

Advisory Board Meeting  
Special Session  
June 10, 2009

Transcription

Attendance:

Board Members: Juanita Jones, Chairperson; Sue Geiger, Les Johnson, Carol Schlachtenhaufen, and Nonette Hill.

Library staff: Barbara Morse, Director; Cathy Haines, Asst. Director and Cheryl Raiford, Administrative Assistant.

Ms. Jones announced that this was a special meeting of the Advisory Board to deal with the request to move two items (Bermudez Triangle and Gossip Girls: only in your dreams) from the Young Adult section of the Library to the Adult section.

The meeting was called to order at 5:02 p.m. Ms. Jones stated that the board would listen to speakers from both sides of the issue requesting that they limit their comments to 3 minutes. After that there would be a roll call vote of the Board on the issue.

Ms Dixie Fechtel and Ms Dianne Venetta spoke first in order to present their request for removal. They reminded the board that the petition for the removal of the 2 books was initiated some time ago. Ms. Fechtel explained that the petition was a result of having a personal experience of being shocked about what her child found in the library. After filing the petition (Request for Re-Evaluation of Library Material) and talking with several people, including Barbara Morse and Wendy Breeden, they determined an alternative solution could solve the problem and it would be fairly simple. Ms Fechtel noted that she believed that other libraries have done this by having a separate shelf or section for books with questionable materials that are labeled and the parents have a right to check these books out. This would prevent the items from being moved to the Adult section. It would solve the problem of having unsuspecting and unknowing parents or children to go into the Library and pick up these types of books.

Dianne Venetta stated that she agreed with everything that Ms Fechtel had said then pointed out that the Public Schools have separate shelves where parental consent is required for the books. That way anyone who wanted access to the books would have it and those that are not in favor of this material would know that they could have their children in the "youth section" and not be in fear of them running into this material by accident. She expressed concern that there might be grandparents who bring their grandchildren in the area and are not familiar with the material. Ms Venetta felt that the information on the book covers does not always show what the book contains in the way of content. It does not show the true, explicit nature of what's inside the book. She doesn't feel that they have an objection to sex in reading material, the teens need to learn about it and whether it is homo-or heterosexual, but it is the context in which it is cast that is the problem. Anyone who wants it can get it but it's not there for the unsuspecting.

Ms. Fechtel stated that the problem, as she sees it is not that the books mentioned sex, drugs, or violence; it is that they glorify the behavior as being normal, natural behavior. The Gossip Girls series is about very wealthy teens that have a fantasy life and there are no repercussions in what they do. It does not matter if it is sex, drugs or making a porno movie or whatever it is just fine and good. She stated that she's sure there is some moral in the story along the way, probably some good in all of these books but it does not overcome the harmful effect it can have on our children.

Ms Venetta stated that a lot of the kids who come here [library] are at risk, they might be poor and they might fantasize about some of the life styles that they are reading and not be able to draw that line between reality and fantasy because they have no better example from which to work. It is unfair of us to have these books so available and not have something like the PG-13 movies or a special shelf for parental consent that lets them know there is something crossing the border in these books for these kids. There is research that shows that adolescents are incapable of realizing the repercussions and consequences of what these books present to them. It is our job to protect them and guide them.

Ms. Fechtel stated that Ms Venetta and she had talked to reporters and TV stations who took a look at the material and, when asked if they could reprint or show the material, the reporters said they could not. They stated that community standards are not such that this could be printed in the newspaper or shown on the television. Ms. Fechtel asked if this was what we wanted in our youth section something that is not in keeping with our community standards? She did not think that the majority of our citizens would want this type of literature available to any teen, who comes in off the street without some sort of parental consent. Ms Venetta stated that it is not about censorship, we all should have free and open access to these items but at some point we need to ask ourselves is this ok. This is not good for our kids, this is not helping them, we are not sending the right messages and at some point you have to draw that line. Different parents draw that line in different places but the law draws that line at the age of 18, some states draw it at 16. As custodians of the kids that come into the library we should try to help in that guidance as much as we can in a responsible way. Ms. Fechtel said that there is a reasonable solution, that doesn't involved censorship, by having the books in an appropriate place where unsuspecting or unknowing parents or teens don't get this type of thing off the shelf. She and her child were totally shocked by the books. She understood that review organizations are use to these books but she understands that the reviewers give the reading level of the child, not whether or not the content is appropriate for that age; if they can read that title then it is appropriate but she doesn't feel that's the case.

Ms Venetta reiterated that the public schools have a special shelf for parental consent for these types of books, and she felt it would be easy for the public library to do the same. She realizes that the argument is that public schools are custodians for the children but that the public library is different in that respect but that, as adults, we should be proactive in this matter and do the same, follow suit. Ms. Fechtel asked if all of the board members had received the excerpts of the books. They agreed that they had.

Les Johnson asked when the schools had started having a separate shelf for questionable materials. He remembered the schools having problems with Judy Blume books in the past. Ms. Venetta stated that she did not know, but Tavares Middle school has a special shelf for this type of material. In response to a query from Mr. Johnson, Ms. Fechtel said it was her 13 year old who had borrowed the books in question. He asked if the child had seen the Gossip Girls on television, Ms. Fechtel stated that they had not. Mr. Johnson stated that he had read the excerpts and that taking into context of today's world it isn't different. Ms. Fechtel said that today's society has become desensitized to this type of behavior. Ms. Venetta stated there are rating systems for television and movies but not for reading material. This is what they are asking for here something like a PG 13 rated shelf. Another option would be to label the books like the ones for movies, games or CD music, advisory labels. However, Ms. Fechtel disagreed with that kind of labeling, stating that a child would not pay attention to a rating label. We would still not be taking responsibility for the child coming off the street that doesn't have dance lessons, ball lessons, they don't have that extra money and they come into the library for their entertainment. She asserted that they go into that room and take books out that are harmful to them. Their brains have not developed yet, they're adolescents and they should be focusing on other things. Kids are getting it from all different directions why do we need it on the shelves of our local library. We can do better than that.

Mr. Johnson asked how the parents were handling the issue with their kids. Were they using it as a learning tool or guidance? The language and themes from the book are common in today's society. Ms. Fechtel said these things are not common in her home. Mr. Johnson pointed out that was just in her home. Ms. Venetta stated that her daughter is 9 years old and they are already having conversation. It is the context in which you have these conversations which she feels is key. Delivering it in the context of these books is not the same as having the conversation that you [Johnson] are talking about. Ms. Fechtel said they aren't saying these subjects should be brought but she feels these books are saying it's OK and this is a normal life-style; they are glorifying it with no repercussions.

Ms. Jones asked if Ms Fechtel used this as teaching moment for her. Ms. Fechtel said yes she did discuss this with her daughter and that it had to be a teaching moment because what she was reading about, she'd never encountered before.

Ms. Hill asked if they considered who else would be making decisions about what would go on the special shelves; what the criteria would be. How do we keep freedom of speech? Ms, Venetta suggested that this was an advisory panel that comes together and makes decisions. She suggested that they [the Board] could take the imitative and have a parental advisory panel comprised of different opinions and different perspectives to take a look at books. She admitted that it would take some effort and time but it would be worthwhile. Ms. Venetta has done some research and found that the teen birth rate in the United States is highest by far of any of the industrialized nations and our education scores are at the bottom. She found that China, Singapore, Finland and the Netherlands have the lowest teen birthrate and the highest scores in education and that's not a coincidence. This is not about one parent's differing guidance than another but rather a community problem. Drop outs, poverty, single parenthood, gangs are not issues far detached from what we are talking about today. She wants to keep the books but have those on a separate shelf; not to say you cannot have it just make sure your parent knows. Ms

Fechtel repeated her concern that we are desensitized to these issues and someone has to draw the line and the library is the perfect place.

Ms. Schlachtenhaufen stated that the resolution was about moving the books and Ms. Fechtel and Ms. Venetta are no longer asking to move the books. Ms Fechtel said that the idea is the same; they could go to a special section just “where they go is open to the most appropriate place.” Get them off the open shelves where anyone, unsuspectingly and unknowingly, can get a hold of them and start reading. Mr. Johnson asked if there was a certain age they were requesting. Ms. Fechtel stated that the current age group is 12 to 18 year olds and this is a wide range that could, perhaps be looked at.

Ms Schlachtenhaufen asked again if they were requesting the books to be removed from the Young Adult room. Ms. Venetta stated that the books could be in the room if they were moved to a shelf behind the Young Adult librarian. Ms. Fechtel stated that she would be surprised if it were decided that the books were left in the room since that would still mean that the unsuspecting borrower can still get them off the shelf. Ms Schlachtenhaufen asked again for confirmation, were they requesting that the books be taken out of the room? After some discussion, Ms Venetta said she thinks they are asking to have them removed from open, easy access in that room. Ms Schlachtenhaufen asked Ms Fechtel’s response to that question. Ms. Fechtel feels that they need to be out of the room; they need to be in a place where children cannot come up to them and start reading them. She suggested that the Advisory Board might be able to come up with a solution; she respects their problem-solving ability. Ms Venetta feels that this is a minor distinction, if they are in the room, on a separate shelf with a cover over them without easy access so people can’t just go and take them the fact that they are in the room is negated by the access.

Ms Schlachtenhaufen noted that it was important that they know the language that they will be voting on, removal or not removal. Ms. Venetta expressed concern that they would not be able to come to a negotiated position so that they would have to come before the board again. Can we solve the essence of the problem? Ms. Jones stated that the wording was the consideration. Mr. Johnson asked if, in their research, this type of situation exists in other areas of the country. Ms. Venetta said yes, they are popping up all over the country. Some of them are taking lawsuits into account others are doing what the public schools are doing by putting them on a separate restricted access shelf. Ms. Fechtel stated that not all libraries have these books. Out of the 15 Lake County Libraries only 9 have them. Ms. Venetta stated that they do know the books are available to be requested from other libraries; that, where there is a will there is a way, they just want the unsuspecting person not to walk in and take it off the shelf. They want to protect those children and also those who are accompanied by an unsuspecting parents, grandparents, guardians, babysitters, people who are trying to do the right thing but don’t know what they are getting into. Ms Fechtel gave the example of looking at the book, The Bermudez Triangle, and having no idea that it was about a three-way love triangle and not a book about a tropical place. She would have possibly checked it out for her daughter because she would not have read the whole book. If it had a label on it or was in a separate place, at least she would have had a warning. Ms. Venetta wants a win-win situation where everyone gets access to the books but still protects those who don’t know what they are getting into.

Sue Thomas spoke next and did not think she could add a lot of but wanted to add a few things based on her experiences in a classroom like Mr Johnson. The question of freedom of speech not only addresses the children but the author more than the rights of the children. We are not trying to censor freedom of speech for the children; it would be more the person who wrote the book. It has become common place for people to speak and express themselves in a way that frankly is offensive to me [Ms Thomas]. Just because everyone is doing that and we are desensitized, still does not make it right. We should censor many things for our children. She pointed out that she censored many things for her children from what she fed them to what she read to them. Only by being responsible will we be able to help children learn to be responsible.

Wendy Breeden spoke next. Ms Breeden introduced herself as Director of the Lake County Library System and President of the Florida Library Association this year. She appreciated that the process for reconsideration was being followed. She advised the group that there are committees for Intellectual Freedom at the state and national level to help libraries with challenges such as like this. There are strong statements for the Freedom to Read. Barbara has made the initial contact. This is a challenge that needs due consideration; whether removing from the library or making them less accessible. A question that arises is who will make the decision of which books get moved or removed from access. Before very long the Harry Potter books will be part of the process, they are about witchcraft and, at the end they get very dark. People are offended by any number of issues and it is a slippery slope; it is not an easy decision. Librarians sometimes fight uncomfortable battles because sometimes we have personal beliefs that are difficult to defend but we believe firmly in the First Amendment and that is what we are trying to uphold.

Dorothy Roman spoke next and stated that she completely agrees that it is a parents right to chose what their child reads, but she does not want any other parent choosing what her children read. She stated that she would rather have her child read a book that was too mature for them three years before they were ready for it than one day after they should have known that. Parents educate their children; it is a job of parents, it is not the job of the library. She takes out many books from the Young Adult section and thinks they are excellent. If they are on a separate shelf, children are still going to read them. If a child wanted to read one of the books from the restricted shelf how would they do that? How do you determine if a child has a parental permission, a written excuse, bring parents with them, a blanket permission to read all the books? My child might be ready to read a 16 year old book at 12 or 13. Ms Schlachtenhaufen noted that such a situation would probably mean that those young people who are 16 to 18 years old would probably be the only ones that would be in a position of needing a written permission. Many of them are independent and able to make that decision on their own. Ms Roman agreed that no 18 year old would ask their parents for a note to read this material.

Terri Fachtel spoke and said that she was here because her Aunt Dixie brought it to her attention. She feels that she is one of those who went to see movies before she was the appropriate age and learned things she probably shouldn't have. She grew up without a mother, and a father who was very busy, so she didn't have the parental guidance. She questioned that, if they can monitor video games with

ratings, why can't we have a rating system for books? Help parents help kids by labeling materials. Mr. Johnson stated that kids would read anything that is labeled and that peer pressure is out there. Mr. Johnson advocated using the books to have a discussion with the kids. Ms Fachtel felt that, as a child who didn't have parental guidance, she has a point-of-view to share. She feels that parents need help to guide their kids and she felt that labels would do this. Mr. Johnson noted that even profanity has changed – what is acceptable or is not.

Ben Roode advised that he was here to be part of the discussion and not as a reporter or representing any news media. Mr. Roode asked if the library controlled access to any area of the library. Barbara Morse replied that there was not; a library card is good for anything in the collection that was available to be borrowed. Would children be able to borrow anything from the library, books in other areas? Yes, there is only one type of library card, good for the entire collection in the library. Would it be feasible to label all the items in the library? Barbara Morse answered that there are over 130,000 items in the library. Mr Roode asked if all of those were objectionable; the answer was no that is just the size of the entire collection of items. To label them all would be a huge project. How are items chosen for their appropriateness in the library? Library staff is assigned subject areas using a variety of journals (Library Journal, School Library Journal, Publishers Weekly, Booklist, VOYA, etc.). Do these book reviews determine the reading level and readability, subject matter, themes, etc? Barbara noted that the reviewers describe the book, comment on how well written, and the audience for the book. In some cases they'll recommend by size of the library, i.e. "for larger libraries." Some reviews give the interest level and reading level. Mr. Roode commented that it is a difficult age group; there won't be one answer for this. We need to be very careful if we get into the business of determining what is appropriate for certain individuals. Parents should play a strong role in determining what is appropriate for their children to a certain age, who's going to know a child better than their parent? Mr. Roode did not agree that is First Amendment issue; that ended when they produced the material. There is nothing in the First Amendment that says I am allowed to read anything. But there's also nothing anywhere that says someone else gets to determine whether or not I have to go through extra steps to see something. The law can determine that with things that are of a prurient interest, involves lewd acts, or swear words or things that can be a danger to people; and the law determines that. When you are dealing with something like the moral value of a product, the goodness or badness, the rightness or wrongness of something then you run the risk of determining that for somebody else. He believes that is a dangerous, slippery slope, determining what's right for a certain group of people. Which is why parents are reminded to play such a strong role in the development of their children. He recognizes that there are things that get in the way of parents to perform that role in today's society. Surely there is a balance that can be struck between protecting our children from things that are objectionable to some people. He does not agree that the availability of a book does not a prostitute, drug dealer, or morally deject person make. He would strongly disagree that if you read something you become a bad person. There should be a middle ground. He like the point made about ratings and warnings on CD's, movies, and video games but not on books. He assumes that is because of the sheer volume of literature compared to those other media. He doesn't think the Leesburg Public Library or the Leesburg Library Advisory Board is the body to determine such a rating system.

Mr. Johnson asked if Mr Roode has a suggestion on how to strike that balance he suggested. He suggested perhaps stickers similar to the ones on book for mystery, etc. Labels with 'mature themes' but there is a problem with that because your idea of 'mature theme' would be different from mine. Ms. Fechtel responded from the audience that the legislature has stated that sex and drugs for minors is illegal. The laws of the county have suggested that this is harmful behavior. Yet we have it in our youth section encouraging that. Mr. Roode stated that the acts are illegal but if talking about them was illegal then we would all be in jail right now. [At this point discussion from the audience was unintelligible and garbled.] Mr Roode went back to Mr Johnson's question that putting a sticker on would be great but who determines that?

Tami Hindenan: Identified herself as have 5 daughters raised through the Lake County School System. She has three issues with the debate. 1) warning labels on other media give parents cautions for making a quick judgment on whether there is violence, cusswords, etc. She asked the number of books in the Young Adult section. Ms. Morse did not know the number. Ms Hindenan suggested there might a hundred that would be objectionable to somebody. She stated that The Gossip Girl books don't exist in the Middle School Libraries; but that they are in the High School libraries. 2) There is a huge difference from a 12 year old to an 18 year old. This would be very easy to fix, an 18 year old is an adult and that's very different from a 12 year old 6<sup>th</sup> grader. So maybe have a 12 – 15 year old stack and maybe a 15 year old to a 17 year old stack and let the 18 year olds go out with the general public or something. Or put a sticker on it if it has strong language or violence. She doesn't necessarily feel that a child needs a parent's permission before they check the books out. If it's in this section you assume its safe and then you come home and you're shocked. Why not err on the side of conservatism and caution? Its still available in the library and the kids can still check it out but at least when you send your child into the room you know that books that have whatever in it will be in a different space. Or put a sign on the wall that says whatever is in the space doesn't contain . . . . It's too big an age span, Middle School through High School. 3) It boils down to respect. In school the lesbians and the even the boys and girls aren't making out in the hallway. Just because a swear is heard in a home doesn't mean it should be in books. We censor things everyday all day. It's a common sense thing more than First Amendment rights not to have questionable material in this section where you think you're getting something different.

Wendy Breeden spoke to provided a point of explanation about the ratings on movies; they are industry imposed and are not legally mandated. [another voice – possibly Tami] stated that it is a safeguard, you can go on the internet and read...] The publishing industry would be the ones to put that rating on books. Diane Venetta spoke from the audience that the music industry worked with an independent parental advisory council, originated outside the industry and is not legally binding. Nonette Hill commented that she feels that is where this energy ought to go; towards the publishers. Ms Venetta felt that because this started as an independent parental advisory group that it would mean that one should be formed here that would then work with libraries or publishers. Ms. Hill felt that a group would work directly with the publishers, not the library. Ms Venetta noted that WalMart makes choices about what they put in their stores and libraries have discretion about what they put in their library and not every library has the same. Some libraries restrict access to pornography. Adults have a legal right to pornography so when they go into a publically funded institution supported with their tax dollars but

they can't go to pornography, what is the logic? Libraries have some discretion. Ms Breeden stated that if it's illegal, they cannot view it. [Many voices difficult to follow the discussion which continued about pornography on the computers in the libraries.] [Another unknown speaker – possibly Tami] agreed that the parents have to stay vigilant but they get a little assistance, you don't buy HBO if you don't like The Sopranos. In the library, you think you're getting assistance, you think you're sending them to a safe place but you're not.

Ms. Jones spoke to clarify that what was being said by one of the speakers was that if you ask the librarian for assistance about a book, you can get assistance and get good information. Ms. Morse confirmed that, if a child came up to the librarian and said, I'm 13 years old and I want to borrow these books, do you think they are appropriate for me, and one of them was the Gossip Girls, the librarian would not have recommended that book. They would have told them that the characters are High School students and it would not be age-appropriate. Tami asked if it was a national designation of 12 – 18 years old for such a space. Barbara answered that it is generally accepted as the Young Adult label and that she agrees that 12 seems young and possibly 13 would be better but you can't make it only a 2 year span. Tami reiterated her concern that 18 year olds are adults, they can get married, go to war. Barbara commented that we feel that the 18 year olds borrow from both areas. Tami asked what about 12 – 15 and then 15 -17 or 18, it just seems logical to her. However, she stated she understands that you have to watch every little step, that if you take this step, you have to take that step and she can understand the concerns. But they (parents) don't have the labeling, the warning sign, the little blurb, the sticker, so what's a parent to do? You send them here and you think it's OK. She feels that basically we are all on the same page. You wouldn't want your daughters behaving like the characters in the Gossip Girls at that age, so you don't want to promote that. It's not acceptable, it's not respectful, the swear words in a three-year old book. She feels that, because its here (the library?) it's considered to be OK, but its not OK.

Dorothy Roman: How are you going to control this? Children can take their books and “self-check” them out. Children can take books from the adult section and self-check them out. Tami felt that if it was labeled then the parent would know it is a book that is not appropriate (example given was a romance book with soft porn).

Nonette Hill: expressed concern that we are talking about keeping information away from 12 year olds when, in some cases, it might be the only place for them to get the information they need to make good decisions. The material in the books might help a child learn reassurance about them. Ms. Hill noted that she read both books and although she didn't like the Gossip Girls for its commercialism, she did like Bermudez Triangle which was a story about friendship, loyalty, misunderstanding and acceptance. Ms Hill went on to describe the story and commented that, if there was a child who found themselves in this situation who could find comfort in this book, she would not want to withhold that book from a 12 year old.

Sue Thomas commented that Ms Hill had a different perspective and understanding of the situations than a 12 year old would have in reading that book [Bermudez Triangle]. She felt that a child reading

these books would see this as an approval for an active sex life if they used protection. She felt that if you talked to a child who read this book, their understanding would be different from an adult reading the book. Ms Fechtel commented on another section of the book Bermudez Triangle that described the annual hay ride as a “hot farm sex scene” and that if the teenager didn’t lose their virginity by the time they graduated that the bust of Alexander Hamilton would speak their name in the foyer. The male character responded in that same section “everyone thinks its OK to have sex in front of me on the coffee table.” She doesn’t feel that has any beneficial effect for teens to be reading.

Ms. Jones asked for a motion and read the question that opened the meeting. Carol Schlachtenhaufen moved to retain the two books that were discussed, the Bermudez Triangle and Gossip Girls: Only in Your Dreams, in the Young Adult section. Motion was seconded. Ms Jones called for any further discussion.

Mr Johnson stated that labeling of other media such as the CDs was started by parents from outside the organization, maybe you [the complainants] need to do it that way. He further stated that the Library Association has certain rules that they follow. He felt that the way to get around it was to have another group, independent, and people listen to those outside the field. If we tried to make a change like this other people would come in and file suit, other libraries have had problems and I don’t think we can do it ourselves. He stated that he empathized.

Ms Jones called for a voice vote, there were none opposed. The vote was unanimous to retain the books in the Young Adult section of the library.

Meeting was adjourned at 6:30 p.m.