

Minutes for February 27, 2024 Regular Library Board Meeting

1. Call to order and roll

President Fruth called the meeting to order at 6:30pm. Secretary Fairfax took roll.

Present: Maya Ganguly, Madhurima Chakraborty, Theodore Foss, Virginia Bloom, Kristina Rogers, Susanne Fairfax, Matthew Fruth

Also attending: Joslyn Bowling Dixon, Executive Director, Suzy Wulf, Deputy Director, Leigh Tarullo, Director of Collections, Jodi Kolo, Director of Communications and Development, Billy Treece, Director of Finance and Human Resources, Marcin Terlik, Director of Technology, Matt Bartodziej, Director of Facilities, Camayia Dantzler, Executive Assistant, Barbara Fitzgerald, Manager of Collections, Kathleen Spale, Manager of Special Collections

Public commentators: Rebekah Levin, Caren Van Slyke, Kathleen Bell, Dushaun Branch, Celeste Jackson, Leila Massouh, Dima Ali, Haj Herbert, Jim Madigan, Melisa Alabsy, Faisal Alabsy, Cheryl Russell, Tatiana Swancy

2. Public Comments

Due to WiFi bandwidth issues, the first public comment was not captured by Rebekah Levin. Her comment will be on the following page of these minutes.

Per the Public Comment at Board Meetings Policy, Fruth read several public comments that were received for this library board meeting. The comments will be included in the library files.

3. Closed Session

The board called to enter into a closed session. Bloom motioned. Chakraborty seconded. Fairfax took roll to vote into closed session. Approved by all trustees.

4. Adjournment

Fruth adjourned the meeting at 11:07pm.

Good evening, Everyone.

My name is Rebekah Levin. A number of years ago, I was asked to do some pro bono work for your staff in evaluation and have been privileged to be a volunteer with the Friends of the Library for quite a few years. I love this library and am here to speak to you tonight to possibly provide some clarification about how the Palestinian Cultural Day came into being, to try to understand where the events around the Palestinian Cultural Day went awry, and encourage all of us to figure out how to get our library back on track as the extraordinary library system that it has been.

CJPIP (The Committee for a Just Peace in Palestine/Israel) has been hosting events in our libraries – Dole, Maze and the main branch – for 22 years, oftentimes multiple events in a year. Until this year, these events were **always** community-led events. We have always had tremendous support in setting up and running these events, from security, to IT support, to tables with library materials that people might want to check out related to the events, to staff coming by and seeing the exhibits or hearing the speakers. We never asked for library co-sponsorship, but we had the backing and support of your staff.

This past summer, we were talking with a number of groups in the village about an idea to present to the Oak Park area community - a day of Palestinian culture at the library in January or February of 2024, and we thought that this was the type of event that the library would love to co-sponsor with us, given your commitment to programming that promotes anti-racism, engagement and learning. I sent Lori Pullman, the library's Director of Public Services and Programs, a letter via email on August 31 to see if the library would like to be a part of this program. We certainly did not **need** the library to collaborate with us, but we thought that you might **like** to be a greater part of it, given the variety of cultural activities that we were starting to imagine bringing together. No surprise, Lori responded immediately, saying "Thank you for proposing the idea of a *tatreez* workshop at the library and a day of Palestinian cultural activities! I will share your proposal with the library programming staff and a staff member will reach out to you soon to follow up and discuss the possibility of **partnering together** on a program early in 2024."

Less than a week later, Lori sent me an email asking me to fill out the multicultural program proposal form so that it could be shared with multiple staff for their consideration.

Two days after that, I received a wonderful email from your Multicultural Learning Coordinator, Juanta Griffin, saying that this sounded like a “**wonderful culture share**”, and she asked to meet with me to discuss it. We met soon after that, and discussed the tentative program (it was just in the development stage at that time, but we had many ideas.) Juanta made it clear that our draft budget **far** exceeded the funds that she had available to use for these types of events, and I said that we would do the fundraising to raise **all** of the money needed for the program. Juanta said that the library would post the event on its calendar, make fliers for each of the library branches, send out info on their social media, and do whatever they could to support us on the day of the event. She went on-line and reserved the veterans’ room right then and there, and I said that the community folks would get to work to find the people to present all of the activities and that we would be in touch in another couple of months, once we had more information to share. We agreed that if we had any questions or thoughts to share, we’d contact each other.

Community groups started planning, and then students from OPRF said that **they’d** like to be a part of it as well. We were all delighted. We had hoped that this would be multi-generational, and engage the community at large and it was becoming this robustly.

When I reached out to Juanta Griffin on December 1, Chibuike Enyia let me know that Juanta was out on health leave, but said that your Community Engagement Library Specialist, Claire Ong, would pick up and assist us with our needs. I met with Claire and she was great. I had asked if we could use the gallery space or another space that wasn’t being used on Saturday for some of our activities, and she said that she’d look into it for us right away. Within **one day**, Alexandra Skinner the adult services manager, gave us the go-ahead to use the art gallery space for the Palestinian embroidery workshop.

Two weeks later, Claire asked me for a description of the event so that it could be put on the library’s calendar, and **the next day**, it was there. She sent me the link to the event so that people could start registering, and let me know that she was creating a flier to display at the Main Library and branches, and send out on the library’s social media platforms. I told her that we were creating our own posters as well, that we would be putting them up **all over** the village, and that we’d take out an ad in the Wednesday Journal to make sure that the village as a whole knew that this was happening, and that we would put the library’s link on the poster. She sent it to me and we put it on our poster and started sending it out to our lists of community contacts.

Almost 3 hours later, at 1:44 in the afternoon on Wednesday, December 20, I received a message from Claire that the registration link had to be changed, though we had already sent it out to our listservs. And at 5 PM the next day, December 21, I received another email from Claire. "I regret and mistakenly thought that the Palestinian Cultural Day was a **library-led** event. As it is not, **I cannot** create social media promotions... nor a flyer."

What happened? In three months' time, we went from library staff embracing and encouraging this celebration as what your Director of Public Services and Programs suggested could be a **partnership** and your Multicultural Learning Coordinator described as a **wonderful culture share**, to **four weeks** before the event, we are informed that we are not a **library-led event** and thus **not entitled** to a flyer, social media posting nor inclusion in the listing of events taking place at the library on its calendar.

What happened in these three short months to our library? What was gained by **reclassifying and demoting** this event from a **partnership** to a **non-library event**? The only thing that we can see that came out of it is that a whole part of our community was told that their event was 'less', was welcome but **not** with an embrace, could come in the door, but **please** use the side door.

We don't believe that the remedy for this is greater clarification between what is a 'library-led event' and what is a 'community-led event'. I used to run a non-profit research center and I am well-aware of the value of **clarity and specificity** around certain things, particularly those related to safety and finance. But the conversation at last month's board meeting that implied that greater clarity of what **community-led** events are entitled to, and those that are **library-led** made me think that as a community, we will be far worse off with this kind of rigidity around programming. And now, have we **lost the designation of partnership** in describing events? Is it either community- or library-led **only**?

We want the Oak Park Public Library back – the one that was **our community's** library, the one that had been transforming for many years into one that was far more inclusive and embracing of the diversity of our community. We **know** that it is here, that we have **extraordinary** staff who have been working for a **LONG** time to make it that way. Please give them back the **power and voice** that they have had, along with you as the board, to be the library **with which this community has partnered**, the library on which **we have depended**, and the library which has been appropriately celebrated as one of the jewels of this community. Thank you.