

MICHAËL STEPHENS

WHOLE- HEARTED LIBRARIANSHIP



Finding
Hope,
Inspiration,
and Balance

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*Finding Hope, Inspiration,
and Balance*

MICHAEL STEPHENS

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For Cooper & Dozer



Understanding what it means to embark on a research journey—to collect, analyze, and publish illuminating new knowledge as part of our practice of librarianship—should be promoted and commended.

TALK ABOUT COMPASSION

A common punchline in the librarian oeuvre pertains to the number of cats a particular librarian may own. We all know that librarians are dog people, too, as evidenced by the multiple Facebook photos I see of various canine biblio-companions. I am sure librarians also keep various other mammals, reptiles, and birds, but there is a natural fit between our love of four-legged friends and our calling to the profession.

During the semester, I share with my students what I'm up to beyond my academic pursuits. It helps to make a stronger connection as we learn about course content and one another's lives. I wrote this caption for a photo on our course blog:

Cooper is our Labrador retriever—been with us since 2009. In December, we adopted Dozer from the dog hospice here in town. He was abandoned by his family in eastern Michigan and lived alone in his house, then in a cage in a shelter. He has some health issues (heartworm-positive, arthritis, blind in one eye), but he's a totally sweet guy. The ladies at the hospice informed us he likes to be read to! These days he's thriving and holding his own. I know this isn't related to our class, but volunteering with the dog hospice and adopting Dozer has been very rewarding. I hope everyone finds that thing they do beyond our great profession. Balance is important.

In hindsight, it is related to our course and definitely related to our profession. Our animals can teach us a few things and help us to be better at our jobs. I've learned a lot—about myself and about how I see the world—since we adopted sweet Dozer. These lessons transcend caring for animals to embrace concepts that inform and support our mindset as professionals.

Compassionate Leadership

A brief from the Urban Libraries Council a few years back, “Library Leaders Owning Leadership,” states that “leadership is more art than science.” Whether you are leading your own pack at home or leading a department or library, there is no formula for success—no secret recipe that always works. The brief states, “Leadership is built around values, beliefs, relationships, passion, and emotional resources more than knowledge, technical skill, or physical resources; more of a belief and condition of the heart than a to-do list.”

What values and beliefs set good leaders apart? I’d argue for good listening skills, follow-through, integrity, and strong emotional intelligence. It means understanding how best to encourage those around you, taking care of their needs as well as the needs of the group. Adding Dozer to our pack at home has required some special attention to Cooper. Everything is equal and balanced, and on occasion, Coop and I go for a solitary walk as we used to do. Other times, Doze gets more consideration. It’s funny, but I recall being treated the same way by the best mentor/supervisor of my library career.

Dog Days

To take a literal approach, animals are often incorporated into library programming, a trend that has become an established practice. One area is children reading to dogs. The benefits are significant: in addition to improved literacy skills, they include greater empathy, understanding, and compassion for animals on the part of youngsters.

For teens, some institutions have regular activities that involve service dogs that are learning to become guide dogs. The teens learn about the roles that working dogs can play and can observe the intelligence of animals, as well as gaining insight into the lives of those who are differently abled. It’s also a valuable experience for the young guide dogs, who learn to deal with a lot of excited teens.

In It for Life

I’ve often given this piece of advice when someone loses a beloved pet: taking care of an animal is a journey. It’s part of the process, including the difficult things that come at the end. Sometimes those last days,

hours, and minutes are the ones that stick with us, and the memories of a joyous life and companionship take some time to return. It's hard on the heart—as hard as anything we might do or experience in our lives—but I wouldn't ever give it up. Dozer's days are finite, but every day with us will be precious, and every small joy savored. Moreover, never forget, we have to give ourselves the opportunity to mourn. Whether it's the loss of a pet or a significant new change at your library, mourning the loss of “what was” is essential.

We are the heart of our communities, and that only works because of what the people who run libraries give of themselves. They do it knowing that there will be hard days and disappointment, budget fights, and individuals whom they may not be able to reach. The best librarians make that emotional investment because they believe in the institution and the communities they serve.

Epilogue

After my essay “Talk about Compassion” ran in *Library Journal* in April 2016, I heard from librarians all over the world sharing their own stories about dog and cat rescues. Dozer was also featured in an article about Silver Muzzle Cottage in the *Detroit Free Press* and in a video at USAToday.com. At conferences, a common greeting to me was “How's Dozer?” I had a slide of Dozer and Coop in all of my talks through 2016 and 2017. I told Dozer's story and riffed on empathy, compassion, and library leadership. More than once, I looked out into an audience at a library staff day and saw a few teary eyes. It touched my heart.

In December 2017, Dozer was diagnosed with bone cancer in his back leg. It was untreatable. He was always a stoic little guy and continued to be even as his health failed. He stayed very close to me every day, and every night we slept in the living room because he couldn't climb the stairs. He was with us until late February 2018, when his declining quality of life hit the point where it was his time. I held him closely that afternoon and said goodbye. The little guy who was given just weeks to live had been with us for twenty-six months.

Dozer taught me so much about understanding, empathy, and unconditional love. If you ever asked me about him, if you have ever donated to a senior dog charity, or if you have adopted an older animal that no one wanted, thank you.