

# Everyday Ethics for Libraries\*

## Part 3: Equal Treatment

*Pat Wagner*

There are four library ethical standards, and the second one I'd like to talk about has to do with equal treatment. And equal treatment comes from the rule of law which was first described in western civilization by Plato. And it really goes back to western society in England and the idea of an everyman – the fact that a person, regardless of their status in society and regardless of the Church and State, should have equal access to the law and to be treated fairly. So that there is not an elite class where certain people are favored with privilege.

In ethical studies I have to say that that idea of special privilege is one of the key characteristics that will inform you if the issue we're talking about is an ethical issue or not. That, in business for example, if you walk into a room where a group of your competitors are waiting to hear whether or not they are going to get a bid on a job, and you go around to the people and tell them that you are a representative of that particular customer, and the bid has already been decided, and in effect shoo everybody else out of the room so that you get the bid – and I've know people who have done this. Guess what?! That's unethical.

If you use your position in the library because you are an insider to cherry-pick the best books when they come in, to steal – except people don't think of it as stealing, they think of it as perpetually borrowing – really cool media stuff out of tech services. If you come to the library -- even if you bring your own paper -- and use the copier without paying for the copies directly and tie up the copier so that you get to use the materials and resources in a way and manner that an average citizen wouldn't be able to use it. That's all special treatment.

And a lot of times libraries do this because they think people deserve it. People who work in libraries work hard, and I don't know anybody who makes a lot of money in a library. So it's out of that good feeling that we want to do nice things for people who work in the library. And to tell you the truth, there's a whole bunch of wonderful ways that are ethical that you can reward people with who work in the library. The place where I draw the line is where it comes to the rules of the library – the idea that people who work for the library are not subject to the same rules that you impose upon other people. That kind of privilege bothers me.

I also know that in small towns sometimes there are people, as my grandma would say, who think they're "hoity-toity," you know, the privileged characters. It might be because their family has a certain amount of status in the community. I lived in a village of around 500 people in rural Vermont, and it was a village that had been founded in 1712. Well, if your family didn't go back to 1712, you were considered a newcomer, even if you had lived in that village for 50 years.

Sometimes status is imposed because you like the person. It could be the bank president, but it could be your Sunday school teacher. It could be your next door neighbor. It could be a friend or family member, and you want to do something nice for him. Well, that in the public sector is considered special privilege. We call it "favoritism," and we call it "nepotism." And it's interesting that the word "nepotism," which has to do with special favors for family members, really didn't come into existence and wasn't widely used until the 19th century. Until recently, it wasn't even considered a problem to do special favors. Well, guess what?! It *is* today in the 21st century.

So what we want to do is to ensure that, no matter how big or small your library is, anybody walking in is going to receive that same special service. And I tell people, if you've ever been to Disneyland or if

you've ever been to a really well-run restaurant, or a well-run department store, you know the feeling of being treated special, no matter who you are. And that's the kind of way that I want people to be treated in the library.

Years ago my father passed on, and he left my husband and myself a little money. And I was in downtown Chicago dealing with the estate. And my husband and I love art, so my husband was visiting one of the fancy, fancy art galleries in downtown Chicago on Michigan Avenue that happened to carry a painter that my husband and I both love. Now my husband was in his holiday clothes which basically make him look like an axe-murderer. He hadn't shaved for three or four days. He had old blue jeans on and an old T-shirt. And he walked into this fancy Michigan Avenue gallery and said, "Excuse me, I don't want to be a bother, but I really love this particular artist. Would it be OK if I hung around and just looked at the paintings?" And the staff said, "We are delighted to have you here, sir, whether or not you buy anything. We love it when people come in and appreciate the art. Let's pull some stuff out of storage for you since you appreciate this artist, and we'll set up a place where you can come in and look at the stuff." So for three days my husband spent several hours a day with this wonderful art gallery. Well, the fourth day, I came over, and I had a check from the estate burning a hole in my pocket. I walked into the art gallery and I said to my husband, "Pick out a painting and it's yours." And he said, "You're kidding?!" And I said, "No." And he turned to the lady who had been waiting on him and said, "I have great news. I didn't realize we'd have the money, but we can buy something." And she just sort of squealed with delight. And she ran into the back room, and I could hear her saying, "You know that nice man who loved the art? His wife is here. They're going to be able to buy a painting. Isn't that wonderful?" Now, she would've lost a considerable commission if she had decided that my husband wasn't dressed well enough to be at that fancy art gallery. But that's how you want to treat people.

Sometimes when people walk into a library, if they are not well-dressed, maybe they're experiencing hard times, maybe they're on medication, maybe they're physically ill, maybe they're going through some horrible heartbreak in their personal life that you are not privy to. They may not present themselves well. And they know through experience that they may not be treated well themselves. Well, guess what?! That puts a chip on their shoulder. But when they see you smiling at them when they come in and you treat them with basic courtesy, that can go a long way, make a big difference, to changing behavior.

So what are some of the issues of equal treatment that we want to worry about in the library? Well, one thing is that everyone has access to the same services. That you don't have services that are offered to people that are secret. My favorite example is hold policies. At many libraries I visit, it is understood that if you are a longtime patron or resident of the community, you can go to the front desk and give the front desk a list of the best sellers that are coming out in three weeks. That particular list will be sent back to Tech Services for expedited processing, and you, as one of the privileged few, will have a special call shelf in the back. And when you come in, people will say, "Oh, Pat. So glad to see you! Yes, those books that everyone is dying to see, you get first crack at them." And if you're not somebody who's lived in town for ten years, you may not even know that that policy is available. Or the holds policy is so complicated that once you read the 14-page article about it that's written in Latin, you still don't know exactly what you're supposed to do. And if you break a rule, suddenly you don't get what it is you want. So, suddenly in some libraries, a very small percentage of the people have access to the best part of the collection that everyone wants in a community public library – the newest and the freshest books, the prestigious books that everyone wants to be the first to talk about in their book club. And everyone else sort of wistfully says, "Gee, I wonder how they do it?" That's special privilege. And yes, it does apply, whether or not it's the board.

But there's no special class of library users. But sometimes we create a special class of library users because they're old or they're rich or they're well-dressed or, from our point of view, they're well-behaved. Most libraries I've visited have at least one person on the staff who doesn't like teenage boys. And guess what?! Everybody else gets better service than the teenage boys. Somebody once asked me about a situation she had in her town. A young man came in to take books out of the library, and they had at that particular library some very nice art books in circulation. Not all the art books. Most were in reference. But they did have some nice books circulating. And it was known to the woman that this young man had a drug problem. And she absolutely knew for a fact that if she let him check out the books, she would never see those books again. And that's exactly what happened. And she asked me, "Did I do the ethical thing by letting him check out the books?" And I said, "Yes, you did. You had no right based on personal knowledge to decide that for whatever reasons you thought he wasn't allowed to take out books."

I've had staff not treat people well because they knew there was alcoholism in a family. Or that they knew there was abuse in the family. Or they didn't like what the wife did for a living. Or they didn't like the morals of the family. Or they didn't like the religion of the family. I know of a library in Nebraska where the director was fired because she invited men who hung out at the local biker bar to come in the library. And even though they were always well-behaved, the board of the library actually fired her for letting "riff-raff" into the library. Folks, this just happened two years ago. We're not talking about the 19th century.

So this idea that everyone who comes in gets the same services is very important. There aren't insiders regarding contracts. And this goes back to the idea that in a small community, everybody knows

everyone else. And you may have a board where there are people who know painters and contractors, who know people who do electrical work, and the library needs something. And somebody's cousin or sister steps forward and says, "Oh, I'll be able to do that for free." And the library board says, "What's wrong with allowing a vendor to just come in because we like them?" Well, here's the problem. For one thing, it portrays the appearance of unfairness and that board gets the reputation very quickly of being an insider board. And you'll hear people say, "Yeah, if you're part of the old girls' club or the boys' club ... or if you belong to a certain church, you get to have some activity with the library. But otherwise, you don't." Because the board forgets how many decisions are made very quickly even in an open board room without a chance for other people to participate.

The second thing is that even though that person was able to do that work for free, they certainly got rewarded with a lot of free publicity, maybe a nice sign in front of the library, a mention in the newsletter. So it isn't that they weren't rewarded at all, it wasn't like an anonymous donation of some kind. And with it came with a certain amount of leverage as well. So, I find that when boards do audits of dealing with contracts and so on, they find too often they are just handing nice contracts over, even free contracts over to people, without thinking of the implications.

And then finally, and I know I've mentioned this over and over again, no special privileges for the board and staff. If there's a rule about using the copier, everyone obeys the rule. If there's a rule about overdue books, everyone pays the fine. And from my personal view, it is a test of ethics and character if the people who are running the library are the first to say, "The rules should apply to me."

In Colorado, many years ago, we had a governor, Roy Romer, who had a Harley and he had a convertible. And he liked to speed. And we used to make jokes in Colorado that part of the way that

the subsidy for the state patrol was paid was through our governor's speeding tickets. Never once did our governor ever try to get out of a speeding ticket. Never once! Because he knew it set a bad example for people. But boy, he liked to drive fast! It was sort of a standing joke for many years. And you know what?! There were people who said, "I don't know if I agree with Roy's politics, but the guy's honest." So his willingness to impose on himself the same rules as everyone else was very important.

I grew up in Chicago. My father worked for the first Mayor Daley in the 1950s and early 60s. And I was with a family party going someplace, and my dad was speeding. He was stopped by a police officer. And, as the police officer was writing him a ticket, one of my cousins said, "Hal, you're somebody in the Daley administration. Just tell the cop who you are. This is Chicago. You won't have to pay a ticket." And my dad said, "No, you don't understand. I have to be like Eliot Ness. I have to be squeaky clean and untouchable. And by being absolutely squeaky clean and above reproach at all times, no one in the Daley administration can ever blackmail me." And so my dad paid his speeding tickets. He never butted in front of a line. He never tried to get free tickets to a Cubs game. Because he knew that when difficult times would happen – which they did – there was nothing that any bad person could do to force my dad out of office or force him to make a bad decision because they had something on him. Do you think it doesn't happen in little towns for libraries? Well, you just haven't gotten around a lot.

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