

## Difficult Conversations Library Scenarios

Each of these scenarios features a situation that you may face (or have faced) in your work as a librarian. Use the questions throughout and those that follow each scenario to reflect on how the librarians respond.

### Timothy and The Black Literature Club

Timothy has worked at Central Library for over 20 years. He has witnessed a number of community efforts to challenge programs and books at the library over the years, but nothing like he has seen recently. It seems that every week he or one of his colleagues has had to deal with someone upset about something they *think* the library is doing that it's simply is not. One afternoon, Timothy was approached by John, a community member who seems like he has something urgent to speak with him about:

**John:** "Excuse me, are you the one in charge of this library?"

**Timothy:** I'm the head librarian, yes. How can I help you?

**John:** You can help me by explaining what the hell is going on here. I heard that you're hosting a group of radicals who are brainwashing our kids with their anti-American propaganda.



### Let's PAUSE here

Take a few minutes to discuss in small groups or reflect on your own:

**What emotions, thoughts and feelings do you think Timothy may be experiencing at this moment?**

Ok, let's jump back in:

John is holding up a flyer with the months' community meet-up offerings. The library serves as a hub for all types of community groups, which is one of things Timothy loves most about working for the library. On the flyer Timothy sees a calendar with events ranging from "Be there and Be square quilting circle" to Dungeons and Dragons Adventurers League to Dad's and Daughters play dates.

**Timothy:** I'm sorry, I don't know what you're talking about. What group are you referring to?

**John:** Don't play dumb with me. I'm talking about the so-called "Black Literature Club" that meets here every month. I know what they're really doing. They're teaching our children critical race theory and making them hate their own country and culture.

**Timothy:** That's not true at all. The Black Literature Club is a community group that reads and discusses books by black authors. They're not teaching anything, they're just sharing their perspectives and experiences.

**John:** Perspectives and experiences? Is that what you call it? How about lies and distortions? How about indoctrination and manipulation? How about racism and bigotry?

**Timothy:** No, none of those things. The Black Literature Club is a peaceful and respectful group that welcomes anyone who wants to join. They're not racist or bigoted, they're just centering Black writers who may not be as well-known as other writers.

**John:** As a Black man, I'm tired of Black people being singled out as if we are different from everybody else. I don't want my Black children just reading Black literature, I want them reading all literature, that's being a real American. Can you imagine if someone wanted to start a "White Literature Club"? They'd be called racist in a heartbeat. How is this any different?



**Let's PAUSE here...**

Take a few minutes to discuss in small groups or reflect on your own:

**So, let's assume that Timothy is aware that he has been speaking with someone that may identify as Black/African-American. That being said, how do you think Timothy might respond in this situation? How might identity and experience inform Timothy's response?**

**Timothy**, aware that this conversation was beginning to draw the attention of other library patrons responds, "While I can't speak in hypotheticals I can assure you that a reading group under that name would go through the same protocols for approval and any other group.

**John:** Well, I doubt that. You won't be seeing me in here while you all spread woke-ism. And we'll see if the county will allow you to keep groups like this alive once they get wind of this.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- What were you feeling in your body and where you are feeling it as you took in this scenario?
- If you have experienced a similar situation, how did your emotions, personal views and conflict style impact how you responded?
- If you have not experienced something like this, how do you think your emotions, thoughts, and conflict style might impact how you respond?
- What did you think of the way Timothy handled this situation?
  - Were there things you particularly liked?
  - Were there things that you think he could have done differently?
- How do you think you would typically handle this situation?
- What if anything would you do to take care of yourself after an incident like this? Who might you look to for support?

### **LINDA and the Queens**

LINDA is a mother of two young children, a three-year-old and a six-year-old. and frequents the library during the summer months to try her best to keep her children away from screens (which is becoming more of a losing battle with each day). She understands that the library is a place for everyone, but sometimes feels that the library doesn't do a good enough job of protecting young children from certain ideas and images.

As June approaches, LINDA sees a number of colorful displays of books and posters celebrating Pride Month, one of which features an advertisement for "Drag Queen Story Hour" which will be held every Saturday morning in June, during the time that she and her children usually visit the library. LINDA has friends and family members that are members of the LGBTQ community and has been to a drag show a time or two herself, but just can't wrap her mind around how something like this is appropriate for young people to participate in. When she is checking out, she decides to ask the clerk about the displays and story hour:

**LINDA:** "Can you tell me more about the Drag Queen Story Hour that's scheduled for next week?"

**CARA:** Sure, as part of our Pride Month program offerings, we are partnering with our regional "Drag Queen Story Hour" chapter to celebrate the diversity in our community and provide folks in our community a unique experience.

**LINDA:** Ok...I have nothing against gay people, I mean I have a cousin that's gay, but don't you all think children are a little too young to be exposed to that sort of lifestyle?



Let's pause here...

Take a few minutes to discuss in small groups or reflect on your own:

**What emotions, thoughts and feelings do you think CARA may be experiencing at this moment? How do you think this might impact the rest of the interaction with LINDA?**

Let's dive back in...

CARA and her team met many times during the planning of Pride month events to prepare for interactions just like this one. CARA responds:

**CARA:** I understand wanting to protect your children from things you think they may not be ready for. We try our best to serve all members of the community and to provide access to a diverse range of materials and perspectives. The Pride Month programs are intended to celebrate the contributions and experiences of LGBTQ+ people and give folks the opportunity to engage with folks they may not get a chance to engage with on a regular basis.

**LINDA:** I get that, but aren't there other ways to expose kids to LGBTQ people? Why can't you all just do a normal story time and read a book with Gay characters?

**CARA:** We do try to include a range of text during our normal story hour but felt this would be a great opportunity to partner with a local non-profit.

**LINDA:** Well do you at least provide an alternative for parents that don't want their children exposed to this stuff. This is the only time that I can bring my kids into the library because I work all week, and this is just so unfair.



Let's pause here...

Take a few minutes to discuss in small groups or reflect on your own:

**How do you think CARA might respond in this situation? How can she stand firm on the library's values and commitment, but with compassion and empathy?**

**Let's jump back in...**

**CARA:** I understand that it can be frustrating to change your plans when something unexpected happens. Perhaps you can consider visiting one of our other branches this month. Here is a calendar that has all of the program offerings for the branches in our area, and you can find out about program updates online.

**LINDA:** I'll check it out, but I don't know if it will work out. This is the closest to the library to our house. Thanks for trying, I guess we just won't be coming to the library for a while...

### **Reflection Questions:**

- What were you feeling in your body and where you are feeling it as you took in this scenario?
- If you have experienced a similar situation, how did your emotions, personal views, and conflict style impact how you responded?
- If you have not experienced something like this, how do you think your emotions thoughts and conflict style might impact how you respond?
- What did you think of the way CARA handled this situation?
  - Were there things you particularly liked?
  - Were there things that you think he could have done differently?
- How do you think you would typically handle this situation?
- What, if anything, would you do to take care of yourself after an incident like this? Who might you look to for support?

**Joanie and Ramadan**

Joanie is the co-chair of her library's Diversity and Culture committee. She and her colleagues have worked really hard over the past few years to have the libraries' materials and displays better reflect the diversity of the community. Joanie is especially proud and excited about the Iftar (breaking of the fast) that she and the Islamic Center in her town are partnering together on during Ramadan. As Joanie and one of her colleagues are setting up for the event, they are approached by a community member names Teresa:

**TERESA:** Excuse me, what is going on here?

**JOANIE:** Hello, we are having a Ramadan celebration at the library. It's a cultural event to learn more about Islam and its traditions.

**TERESA:** Well, I don't think this is appropriate. This is a public library, not a mosque. You shouldn't be promoting one religion over others.



Let's pause here...

Take a few minutes to discuss in small groups or reflect on your own:

**What emotions, thoughts and feelings do you think JOANIE may be experiencing at this moment? How do you think this might impact the rest of the interaction with TERESA?**

Let's dive back in...

**JOANIE:** We are not promoting any religion; we are just celebrating the diversity of our community. We have events for different faiths and cultures throughout the year. For example, we had a Kwanzaa party in December and a Chinese New Year festival in February.

**TERESA:** That's different. Those are secular holidays, not religious ones. Ramadan is a religious observance that has nothing to do with American values. You are alienating most of the community who are Christians.

**JOANIE:** I'm sorry you feel that way, but Ramadan is not just a religious observance, it's also a cultural phenomenon. Millions of Muslims around the world and in America celebrate Ramadan every year. It's a time of fasting, prayer, charity, and reflection. It's a way of showing gratitude, compassion, and solidarity. It's a part of our global heritage and diversity.

**TERESA:** I don't care about global heritage and diversity. I care about our local community and our Christian values. You are disrespecting our beliefs and our country by hosting this event. You should cancel it immediately and apologize to the public.



Let's pause here...

Take a few minutes to discuss in small groups or reflect on your own:

**How do you think JOANIE might respond in this situation? How can she stand firm on the library's values and commitment, but with compassion and empathy?**

**Let's jump back in...**

**JOANIE:** I'm afraid I can't do that. This event is open to everyone who wants to participate or learn more about Ramadan. It's not meant to offend or disrespect anyone. It's meant to educate and celebrate. We have a right to host this event and you have a right to express your opinion, but you don't have a right to stop us from having this event.

**TERESA:** This is outrageous. You are violating the separation of church and state. You are imposing your agenda on the rest of us and using our tax dollars to do it. I'm going to report this to the mayor and the media. You will regret this decision.

**JOANIE:** I can see you feel strongly about this, but I stand by our decision. This event is not a violation of anything, it's a celebration of something. It's not an imposition, it's an invitation, a bridge. I hope you will reconsider your position and join us in this event. Thank you for your time and have a nice day.

**Reflection Questions:**

- What were you feeling in your body and where you are feeling it as you took in this scenario?
- If you have experienced a similar situation, how did your emotions, personal views, and conflict style impact how you responded?
- If you have not experienced something like this, how do you think your emotions, thoughts, and conflict style might impact how you respond?
- What did you think of the way JOANIE handled this situation?
  - Were there things you particularly liked?
  - Were there things that you think he could have done differently?
- How do you think you would typically handle this situation?

- What, if anything, would you do to take care of yourself after an incident like this? Who might you look to for support?

### **MS. LEE and the Banned Books (K-12 example)**

**MS. LEE** has been the Media Specialist at John Douglass Middle School for 15 years. She loves that she can provide a space where students can explore their interests, hold meetings and find a bit of a reprieve from the daily pressures of Middle School. She's been following the recent news about book banning and calls to limit access to certain materials especially those that some folks feel don't align with their values and while she understands parents wanting to have a better sense of what their children are being exposed to, she finds the lengths that are being taken to censor educators to be a bit much.

**MS. LEE** was busy sorting out the new arrivals when she heard a knock on the door. She looked up and saw the principal, Mr. Jones standing there with a somber but stern expression:

**MS. LEE:** "Hello, Mr. Jones. What can I do for you?"

**MR. JONES:** "Ms. Lee, I need to talk to you about something important. May I come in?"

**MS. LEE:** "Of course, please have a seat." She gestured to a chair near her desk.

He walked in and closed the door behind him and handed Ms. Lee a folder with a piece of paper inside.

**MR. JONES:** "This is a list of books that I want you to remove from the library immediately."



Let's pause here...

Take a few minutes to discuss in small groups or reflect on your own:

**What emotions, thoughts and feelings do you think MS. LEE may be experiencing at this moment? How do you think this might impact the rest of the interaction with MR. JONES?**

Let's dive back in...



**MS. LEE** took the paper and scanned it quickly. Her eyes widened as she recognized some of the titles. They were books that dealt with topics such as racial identity, LGBTQ identities, social justice, feminism, and other issues that were considered "woke" by some people.

She looked at him in disbelief. "Mr. Jones, you can't be serious. These are some of the most popular and acclaimed books in our collection. They are important for our students to have access to and learn from. Why do you want me to remove them?" she asked.

**MR. JONES** sighed and rubbed his temples. "Ms. Lee, I agree with you, but you have to understand the situation. We have received several complaints from some parents and community members about these books. They claim that they are indoctrinating our students with radical and divisive ideologies. They say that they are against our values and traditions. They threaten to sue the school or withdraw their children if we don't comply with their demands."

**MS. LEE** shook her head in disbelief. "That's ridiculous. They are not against our values and traditions. They are part of them. These books reflect the reality and diversity of our world and challenge our students to think critically. We have the right and the duty to provide these books to our students. We can't let some narrow-minded and intolerant people censor our library."

**MR. JONES** looked at her with a pained expression. "Ms. Lee, I agree with you. I personally have no problem with these books. But we have to think about the bigger picture. I have to balance the academic freedom and the social responsibility of our school. avoid any legal or financial troubles that could jeopardize our reputation and resources. I have to do what's best for our school, even if it means making some compromises and sacrifices."



Let's pause here...

Take a few minutes to discuss in small groups or reflect on your own:

**How do you think MS. LEE might respond to Mr. JONES? How can she stand firm in her values and commitment as a librarian, but with empathy for MR. JONES?**

**Let's jump back in...**

**MS. LEE** felt a surge of anger and disappointment. "Mr. Jones, you are not doing what's best for our school. You're doing what's easy and safe and giving in to the pressure and the fear. You are betraying our principles and our profession. You are letting down our students and our staff. You are not a leader. You are a coward."

**MR. JONES** flinched at her words. He clenched his jaw and stood up. "Ms. Lee, I'm sorry you feel that way. But this is not a matter of debate. This is a matter of policy. This is my final decision. You have until the end of the week to remove these books from the library. If you fail to do so, you will face disciplinary action. Do you understand?"

**MS. LEE** glared at him. She felt a mix of emotions: anger, sadness, frustration, defiance. She wanted to argue, to protest, to resist. But she knew it was futile. He had made up his mind. He had the power. She had no choice.

She nodded slowly. "I understand."

#### **Reflection Questions:**

- What were you feeling in your body and where you are feeling it as you took in this scenario?
- If you have experienced a similar situation, how did your emotions, personal views, and conflict style impact how you responded?
- If you have not experienced something like this, how do you think your emotions, thoughts, and conflict style might impact how you respond?
- What did you think of the way MS. LEE handled this situation?
  - Were there things you particularly liked?
  - Were there things that you think he could have done differently?
- How do you think you would typically handle this situation?
- What, if anything, would you do to take care of yourself after an incident like this? Who might you look to for support?