

Paul: Hey, everyone! Welcome to "Your Family, Your Library," a podcast where we discuss the many ways our library is here for families of all shapes and sizes. Each episode, we will bring you information and resources relevant to your family and beyond. We are "Your Family, Your Library," and we're glad you're here. Welcome to "Your Family, Your Library." I'm Paul Knutson, and for today's episode, we're going to be talking about libraries, something very near and dear to our hearts, obviously. But more specifically, what role libraries play in the world and how they position themselves as centers of community, not just today, but every day in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. For this conversation, we are very excited to be talking with our very own Richard Kong, who has been the Skokie Library Director since 2016. Welcome, Richard.

Richard: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Paul: Before we get into anything too deep, why don't you tell us a little bit about your journey with libraries? How did you start in libraries? When did you decide you want to work in libraries?

Richard: Well, I don't know how much you want me to dive in here, but in 2014, I, went to school at University of Michigan. School of Information for Library, let's see the Masters of Science and information. I believe it's official name of the degree. And that's when my journey began with libraries. But I had actually worked at academic libraries during, you know, college and also, during grad school before that. But I did not know at that time that I wanted to become a librarian. So, the first time I really thought that I would become a librarian was around 2014 when I was thinking about going back to grad school. And so I went to Michigan and went to, Ann Arbor, Michigan to get a library degree. And I, thought I wanted to be an academic librarian. I had a previous master's, and I thought, that makes sense. I can utilize my master's, I can work in a college environment or like a grad school environment. And I thought that sounded good. But then I, early on in my, master's program at Michigan, I met a famous librarian. Her name is Nancy Pearl. She was giving a lecture or a presentation at my school, and I happened to meet her after the lecture, and I just said, thank you for, you know, speaking. I enjoyed your talk. And she said, hi. And what kind of librarian do you want to be? You know, what type of library are you looking to get into? And at that time, I told her, well, I think I'm going to be like a grad school librarian, like an academic librarian or a special librarian. And she said, no, go into public libraries. We need more good public librarians. And I said, yes, ma'am. Okay. I guess that changed my trajectory there, you know? So, she really encouraged me. I just met her, but I guess maybe she does that to everyone she meets. But I felt, you know, like I had to listen to her. So I, started working at Ann Arbor District Library, which is, the local public library in Ann Arbor. And I really just fell in love with

the public library environment. I loved serving the entire community. I love the idea of a place, a space in the community where everyone was welcome, and it just really spoke to me. So after graduating, I went to, get my first job. I worked in a library in Southern California for one year, and that was a great experience. But I grew up in this area, so I wanted to come back. My family was in the area, and I was familiar with this area, and I knew that, there were some really great libraries in the area. And I heard, actually, that Skokie Public Library was hiring for an adult services librarian at the time. And I knew a librarian here. Holly Jin who is in our community engagement department. I had met her through the American Library Association, and we were in an Emerging Leaders program together. And I think I probably emailed her and said, hey, Holly, tell me about Skokie. You know, is it a good place to work? And she just, you know, had a lot of positive things to say. And this is basically saying this is the best possible environment to be a librarian. And so hearing that I applied and thankfully I got the job and, and then and then I, left actually, for a promotional opportunity to lead a department at Arlington Heights Memorial Library.

Paul: Okay.

Richard: And great experience there. And I have nothing bad to say about that experience. But, you know, Skokie was always kind of like my library home professionally. Because it was such an important part of my development and in my early on in my career. So in 2013, when I had an opportunity to come back as a deputy director, I was really excited. So and then, you know, served as a deputy director under Carolyn Anthony, my predecessor, the former director and, for three years. And then when she retired, I, you know, put my name forward to be considered for the executive director position. And thankfully, you know, I don't know what they were thinking, but they hired me. So. Yeah.

Paul: Well, we're glad, we're glad about that. So, I mean, library work being, I guess I would call it, service to the community. Service to the people. What about that type of work really drew you in? What really attracted you to that?

Richard: Yeah, it's a great question. I, I, I would say definitely it's about service, right? It's about public service. The library is a public good. So I just knew like early on in my life, I couldn't imagine myself...I think there's honor and dignity in all types of work. So, this isn't to disparage any other person's work, but I just knew that for myself, I couldn't see myself, like, in a corporate environment. And I needed to find a real deep sense of meaning and purpose and mission and what I was going to spend, you know, my life doing. And so, yeah, libraries fit that bill. You know, I think libraries are a public good. We serve the entire community. We have, like, pure motives, right, in what we do, like our intent is to,

really help people, support people just, like, make people's lives better, strengthen communities. So there is nothing kind of like, selfish in, in what we do. Right? It's really to serve others. So I love that. I also think that, you know, my former, master's degree, my first master's degree is, is in, theology. And so I had I'd never wanted to become like a pastor or minister or anything like that full time. But I know that world, you know, and I know people who were in that world. And I think there's some connection there, too. You know, it's it's like the secular version of ministry and, serving people, really centering the work that you do on a community and really caring about people's lives and making sure that you can do whatever you can to, to help them thrive.

Paul: Yeah, I think that's a fair comparison. So what does a standard day look like for you?

Richard: Basically, I get here around 7:30 to 8 and I usually try to start my day with, maybe 30 minutes to an hour of just kind of quiet time. And what I mean by that is just like reading. I have a number of books that I'm working on. You know, reading every day. Right. So they're usually somewhat like, adjacent to my work. It's, there's some relevance, obviously, to my work. It's not just like, kind of reading for pleasure because I am working, you know, but but just grounding myself in, like, that quiet time of reading and reflection and thinking, that's what I like to get in a little bit earlier before the day starts for everyone else, you know, so that there are no emails coming in. There are no calls, no one coming into my office asking a question. You know, it's just kind of really a moment of solitude and, quiet reflection. So I find that it helps me feel grounded, helps me feel centered, helps me feel like I'm in a learning mindset to start the day. So that's kind of how I start the day. Not every day, you know, I managed, I don't manage that every day, but I try and then, usually in my day, the rest of my day is full of meetings, you know? I meet with my direct reports and my colleagues a lot. Those meetings tend to just be more like, you know, and there to listen, to support, to to encourage sometimes to, you know, provide access to resources or connections with others in the community or in the library itself to facilitate something happening. And then I do some community engagement work. So I'm attending some meetings in the community. Usually, like every week, there's something that's going on where I'll get outside of the library and try to connect with the community or, just part, connect with partners in the community. I try, I don't I think I need to do better at this, honestly. But especially during busy times, it's kind of difficult. But I try to walk around the library and make myself, just kind of be present and also just be aware and open my eyes to not necessarily how staff are working, because I know staff, I don't have to do that, I mean, our staff are fantastic. So there's nothing to monitor per se for that. But I like to observe how the community is using the library. So I like to I mean, it sounds weird, but I just like to see how people move

throughout the library where they're sitting, how they're using the library. Are they alone? Are they with friends or are they working? So I just kind of like to see, you know, how the library feels. So I move around the library. But a lot of my, work, it revolves around the board and the board meetings, it's kind of like, a monthly marker for me, you know? So a lot of it is like, prep for that meeting and then kind of like implementation of things after that meeting. So, a lot of it is unfortunately, like, you know, sitting at my desk in front of my computer, you know, with bad posture and all and, just kind of, typing or, you know, reading emails and that kind of thing, but I enjoy it. So I think that it's, fulfilling.

Paul: Yeah. You mentioned you were reading some books. Is there anything interesting that you're reading right now that you're really, could recommend, or are you really enjoying?

Richard: Yeah, I mean, I, I do read for fun as well. And I lately I've been into, formula one, so I read, I think it's called this "Formula," if I'm not mistaken. I can't remember the author, but it's basically like a kind of like, history, and insight into providing insight into the business and kind of the politics of Formula One racing. So that's been fun. I must I love nonfiction, so I've been reading a book called "How to Know a Person" by David Brooks. You know, the columnist, and he's he's written so much and I love his writing, but I, I like this book, "How to Know a Person," because he's talking a lot about disconnect in this way and belonging and the, the idea that, these days it's very difficult to gain that skill, to really listen to someone, to really help someone feel seen, but also to be vulnerable enough to be seen by another person, right? So I'm really interested in that topic of the how humans relate to each other and, and just build relationships with one another. So, yeah, I'm, I'm enjoying that.

Paul: Very applicable to what you do here as well.

Richard: Exactly. Yeah.

Paul: What about music? You have a favorite song right now. Anything you're listening to?

Richard: Yeah. I mean, I listen to music all the time. When I'm asked, like what my favorite song is, I really don't have a good answer to that. But I always, my default answer is going back to when I was in high school and my favorite band was Depeche Mode, and I'm a total Depeche Mode, you know, nerd. So anything by them is incredible in my, in my eyes.

Paul: That's fair.

Richard: Recently I was listening to my, I think the first album that

I really fell in love with was, 101, which is like a live concert album when they play at the Rose Bowl in L.A.

Paul: That's a good one.

Richard: Yeah, and behind the wheel, like the I think it's like the officially the second track with the first real song is amazing how they open up the concert, you know? So I love that song.

Paul: So a little reading in the morning, little Depeche Mode.

Richard: Yeah.

Paul: I mean, some coffee or tea?

Richard: Coffee, coffee. Yeah.

Paul: What would you say is your favorite library moment from the last year? Or if you can't pinpoint one, a top three.

Richard: I have so many. I mean, that's the beauty of this job, right? And working at the library every week, every day. It's, it's hard to limit it to, you know, that kind of question to like, for you, there's so many moments that are just, I mean, within the staff, right. Within the, our staff, like activities, like things like, we had that, Inspire through Flowers, came and provided flowers for...

Paul: Wonderful.

Richard: Bouquets for all of our staff. And, yeah, I just, you know, the joy and the the smiles from and the laughter and just the appreciation from, all of our staff and and it was great, you know, I love that moment. I think of a lot of programs that I get to attend. I just, you know, that's what I meant when I said I walk around and kind of just, like, observe people using the library. I love attending programs and seeing how people are experiencing our events. And, the s'mores party, I don't know if you, you heard about that, but, like, there was one night, I think I was just, I didn't I don't I'm not even sure I knew that there was a s'mores party, but I must have just been walking out of the library, and I noticed, in the courtyard, there was a s'mores party, you know? So I was like, I'm going to go to that. Yeah, exactly. S'mores party. Say no more, you know?

Paul: Absolutely.

Paul: Yeah. So I, I thought that was great in the south courtyard. It was really fun, though. The first concert back in the Petty after we renovated this past year was really special. I think that, you know, it was, a concert and it's like a really good crowd. And, I don't know, I just like, I love the arts and I love, how people can kind of

bond and come together, an appreciation of the arts, you know, the kind of like, breaks down a lot of walls and barriers that we might experience outside. Right? But, something like that was I just loved seeing that come together and, appreciating the moment of that. And then let's see, I don't know. I think that so many of my favorite moments are just not even, like the big stuff, you know, the big things. It's sitting in a meeting with my management team and, you know, spending the first ten, 15 minutes, like just connecting and laughing with one another and enjoying each other's presence and appreciating each other's humor and kindness and warmth, you know, like, that's that's what I kind of hold on to, you know, at the end of the day. Yeah, exactly. Let's see. Volunteer Palooza. That was really fun. Again, just seeing people in this day and age come to the library. We had, you know, over 300 people, I think, come to the library because all to find out why, how they can serve others right in the community. And, and I just thought that was inspiring and uplifting, You know, personally, there's a lot of selfish motives that you kind of witness in, in the news and kind of play out in the world right now. And to see our local community members come out and show what's in their heart by, wanting to serve others and help others was just, the best, you know? So I love that.

Amber: You're listening to "Your Family, Your Library," and this is a meditation moment.

Paul: To me, that really resonates as a number one kind of mission of a library to sort of provide space for people to sort of live in the moment, live in their own reality, and have access to such a variety of resources to help the people feel whole, in a sense. You know, you and, and, and I mentioned briefly the, the renovation of the Petty and we'd have to say, you know, for those, listeners who don't know the Skokie Library under Richard Kong's leadership did complete renovation of the first second and then finally the third floor, which is the office space for, the staff here. And if you could just a couple of words or a few sentences about what you feel was your main objective for doing the renovation, what was, you know, what was the main goal and purpose for that?

Richard: Yeah, thanks for asking that. It seems like the renovation projects were, have been, I don't know. When I look back at the nine years that I've been the director here, that it's just like such a massive part of what took up that time, right? Those nine years and, I mean, and I do mean nine years, because even when I was being interviewed for the job at the end of the interview, they asked me, did I have any questions? And one of my questions for the board at that time was, would they be open to talking about a possible renovation project for the public spaces and and I didn't know, you know, exactly what I wanted or I didn't have a vision for it. We had no architect that we were going to work with yet, we hadn't identified that person yet, but I knew that we wanted I wanted to do something

with the building. I think that the building is a beautiful building on its own. Right. The history of the architecture and design of this building is fantastic, but buildings, any building, right, regardless of how well it's kept up and designed, have a natural lifespan. Like every 18 to 20 years, you really need to take a fresh look at things and see is it working, you know, and, and do we need to change anything? And I wanted to, you know, lead that for this library and for that there was an opportunity to improve things. But getting back to your question, I think like the heart of it for me has always been how people feel. And what I mean by that is I wasn't like hyper-focused on storing things in the building, right? Or like inanimate objects in the building, right. I mean, I love furniture and I love our collections.

Paul: Sure.

Richard: I love, like, you know, all that. But that said, I, I knew that the design of the building and what we accomplished was going of really, the success of that was going to be determined by how human beings actually experience the spaces, you know? So when people come into our library, I wanted them to feel a sense of calm, a sense of like peace, you know, a sense of being welcomed into the space. When we were doing this project, the there was, you know, I was reading a lot about architecture, and there's an architect in James Polshek who talked about the architecture as a healing profession. And because he used like, medical and health terminology to describe what he was trying to accomplish, you know, and designing spaces that reduce people personal and social anxieties. And I, I loved hearing that. And it resonated with how I, I thought about the library spaces, and I really thought about it as a way to provide just some respite for people, you know, experiencing the harshness and kind of the challenges of daily life and the realities of life. And when people walk in, I want them to feel like renewed, restored, you know, just a sense of like peace, you know? And so that was that was kind of the driving force for me personally. And then.

Paul: Yeah.

Richard: And then, you know, beyond that, when we started actually working with our architect, Andrew Berman, who was fantastic, I love him as a person and as an architect. He was a perfect fit for us. And then, of course, like our deputy director, Laura McGrath, and Annabelle Mortensen on our staff and Amy Koester and a lot of other people that I don't have time to name, you know, but so many people came and brought like so many ideas and just a passion for, really creating incredible spaces and the ideas just kind of were flowing, you know, for, for a number of years at that point, you know, and here we were and we was just like, I feel like all the pieces came together, you know, and it was a perfect timing. We had a board that was incredibly supportive of this endeavor. And at every turn, you

know, they really pushed us and encouraged us to go all out, you know, like, just do this well, you know, and, and they didn't hold, hold us back or limit our resources. And they just really, like, gave us the green light completely. And, and the community, of course, you know, supported it as well. And the Village was supportive, like the entire community was supportive. So yeah, I feel so fortunate. And, a lot of gratitude for a lot of people and for the just the, the, all the pieces coming together, you know, yeah. I'm really proud of the work that we've done.

Paul: The renovation came out great. And I think the last element you mentioned, you know, the, the community loving it, you know, you could do all of this work. And then if it doesn't work for the community, you know, what was it worth?

Richard: Right.

Paul: So I think it really did come together. And it's the community has really embraced it. And so I guess it probably makes you feel like a job well done.

Richard: I do, honestly, I do. I feel like it's a job well done for all of us, you know, like, all of us, you included. Right? Like we all had a role in shaping the spaces that we work in right now and that the public uses right now. And so all of us should feel, a sense of pride and gratitude, in my opinion, you know, to build the spaces that we were allowed to help create, right. And, and I think that you put it best like seeing how the actual community members use the library and, and witnessing, just the sheer number of people that use our library every day is really encouraging. And it feels good to see that I the saddest thing for me is the idea of a library being renovated or built brand new, and being a quiet, beautiful space, right, where no one comes in. Right. So like, that's not us, right? We're a very active, activated library. And that's the best feeling, you know, because it's actually, like, impacting people's lives.

Amber: This is "Your Family, Your Library," and it's time for a Skokie fact.

Jessica: Did you know? The one-mile stretch of Church Street from Niles Center Road to Keeler Avenue, originally paved in 1913, was the first concrete paved road in Cook County. For more Skokie history, visit the library's local history page.

Paul: So we talked a bit about Skokie Library and sort of generally about how libraries fit into the community. What specifically about Skokie Library, do you think really, resonates with this community?

Richard: Yeah, it's a good question. I mean, I don't know how unique it is because I think there are a lot of libraries, share this common



trait. But, I mean, I would start with the the people, honestly, you know, like, if there were no staff in the library, the library was just not staffed, and it was open to people like you wouldn't have the same feeling. Right? And they have the same impact on people. So I always start with the people, you know, like when people walk in, they see our staff, they are welcomed, genuinely welcomed. The staff are caring and really passionate about service. They want to make a difference. Or, you know, we're a mission-driven organization. So I think people feel that, and that makes the world of difference, right? Like we've all walked into environments, whether like stores or restaurants or other public spaces that are where we might not feel like people really care or or we might actually feel, you know, there's some, a lack of hospitality, right? And, and that people I don't think people feel that here. You know, I think that we do a really good job of making people feel welcomed and, like that we're happy with that. We're glad that they're here, you know, and that we're here to do anything we can to support what they want to accomplish here at the library, right? Whether it's just to sit, whether it's just to rest, to study, to work, to accomplish a task, to find some books to read or whatever, right? So I think that, you know, it starts with that, so like I said, I think that a lot of libraries do that well, so I don't know if we're alone in that, but, but I think that it is a strength of ours. And then I would just say, beyond that, we have the other side, right? A community that really values their public library. And I don't know, honestly, how that came to be. You know, I, I give credit to the people before us, you know, like the original community members who had the dream and the, you know, determination to start a public library in Skokie and, and the people who said, yeah, let's fund that library and let's make sure it's well resourced, you know, and and then the leadership, you know, and the people before us who have worked in the library as employees, you know, like they did a lot of work over the decades to stack, like all the goodness, right, that we stand on right now, you know, so they built that platform for us and they did a great job. Right. So like my predecessor Carolyn Anthony, who I've worked with for many years, like I can't say enough about her, you know, and oh, so much of what we enjoy in terms of support for the library and the library's reputation was built by her and, her predecessor, Mary Radmacher, right. So, so, yeah, I think that we just are so fortunate. I don't I can't say that enough for so fortunate to be in a community where it's like the sweet spot of a community that just happens to be in love with its library and wants it to continue to thrive, and in turn, a library staff who wants to serve the community and never takes for granted the the love that we receive, right? So it's like kind of a just a nice reciprocal, you know, appreciation and love for one another, right? So...

Paul: Sure.

Paul: Yeah, that's it for us this episode. But our conversation is not over. Join us next time for part two of our talk with Skokie Public

Library Executive Director Richard Kong. Also, remember to keep in touch with us. We'd love to hear from you. Email us at podcast at Skokie library dot info. And don't forget if you've enjoyed this episode or previous episodes, rate and review us on your favorite podcasther. Bye for now.