

# Connecting with Our Communities with Empathy, Compassion, and Kindness:

## Marketing and Outreach Inside and Outside Library Buildings

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MAGDIANAMY CARRILLO-SOTOMAYOR (she/her/ella) was the Partnership Team Interim Supervisor for Washington County Cooperative Library Services where she also managed the Spanish Overdrive Collection. She has recently taken the position of manager at Shute Park Library in Hillsboro, Oregon. A native of Puerto Rico, Magdianamy has been a passionate advocate for the Latinx community in libraries for over a decade. She has a long track record of making library services more diverse, equitable, and inclusive for everyone. She focuses on offering bilingual services to diverse and underserved populations. Magdianamy has had a rewarding career in the library field in Puerto Rico, New York, and Florida. She has held numerous positions in each of these three regions, from volunteer to librarian and beyond. Her dedication and perseverance have had a positive impact on many lives. Magdianamy holds a Bachelor's degree in Social Sciences with a major in Labor Relations and a Master's degree in Library Sciences from the University of Puerto Rico. See <https://www.hillsboro-oregon.gov/Home/Components/News/News/15128/4300> to learn more about Magdy and to check out her nine feel-good stories about serving library patrons.

It is undeniable that having access to education and resources can transform a person's life. Books, in particular, can be powerful tools that provide knowledge and understanding to help individuals reach their goals and succeed. Unfortunately, many people around the world do not have access to materials that could give them a much-needed educational boost. For example, in developing countries, where schools are not adequately funded or equipped, students may not have access to the books and materials they need to learn. In impoverished areas, there may be a lack of libraries and bookstores, making it difficult for people to access the materials they need.

### **The Lack of Resources**

I grew up in a housing project in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Growing up in such circumstances can be a very challenging experience; it means dealing with poverty, violence, and a lack of stability. It can also mean having limited access to resources and educational opportunities that can improve one's quality of life. The lack of resources and education was a major contributing factor to why I lost some friends and loved ones and why both of my parents eventually ended up in jail. My family didn't have enough money to provide me with the necessary resources to get a good education. Gossip magazines and the yellow pages were my only reading materials available at home.

One of my fondest childhood memories was going to my neighbor's house where she would lend me her encyclopedia so I could do my homework or sit on her balcony for hours

reading about art, science, geography, sports, animals, and flowers. I imagined my life surrounded by things that were only visible on those pages.

After graduating from the University of Puerto Rico, I had a successful career as an academic librarian. However, as a result of a new law I was laid off and had to relocate to the United States. The language barrier was the greatest challenge I faced, and I had to begin from scratch, find a job, adjust to a new culture, and make new connections.

Despite this, I was determined to succeed professionally. I started volunteering at the library and benefited from the services and resources that helped me develop my skills. As well as helping me recognize the importance of developing, expanding, and promoting bilingual services, they have prepared me to identify inequities and barriers in the library's services.

### **Marketing and Outreach Inside and Outside Library Buildings**

Libraries are places of knowledge, connection, and inspiration. We can reach our patrons from anywhere at any time; our patrons are everywhere. We have the potential to connect with them in a meaningful way no matter where they are.

By listening to and understanding the perspectives of people in their communities, libraries can gain valuable insight into their patrons' needs. Through thoughtful outreach and marketing, libraries can ensure that patrons feel seen and heard, creating an environment of trust and understanding. Libraries can also use this insight to create programming and services tailored to the needs of their communities.

We can market our resources inside our buildings. In my previous library system as head of reference, I observed people studying for tests every day at the same table. When I placed bilingual information flyers about our free practice test database on tables, patrons began asking me about the database. They were thrilled to learn they could access free resources since they could not afford them. Some of them told me a few months later that this practice test helped them better understand the materials, improve their understanding, and pass the tests.

Successful outreach sometimes starts by simply talking to a patron. One fine day, a 42-year-old White man showed up at the library with olive-green ripped pants and a plain white shirt. He sat down in front of the computer for a couple of hours without using it and then left. The next day; he came back wearing the same clothes and did the same thing. I approached him and I said, "I noticed that you were here yesterday but did not use the computer. You are here again today, but you are not using the computer. Do you need any help?" He looked at me and said: "I was just released from prison with a bus ticket and 40 dollars after being there for 20 years, and I don't know what to do." He did not know about computers, smartphones, or other technological advances. After he was connected to the appropriate social services, I offered to teach him how to operate a computer. He started attending all of my classes. A few months later, he learned the basics of operating a computer, building a resume, using a cell phone, and searching for a job. After a few months of lessons, he could use a computer to search for work. He eventually found a factory job and a place to live. He was so grateful that he proudly promoted our services, telling others that he was born again in the library building.



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Observation and willingness are powerful tools that can impact positive outreach. We can make a real difference in a person's life lives by being observant and open to the needs of others. Taking the time to notice signs of distress and being willing to help can make a huge difference. A few years ago, I was participating in a job fair inside a correctional facility when an inmate walked by our table but did not say anything. I noticed that his name was Hispanic, so when he walked by our table again, I said, "Hola," and he replied, "Hola" to me. He then asked if I spoke Spanish. After I said yes, he said in Spanish, "I will be released tomorrow, but I have no idea where to begin or who to contact." I told him to visit the downtown library and the next day, he showed up at the library. He connected with people and found a place to stay after I helped him create an email and Facebook account.

### **Language is the Major Obstacle**

As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, the challenge of language barriers is becoming more and more prevalent. In the last 10 years, Oregon added nearly 140,000 residents of Latin American descent, according to the 2020 census (KGW, 2021). With Spanish being the primary language of many Latinx immigrants, this population often faces a steep learning curve when mastering English. As a result, Latinx individuals may struggle to gain access to essential resources such as education, employment, and healthcare due to their limited knowledge of the English language.

In a more metaphorical sense, language can also be seen as a wall that separates us from fully understanding and connecting with one another. I remember that a few years after I relocated to the United States, I always felt disconnected from the English-speaking world around me due to my inability to express myself fluently. Being unable to communicate with others created a sense of isolation, as though I were a spectator. I felt like I was on the sidelines, unable to fully engage in conversations and activities that were important to me and those around me.

It is no secret that language can be a barrier to effective communication, and this can be especially true when it comes to outreach initiatives. When organizations try to reach a broad range of people, language can be a major obstacle. For libraries to effectively engage with language communities, it is important to develop targeted outreach strategies. This should include the use of multiple languages and cultural and community-specific approaches. Libraries should also consider creating programs and services tailored to the needs of language communities. This can include language classes, cultural celebrations, or other events and activities designed to build relationships and foster a sense of belonging.

For instance, translation services are invaluable for libraries looking to reach a wider range of individuals. By utilizing translation services, libraries can create materials in multiple languages, expanding their outreach and making their services more accessible. To ensure accuracy and cultural sensitivity, it is important to hire translators who are native speakers and familiar with the language and culture. In addition to translation services, libraries can also use interpretation services to assist inside and outside of libraries' buildings.

Libraries can provide the best possible service to Latinx communities by providing Spanish classes for staff members interested in serving them. As a result, cultural understanding can be enhanced, and a more meaningful and effective service can be provided.

In addition, the functions of libraries are often misunderstood by Latinx community members since, according to Ruhlmann (2014), the word "library" resembles *librería*, the Spanish word for bookstore. Some Spanish speakers do not use libraries because they think they can't afford them, or if they do use them, they ask how much the books cost. Promoting our services

in Spanish and emphasizing that they are free to everyone is important. Simply saying “Gratis para todos” can help bridge the language barrier and ensure all community members can access and understand our library services.

Sometimes potential patrons face both language and distance barriers. As part of the Migrant Education program, I was able to provide outreach to farmworkers who move from one state to another. They don't have easy access to public transportation and often cannot get to libraries. We met them at a bus stop and provided them with English Language Learning and Spanish books of different proficiency levels. Their bus did not arrive until 9 p.m., but I waited for them knowing this resource would positively impact their lives. I distributed the books to the farmworkers using my cell phone and car lights. Those sacrifices meant nothing when I saw how grateful the farmworkers were when they saw books in their languages that would help them and their children learn.

### **Outreach to the Incarcerated**

As a child, I remember making books for my parents out of magazines while they were incarcerated; my letters and books were my way of keeping them happy. Literature is essential for incarcerated individuals, providing a wealth of benefits that can help them prepare for successful reentry into society. Books provide mental stimulation and help stave off boredom while allowing individuals to stay engaged with the world outside prison. They can also allow individuals to escape from their current situation into the world of their imagination.

In 2021, Washington County Cooperative Library Services received American Rescue Plan Act grants totaling \$7,125 from the State Library of Oregon to support incarcerated patrons and other underserved communities by providing them with a diverse collection of books in Spanish (Washington County Cooperative Library Services, 2021). Providing library services to incarcerated individuals is rooted in the belief that access to books and other materials can help incarcerated people gain knowledge, develop skills, and stay connected to the outside world. By reading, inmates can learn more about themselves, their families, and the world beyond their prison walls.

This project was successfully completed for three facilities in Washington County: the County Jail, Harkins House (a juvenile shelter), and the Community Corrections Center. Each collection, containing more than 100 books, was tailored to meet the distinct needs of the patrons residing at each facility (Washington County Cooperative Library Services, 2022). I thoughtfully curated the collections to include bilingual (English/Spanish) and Spanish-only books. Nonfiction topics ranged from self-help and learning English to trade skills and business.

Each book was selected with consideration of the rehabilitation process and how the power of literature can help people overcome their past. I believe that reading creates an experience of transformation for reintegration into society and preparation for people's future release. Providing library services to the incarcerated is an important way to support the rehabilitation process and provide a sense of hope and possibility. By providing inmates access to books, magazines, and other reading materials, library services can help promote personal growth and development, build connections, and create a sense of hope.

### **The Key is Empathy, Compassion, and Kindness**

Libraries are truly a paradise of information; we have various tools that can be used to transform people's lives. As a bilingual public librarian, I have been on a journey to help bring about positive change in the lives of those I serve. I have seen firsthand the power of books and information to help people learn new skills, explore new ideas, and discover new perspectives. I have seen how public libraries can serve as a safe haven for those needing a place to learn, grow, and heal. I have seen how libraries can unite people and help bridge divides.

It is essential to emphasize that empathy, compassion, and kindness are key to connecting with our communities. We can build stronger and more resilient communities when we come together with these values in mind. Creating safe and supportive spaces for all people can foster an atmosphere of understanding and inclusivity. This sense of unity and acceptance will help strengthen our communities and bring us closer together.

One of the most rewarding experiences in my career has been facilitating access to information and resources for those traditionally overlooked and underserved in our communities. Many of these people have come to this country looking for a better life, just like I did. I have found a deep sense of satisfaction in being able to make a difference for people who may otherwise have been left in the dark.

I am proud to have been part of a movement to provide access to information and knowledge for all. I am humbled and grateful for the opportunity to help transform people's lives, one book and kind gesture at a time.

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