

BUILDING COMMUNITY AS A LAW LIBRARIAN: LESSONS LEARNED FROM FIGURE SKATING

If you were to ask anyone who knows me to explain one thing about me, they would answer one of two ways. Austin is a librarian, or perhaps more likely, Austin loves to figure skate. Now you may be asking, “what do figure skating and librarianship have in common?” Well, they both take perseverance but more importantly, you don’t excel at either without a little help from your friends.

I started figure skating as an adult, which is not as uncommon as you might think. After spending my 2016 winter break bingeing a show about figure skating that brought me to tears more than once, I decided I wanted to try it. I was stressed. I moved states to go to law school and I missed my home. I have suffered from depression and anxiety my whole life, but the first year of law school was the worst it had been in almost a decade.



Skating was something I could fling myself into. It uses every muscle in your body, and to jump or spin you have to be completely focused. That focus forced me to let go. Learning to skate, much like law school, is an exercise in perseverance. You must retrain your brain to not see every fall as a failure but as part of the learning process. More than that, there was an unexpected benefit to skating, the sense of community. For the most part, skaters are friendly people. They will help you before they know your name. They will stop to answer your questions and are always ready to share both failures and successes.

Skating was a good stress reliever, but more importantly it reminded me of how much better we can be when we work together. By the time I graduated law school, I knew I wanted to be a law librarian. I had seen that same sense of camaraderie from my mentors in the law library. Later, I would see that same community spirit from my mentors in library school and in my career. They were always ready to listen, to give advice, and to share every triumph and pitfall that got them where they are today. Much like skaters, law librarians are friendly people. Many of us got into this profession because, at some level, we love to help others. I knew I not only wanted to be part of that community, I wanted to help build it for other law librarians and for my students.

It takes courage to be wholly and radically open, to reach out to others you might not know, or to ask for help. But that is the foundation of community; it has kept my figure skating group together even now that we are a thousand miles apart. It is what kept my library school cohorts together through COVID, when we sat together over Zoom to talk about assignments and to just check in. There is a special kind of magic when you allow yourself to be open with someone. It matters when you stop to ask how they are. It matters when you share the struggles you face. I could tell you about social capital theory. About how important the support and development of these community-built groups are. But I will boil it down to this: being open and vulnerable with others gives them space to do the same. And with those connections, we build each other up.

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