

Somewhere Among the Bookshelves a Librarian Sings

“Hi Friends! Welcome,” calls out Julia Hurowitz from the small, rounded desk near the entrance of the Children’s Department of the Boston Public Library where she stands, rarely sits, so she is able to watch over the library. She stands just over feet tall.

While helping a parent compile a list of books about characters who don’t conform to traditional gender roles, she intercepts a running toddler. Holding the child’s hand, Hurowitz walks her back to “Toddle Town,” the loudest part of the children’s department in the huge, historic library, singing “Walking, walking! Here we go!” to the tune of Frere Jacques.

Returning back to her research, it’s clear that Hurowitz has worked in a library for half of her life.

“For one year olds and in between, anything you can sing is great,” said Hurowitz. “I love to sing. You can put a tune to almost anything.”

The 28-year-old grew up in Redding, Conn., a small town with a lot of trees and a very good town library. In Connecticut, you must be 16 years old to work most jobs, but at age 14 you are able to work in a library.

“The day before my 14th birthday, the library called me and said ‘Hey Julia, do you want a job? We can start paying you now,’ said Hurowitz. “I’d been volunteering for quite a few years before that and had been active in various children’s activities. That was my afterschool job all through high school.”

When Hurowitz graduated high school, she went to Drew University to pursue a degree in English and French.

“Even though I had worked at my hometown library,” said Hurowitz. “In college, it didn’t occur to me that it was something I could do as a career.”

Before working at the Boston Public Library, a job she started exactly one year ago this past Tuesday, she worked at a library in D.C. for four years while she pursued her master’s degree in library and information science at Catholic University. She took a more generalist track with her coursework while in graduate school, allowing her to take courses she was passionate about, such as “Rare Books in the Rare Books Reading Room in the Library of Congress.”

“Had I not ended up a children’s librarian, I definitely would be doing something focused on special collections and rare books,” said Hurowitz. “It’s definitely something that I’m very interested in and passionate about, but if I have to pick, I will always pick doing story time.”

There are two to five programs at the library per day, from story time to “Tinker Tots,” which is a STEAM (Science Technology Engineering Arts Math) focused pre-school program that Hurowitz runs. “Tinker Tots” is a story time paired with a related hands-on activity in the Program Room. Hurowitz facilitates the activity with the 3 to 5 year olds.

“It’s extremely messy, but always a lot of fun,” said Hurowitz.

Hurowitz was the last person added to round out the staff in the Children’s Department. There are six children’s librarians who all run a different portion of the daily programs and have one hour shifts working the front desk.

“She was the last piece of the puzzle,” said Theresa Furbish, one of the Children’s Department librarians whose shift overlaps with Hurowitz’s. “She has kind of a bell aspect about her where she likes to randomly break out into song.”

Not only does Hurowitz have the incredible skill of matching picture books and even simple sentences to the tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,” but she also has a knack for memorization.

When asking her about certain children’s books, she can recite the lines as if reading from an open page, and when a father comes up asking for a book about female scientists for his 5-year-old, she pops out from behind her desk and heads toward the back of the room. You can barely spot the messy bun at the top of her head as she bends over between the five foot shelves holding non-fiction books where she plucks a book about a female paleontologist from the stack.

The Children’s Department is designed to grow with the children that visit. From “Toddle Town,” full of stimulating lights and moving elements to encourage motor function and carpeted floors for comfortable crawling to the three foot shelves of picture books in the “Storyscape” next to puppets and dress up clothes for children to act out their favorite plots to the four foot shelves with built in tunnels below the top shelf for children to walk through to the five foot shelves in the pre-teen section shrouding the bay of computers from the more rambunctious areas of the room. Even the ceiling has something to look at with books suspended from wire as if they flew from the shelves, taking flight on their own.

And if the room of bold tones and elements weren’t enough, the space is full of roaming children calling to each other, and Hurowitz, through the bookshelves and yelling out arbitrarily as they explore. In this chaotic, colorful place, Hurowitz seems at home with her silver, polka dot glasses and blue and silver patterned scarf, stepping out from behind the computer screen that comes up to her chin to remind toddlers that we wear shoes in the library.

“We are about sharing information in all forms it takes,” said Hurowitz. Whether that be reminding her “friends” of library rules, teaching visitors to bring books up to the librarian when they don’t know where they belong or explaining how to use resources online.

“Digital literacy is just as crucial to take into account as other kinds of literacy,” said Hurowitz, which is why she tries to include technology in some way when planning her portion of the daily programming.

In addition to knowing library rules and where to find certain books both by searching through the shelves and on the web, Hurowitz also has to be knowledgeable about the latest books in the

children's literature world. From manga to tween romance to picture books, she has to be ready to make recommendations.

"You are never too old to read a picture book," said Hurowitz. "You can get a lot out of it as an adult."

On her bus ride home, you may find Hurowitz reading the latest children's fantasy to brush up on books to recommend to little readers or you may find her reading a mystery, her favorite genre, just for fun. There is one genre, though, that she will always need to remain up to date on.

"Very often people want books about trains," said Hurowitz. "There are never enough 'Thomas the Tank Engine' books."