approach that plays to the strengths of staff. Staff should be given the opportunity to grow and take risks. She believes in an open and transparent approach and an open-door policy. She will make herself available as much as possible in as many different ways as possible. She believes in honoring staff's contribution to the workplace, and recognizing people for a job well done. She said that creativity is important in a time of change, and the library should dream big. Forbes is not a huge library, but it has huge aspirations. She would like to push it a little further while still managing day-to-day priorities. The most difficult task is working within a budget that is not level service funded each year, and making the tough choices. The director has a big role in looking for creative and innovative ways to prioritize and meet community needs.

3. Tell us about the most difficult personnel problem that you have had to deal with. How did you handle it? How was it resolved?

Ms. Downing said she would speak in generalities to maintain privacy and confidentiality. She said that when someone is struggling and their goals are not being met, she sits down and talks with them to find out what is going on. She looks for what support can be provided, and helps make sure that expectations are clear. There should be a lot of communication and regular check-ins well before deadlines are missed.

Trustees Questions (continued)

Changing expectations and technology can create challenges, and she believes in approaching staff with as much respect and support as feasible. As a result, she has been able to work things out and put employees in a stronger position.

4. How do you keep up with what is hot in the library world? How do you decide when a trend is worth pursuing?

Ms. Downing said that a benefit of the digital age is that there is a lot of information available both online and through other means, that can provide professional development opportunities. She likes to network and talk to people both here in the library and in the community. The staff at Forbes is interested and engaged and share news and ideas with her. When considering new trends, she pays attention to how it fits with the library's mission and whether it makes sense for the community. She said that sometimes you need to be flexible and act quickly to seize an opportunity, within reason, instead of being too tied to a plan.

5. What kind of partnership and/or collaborations do you see as advantageous for a public library to establish within a community?

Ms. Downing said she is a huge believer in community collaborations and partnerships. Through programming, collaboration is a great way to reach a large group of people with common interests. She would grow connections with schools, business groups, and social services organizations. She said that all partnerships are worth pursuing, but a touchstone for her is does it make sense with the library's mission. She likes to say "yes" and figure out the details later. There are so many resources in this community and she will reach out to them as much as possible.

6. What techniques would you use to evaluate service quality and customer satisfaction with services provided?

Ms. Downing said the most important technique is listening, observing, and hearing from the community and staff both informally and through surveys. She said she would use the strategic planning process to help set the direction and priorities, and to look at how Forbes fits into the bigger picture.

7. What are some of the unique service populations that the library can serve and how can that service be provided?

Ms. Downing said that there are so many different groups and the library strives to serve all of them, including home schooling families, people with disabilities, refugees and immigrants, researchers and genealogists, the self-employed and under-employed, writers and artists, people with technical skills and those without, and the homeless. She said with all groups, it is important to look at people as individuals, and to look for common needs within service groups. Listening, asking, and receiving feedback is critical for identifying service needs.

8. What kind of public relations program would you envision for this library?

Trustees Questions (continued)

Ms. Downing said that public relations is very important. Everyone affiliated with the library should have a clear sense of what the library is and what it does. She said that branding, and how the library presents itself in a time of changing needs, is an area she is particularly interested in. The Library needs to spread the message in a direct and obvious way by getting out there in the community and talking to people. She would encourage everyone to talk about the library with connections in the community. There is also room for more formal methods through the strategic planning process. She said that people do not realize everything the library does and she would launch a campaign to help the community find out more about what the library has to offer.

9. If you were appointed Director, what kind of relationship would you strive to establish with the Library Board? What would you expect from the Board?

Ms. Downing said that she has been attending the monthly Trustees' meetings as Assistant Director and has a well-established and good working relationship with the Board. It is important for the Trustees to be kept well informed about what is going on in the library and in the community, and she sees that as an important part of the Director's role. Janet Moulding has been a great role model for her in taking the extra time to make sure the Trustees are well informed. She expects open communication, mutual respect, and annual goal setting for both the Trustees and Director to set priorities and guide direction.

- a. If you make a recommendation to the Trustees and they reject it, what would you do next?

Ms. Downing said that this has probably happened already during her years at Forbes. She would ask follow-up questions and if it is something she feels strongly about, she would come back with a revised proposal and try to figure out a way to make it happen. Ultimately, she respects the Board as the governing body of the library.

10. If you were offered this position, what would be your top three priorities and how would you determine them?

Ms. Downing said this has been on her mind. Her first priority would be strategic planning to build the groundwork and set the direction for the future, and she would want to get that process started. Secondly, she would want to work on a marketing plan to position the library and its assets in a way that make them known to as many in the community as possible. Thirdly, she would want to continue and implement the project to redesign the front desk. She would look at ways to improve delivery of service, using technology to create the most advantageous and efficient model possible.

Search Committee Questions

Molly Moss asked Ms. Downing to describe her experience with staff training and development. Ms. Downing said that Ms. Moulding has always believed in fully supporting professional development for staff, and she has seen the benefits. Staff network and hear from experts and then bring information back to the library, which grows both the individual and the organization. She has been involved in a lot of staff training, and believes in giving staff the

Search Committee Questions (continued)

opportunity to grow and learn. She likes the concept of the learning organization, where education is valued and staff are continually growing and having an impact on the community.

Martha McCormick asked about her experience with Friends groups and volunteers. Ms. Downing said she has been the volunteer coordinator for the library and has had many successful placements. She has worked with the writer-in-residence and now the musicians-in-residence. She loves working with volunteers and the volunteers love working at Forbes. It has created community engagement in unique and interesting ways. It is important to have guidelines as to what are staff functions and what volunteers can do. There are many opportunities to grow and to have greater impact through the use of volunteers. Ms. Downing said that she really loves and appreciates the Friends group who fund programming and professional development for staff. They contribute financially, but also through advocacy by getting involved and talking to the community about the library. She enjoys the Friends and loves coming to their meetings.

Mr. Carrier asked what is the biggest change she has observed over her time at Forbes. Ms. Downing said that she believes the shift in focus to customer service has been something done out of necessity, but also through prioritization and looking at the customer both internally and externally. This has been done through reviewing and revising policies as well as formal grants, and shifting the focus to providing service the best way possible.

Public Questions

Dee Michel asked Ms. Downing what projects or decisions she was most proud of and for which did she have regrets. Ms. Downing said she is most proud of the recent two-year grant to improve service to patrons with disabilities, focusing on hearing and vision impairments. The grant came about near the end of the elevator project, which improved access to the building. Once people are in the building they need to be able to access the programs and materials. Technology and additional formats can be used to provide more equal access. It has been very successful and is now an ongoing project. Something she regretted was that for a while references and forwarding addresses were required to receive library cards. Women and children from the local shelter were often not able to provide all the necessary information to receive library cards, partly because they did not have a network and partly because they were concerned about privacy. This did not sit right with her, and she was able to revisit it. The library no longer has the same requirements and this population is now able to get library cards more easily.

Mark Parsons asked about patron privacy and whether Ms. Downing would stand behind a decision made by a staff member, and if she did not agree how she would handle it. Ms. Downing said privacy is so critical. It is being attacked on many fronts, just by going online and browsing the internet. Often patrons, especially younger ones, do not have the same sense of the importance of privacy and the library can help them understand it. She said she believes in empowering staff to make decisions and giving them leeway to use their judgment. There are often unexpected moments in the library and sometimes staff has to think quickly and make quick decisions. Afterwards you can debrief and look at ways you could have handled situations differently. No matter what the situation, you can learn from it. She believes in building trust and giving staff the leeway to make decisions.

Public Questions (continued)

David Lukens asked about the role of the Children's Department in building community and how she would improve it. Ms. Downing said she is the parent of two small children and she values the role of the library for children. It is critical that there is a strong Children's Department that is engaged with the community. She has made connections with community groups through programming, and would take the next step and look to form partnerships with schools and youth groups. The library should be flexible and responsive to what the community is looking for. She is excited about developing the strategic plan and seeing more engagement with families in the community.

Nancy Dubin said that Forbes is a great library, but is closed on Saturdays during the summer and Sundays all year. She asked Ms. Downing for her thoughts on extending hours. Ms. Downing said this is a priority for her. The community is asking for it and she would be committed to trying to make it happen. There are many factors at play that go beyond what the Director and Trustees are able to do, but she would look for ways to tweak hours to provide more access.

Mr. Carrier asked what qualities she looks for when hiring staff. Ms. Downing said that a lot can be learned from resumes, but personal character traits and philosophy are also important. She looks at who candidates are as people, and do they match the culture and vision that Forbes is trying to achieve. It is important to hire for diversity that represents the population the library serves. She looks at how the person's strengths complement what the library already has.

Mark Parsons asked Ms. Downing about the Coolidge Museum and local history collection and rumors he has heard of them closing or leaving the library. He asked if the collections are digitized, would they still be maintained as a permanent part of the library. Ms. Downing said these were important questions when looking at the future of the library. She said one of the library's strength is those special collections, and she would like to see them continue to be supported. She would like to see a place where staff can interact with researchers. The dual use of the space for programming helps bring people through the doors, and she would like to have as much functionality as possible. Ultimately, it is the Trustees' decision, but she would be a strong proponent of maintaining or expanding special collections.

Trustees Wrap-Up

Mr. Carrier asked if Ms. Downing had any questions for them and she asked what are the board's priorities going into the next year of transition. Mr. Carrier said he is hoping for a good decision from the probate court and a clarification of the Trustees' role. Ms. Reall said she is concerned by the city budget cuts in the last 10-15 years that have not served the best interest of the community, and she would like to see weekend and evening hours restored. Ms. Hess said that funding to restore hours and outreach services are top priorities. Mr. Carrier said that he would also like to see improvements to the Children's Room entrance in addition to renovation of the service desk. Ms. Wight said that she would like to find creative ways to connect with the community and assist the refugee families. Ms. Hess said that much of what the library is doing is already terrific, including programming and serving the needs of the community, and that should continue.

Ms. Downing asked what the Trustees see as a successful transition and what would help with this process. Mr. Carrier said that he would like the library to land on its feet with a director who has the experience and sense to come

Trustees Wrap-Up (continued)

up with the solutions to the problems the library deals with on a daily basis. Ms. Reall quoted John Olver who said he was a workhorse, not a show horse, and that is what she would like to see in a director. Ms. Hess said that when they asked at the community forum what qualities were important for the new director, the response was someone who supports staff, has a sense that the library is important to them, respects the past and the building, but can also take the library into the future. Ms. Wight said that when there is change at the top level, it is important to respect staff who have been there a long time. Mr. Carrier said he would like the director to set the agendas for the Trustees meeting and to move the library forward.

Ms. Downing commended the Trustees for such a transparent process. She thanked the search committee for how they have handled this important moment and for their thorough and thoughtful approach. She asked what the Trustees have heard from the community that is important for the new director to know. Ms. Hess said that the community wants someone who listens. People like much of what the library offers already and would like more.

Mr. Carrier asked if there were anything else Ms. Downing would like to tell them and she said she hoped her enthusiasm for the position was clear. She is committed to this organization and enjoys working here with the staff, the Trustees, and the community. The library has so much going for it. It is a magnificent jewel and she is excited about the future. She said she would bring continuity and build on the momentum, but would also bring fresh eyes to the position.

Ms. Hess thanked Ms. Downing for coming and speaking with the Trustees and the public. Mr. Carrier thanked the audience on behalf of the Trustees for sharing their questions, and Ms. Hess reminded the audience to use the feedback form or email their feedback to the Trustees. The Trustees will consider the feedback when making a decision at a special meeting on November 10 at 3:15 PM.

The meeting ended at 5:00 PM.