

Margarida Celestino ([00:11](#)):

In Portland, the teen library doesn't look much like what you might think or imagine when you hear about the word library. The teen library is a gathering place for young people from different high schools every day after school. In today's episode, we'll talk to the teen librarian, Kelley Blue, about how the teen library became such an important part of the community and welcoming space for young people. Mrs. Boo will tell us about how she's grown her team, how she intentionally connects with schools and other community organizations, and why she focuses on being an advocate for teens in her organizations and in Portland as a whole.

Katherine Plog Martinez ([00:47](#)):

Kelley, we are so excited to have you with us today to learn more about all of your work with teens and the teen library in Portland. The library and you and your team were one of the first places that came up as a place where Margarita spent her time after arriving in Portland and as an important part of her journey through Casco Bay, the places and spaces she connect outside of the school building. And so we're really excited to talk with you today to hear more about what that looks like and what the teen library is all about. But even more than that, how it fits in the broader ecosystem of things for young people in Portland and how you connect with some of those other places and adults.

When folks hear library and teens, they don't often think that's the place kids want to be after school, but from what I've heard from Margarita, it is. It's the hot spot from different schools. So tell us how you got there. What happened and how did it come to be?

Kelley Blue ([01:50](#)):

Yeah. So when I arrived here in 2015, I was the third teen librarian they had ever had in a very short period of time. And I would say in the 2010s, moving forward, there was a big trend in libraries nationwide to create spaces for teens because teens are a big demographic group. They're a bridge between childhood and adulthood, and libraries are for them too. I came from libraries that were much more, I think, locationally isolated. So suburban libraries where the library had to be a destination for teens. It wasn't like it is here in Portland where we're in the middle of the city, right across the street from a high school, right down the street from the Boys and Girls Club, which we're so fortunate to be. Teens are already here in downtown Portland. And so it used to be my job in my previous library to pried teens into the library with all these big programs. And it was really tough to get teens to come into the library. And that's not an issue here in Portland.

But I like to think that I created a more welcoming space for all teens. And so we just started seeing more kids here almost to the point that we were beyond capacity. It used to be like a clown car in here. How many kids can we fit into the space? I really believe that one of the most important developmental assets for teenagers is to have adults outside of teachers and parents who care about them and who want them to be part of their community. And that is the driving force of what we do here. I've managed in my time here to increase our staffing. So now it's me and two part-time folks who are dedicated solely to working with teenagers and libraries. And I like to think that I have a great staff and we really love teens, and I think it really shows. And so we're just trying to be those caring adults that are welcoming and remember your name and care about you and want to know what you're up to.

Katherine Plog Martinez ([03:43](#)):

I realized I jumped right in because I've had a chance to listen to Margarita talk about the teen section and everything that's there. And I imagine there are people listening right now who are visualizing books geared towards teenagers, but it is so much more than that. So can you tell us a little bit about when we're talking about the teen library in Portland, what are we talking about? What does it look like? What's there?

Kelley Blue ([04:07](#)):

So that's a great question. We do have books. We have lots of books. We have comic books, we have movies, we have video games that you can check out. But we've also got sprawling space for kids to just hang out. We have an area that we call the lounge, which is where we have this giant TV, a big welcome banner that was just created by one of our teens, and the TV is connected to a PlayStation. On Fridays, we do soccer, which a lot of people don't expect to see in a teen library. At the very heart of the space is our staff desk. So we're at the center of everything. And then we try to make it a place that you can use it for multipurpose. So if you want to do homework, if you want to just chill out and read, or if you want to play a game of Uno, we have some study spaces and we have some computers for teens to use. We have free wifi.

Katherine Plog Martinez (04:58):

So that coupled with you talked about, you've been able to grow your staff, there's some resource decisions that are made there. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about that, the within the library system, what are those conversations like to get the resources and the support from the broader community to invest in young people in this way?

Kelley Blue (05:18):

So I see my role, whether or not it's defined, but this way in my job description, I see my role as I am the advocate for teens in libraries here. And that can mean having some really difficult conversations about what we need, what is allowed to happen in here. I'm the expert on teens in libraries, and my job is to be an advocate for them at every level.

Margarita herself came to a board meeting with me once so that we could tell the board what the teen library is all about, what we do, what's important to teens, what we'd like to see. I really actually wish we could do more of that. I try to invite community partners. I'm always amazed at how many people have never been here. And they always come into the library and they're like, "I can't believe you have this for teens. I can't believe it's here."

So whenever I am introduced to a new community partner or I meet somebody out in the community, I want to invite them in here when we're our busiest so they can see what it's like and what we offer. So that's my outreach. Come hang out with us. Come just if you love teens, if you are another youth serving organization, come in here and sit with us after school and just see what it's like. I also love that because a lot of times they also know the teens that are in here.

Katherine Plog Martinez (06:30):

I love that. Invite them into the space and help. It's not just a space for the teens themselves, but for everyone in the community who works with, connects with, helps lift up the voice of teens. I have seen Margarita nodding her head at a ton and lots of smiles about the things that you're talking about, and Margarita, I know beyond just hanging out at the library after school before going to the Boys and Girls Club, you were also part of leadership in the teen council. And like Kelley said, got to talk to the board. And so I know you had lots of things you wanted to dig in more deeply with Kelley on and would love to hand it to you.

Margarida Celestino (07:06):

So the library doesn't just offer opportunity for kids to go in and play FIFA to go in and get books, but there's also events like musical groups go in and perform. We have dance groups that sometimes come in the evenings. We've had tutoring sessions for high school students. So how are you able to create a space where every student is able to seek the help that they need, or the entertainment that they need within a library?

Kelley Blue (07:32):

That's a really hard question. I do try to do that. Sometimes it feels like we don't have the capacity, but I'd say we try to have a balance of... Programming has always been really important to me. So the word

programming can mean nothing to some people in libraries. That's what we refer to any events or tutoring or anything extra we're doing besides sitting at a desk and providing help, we call programming. So programming has always been super important to me. Again, I mentioned I have two staff. I empower them to come up. I'm like anything you think is a good idea, anything you're talking to kids about wanting to do, let's do it. Let's see what we can do it. We fail a lot. We fail a lot. And sometimes zero people show up and again, it goes back to being responsive.

I think about the dance group that was coming in here and looking for a place to practice, we try to make that happen. We try and look at the spaces we have. Sometimes it feels like chaos when we're open. We're trying to run a program. We're trying to do what we call readers' advisory, which is helping somebody find their next favorite book, or helping them do research for a project. We're helping somebody else apply for a job on a computer. We're helping somebody else with their math homework. For three hours every day after school, we expect it to be chaos, and we expect to do whatever we can to meet everybody's needs. And again, it used to be just me and maybe one other person part of the time. But because I was able to show the need for more dedicated staff, we were able to get more people. And now I finally feel like we're in a place where we can handle it.

Margarida Celestino (09:07):

So Ms. Blue, aside from the student council and many other opportunities that you were able to give to students who come to the Portland Public Library, how are you able to find more opportunities for the different teens that the Portland Public Library hosts?

Kelley Blue (09:22):

So first there's traditional library resources, which we're here to provide and to make sure that teens know about, but as far as the other things that we offer, I think having them be teen driven is the most important thing. So I see myself as a facilitator of other people's ideas. Whether that is a community partner or teens themselves, if you come to me with something that you want to do here or something that you think would be a good fit, I want to try and make that happen. I don't want to be a top down librarian where I'm like, I have this great idea based on what I think about teens and what I think about the community. I want to hear from you and your friends. I find that giving teens that power of creativity, I'm here to make that happen for you.

When that happens and the teens actually run the program, it's the best possible opportunity. It's always the most successful. It's the same with community partners. I might have somebody from Planned Parenthood that really wants to come in and talk to teens about sex education. And I'm like, okay, do you like teens? That's the first question I ask, and oh yeah, I love teens, and I work with them on my own teen council. And I'm like, okay, great. That's the first thing. And are you willing to be flexible and just come in and hang out?

When it comes to adults wanting to do things in here, I try. I'm like, are you comfortable just hanging out and interacting with people? But I think the most important thing to answer your question, Margarita, is getting to know kids that are using this space and letting them know that they have the power to make suggestions and to change things here and to try doing their own programming here.

Margarida Celestino (10:56):

So aside from being a facilitator and great support for students, you have really great relationships with about any student that steps into the Portland Public Library, especially in the teen section. My question is how do you build those strong bonds and relationships with students beyond those who just come and ask you for where certain books are located or for book recommendations?

Kelley Blue (11:20):

That's such a great question because there are teens that can come in here every day for a year and never ask for a book and never engage with me very much at all. I think that the most important thing is

to provide a safe and welcoming space for teens to be no matter what they want to do in here. They can come in every day and use a computer and never talk to me. They can come in and just hang out with their friends. Funny enough, a lot of times, the way I get to know kids is if they're breaking the rules. And some of my best relationships with teens are because I've had to talk to them about breaking the rules in here. Usually it's something very hilarious. And that's another way to build relationships is talking to them about how we behave together in the library, regardless of, I don't care about adult expectations. I mean, how other teens want to be treated in the space.

So a lot of my relationships are not built with the kids that are here looking for books or looking for somebody to help them with their homework. It's just kids that are hanging out. And I think it's really simple. I just try to make eye contact with everybody, to say hi, ask them if they need help, make sure I say goodbye even if they haven't talked to me at all so that they know consistently, and also to have a staff that's here all the time. They know that Miss Blue's going to be there every day. Harley and Megan are going to be there every day. It's a place I can go and just be.

Katherine Plog Martinez ([12:43](#)):

Makes me think about something that Margarita and I have been talking about in terms of what are the opportunities that easily come and are presented to see some young people, but other young people aren't presented with as frequently? And from what Margarita said, the team council for the library isn't the kids that are in every other leadership position in the community. It's not oh, it's obviously that's going to be Margarita and Joshua and six other kids that are on everything. But it really is a group of diverse thinkers, diverse skill sets who just have an opinion. And I'm wondering, how did that come to be? How did you begin identifying the voices that you wanted and even needed on that teen council to really get the type of input that you were looking for, and how do you keep them all engaging?

Kelley Blue ([13:34](#)):

Again, it's I notice a kid is in here every day. We talk, we say hi. They seem like they really like using the library every day. They're not necessarily that kid that's on every other leadership council, but I'm like, "Hey, did you know that we have this teen advisory?" Maybe they have an idea like I wish there was a bathroom here in the teen library. I'm like, that's a great idea. Or we recently got rid of this rule, but we used to have a code of conduct rule that you couldn't wear a hoodie in the library. I don't like that rule. I'm like, I don't like that rule either. Hey, we have this teen advisory board that meets a couple of times a month, you want to come and hang out? And we tried to set some expectations, mostly because the teens asked for them.

But I think unlike student council, if you miss three meetings in a row, there's not going to really be any repercussions. If you can be here, when you can be here, you're welcome to contribute. So again, I think because we're fortunate to have such a cross section of kids from Portland, again, it's building those relationships and inviting them in and just saying it's really low stakes. It's really low pressure.

But we get some things accomplished. But again, if you want to really accomplish something, like it change to the code of conduct, okay, well this is what we have to do in order to make that happen. I think setting expectations like you can't change a policy just by saying, you want to change it. Here are the steps we have to take in order to do that. Are you willing to do this with me? This is what I need from you. Can you write a paragraph about why you think that is. Hey, maybe you are good at looking up articles on why saying you can't wear a hoodie in a space is problematic. So tapping strengths, trying to get them to be excited about something and setting expectations that okay, you want to change something? This is what it's going to take.

Katherine Plog Martinez ([15:17](#)):

You've talked a lot about how you connect with the young people once they're there, all the different ways you encounter them, taking time to talk with them, the teen advisory board, but there's a really

unique population in Portland. You have a lot of asylum seekers, a lot of folks from African countries and nations. And I'm wondering, what does that look like to not just know the kids who are already there, but to know and understand the community of young people as a whole. And I imagine in the time you've been there, the changing and shifting nature of the community in Portland.

Kelley Blue ([15:54](#)):

Yeah. I feel really fortunate where we're physically located because a lot of times this is the second stop for folks that have just settled in at the family shelter, at the teen shelter. So we are getting to know people right when they're joining this community and building those relationships from the start and providing people with a space to come that has technology, that has wifi, that has just space to be. So I get to be at the forefront of seeing those shifting demographics. Who's coming from where, what the dominant language is. That's been a real adjustment, and it's one thing I really wish we could do better is meeting people with the language needs that they have. I would love to have cultural navigators that are teens or are young adults that are already doing that work naturally in their community.

I also know that we have a large population of teens that aren't going to school that are experiencing homelessness or in all of its many forms, housing insecurity. They may not be enrolled in schools and they're spending some time here. That's another thing, we will be open again at 10 in the morning and we'll be open all day. The spaces for teens, a hundred percent, the entire time we're open. And it has to be staffed the entire time that we're open because there are a lot of folks that don't follow a traditional school system that need this place all day long. Portland High is an open campus. At schools like Casco or Paths, you might have an alternative school schedule.

Katherine Plog Martinez ([17:27](#)):

I want to drill down on something that you said, because we heard the same thing from Erin at the Boys and Girls Club. The proximity of the family's shelter and the teen shelter is critical. And same thing for both of you, it often is that first place that young people get connected. But I'm wondering if it's more than proximity, what are the conversations and the dialogue with the families at shelter and the teens shelter about the recommendations that they're giving and how do you communicate with case workers there or other members of the team?

Kelley Blue ([17:59](#)):

It's really difficult. And this is not to slight our shelter services, but I know that we all realize they experience very high turnover in staffing and the pandemic has made that worse. I love that the library has recognized that we need... So we now have two community resource coordinators who are social workers and they're amazing. And they help us establish, they help us keep that bridge of relationships that keep us up to date on who's the best person to contact at the Root Cellar or the family shelter.

I also want to point out something really important, which the library is one of the last free spaces in our society. It's free. You don't have to pay for anything here. You don't have to pay to be here. You don't have to buy a cup of coffee, and there's bathrooms you can use. I know that sounds really basic, but it's big. There's nowhere to go to the bathroom in the city of Portland, and you can make your own space here and do what you want. I think when I talk to teens, the fact that this is a free space that is welcoming to them is one of the key components of why they want to be here. And we provide free wireless. And if you want to get on a computer, we provide that.

Margarida Celestino ([19:09](#)):

The only other question I have is if Miss Blue does anything outside of the library to collaborate with teachers or other educators?

Kelley Blue ([19:18](#)):

Yeah. So I feel like relationships with teachers are critical and they are definitely relationships that need to be fostered. And I love it when I start building a relationship with a teacher, it's going to last for years,

and they're going to bring their kids to the library, and they're going to bring me into their classroom, and we're going to collaborate together. So any chance that I have to do that, I was just at Portland High to do mock interviews on Friday, which all the poor freshmen have to do. It's one of my favorite events of the year.

I go to King Middle School every year and work with the librarian there to do a presentation on freedom of speech and intellectual freedom in libraries. I love going to schools. If anybody hears this, I will come to your school. I will talk about banning books, and I will talk about freedom of speech and how teens have a right to access ideas. That's a big passion of mine. Baxter Academy is another one. I love this, they have a young adult fiction class at Baxter Academy. So it's an English elective, and I get to come and teach them about what young adult literature is. I get to come, I get to help them pick books. I get to teach them how to use the library or they'll come here. And I love seeing them get excited about teen books.

Katherine Plog Martinez ([20:27](#)):

It's not just about people coming to you. It's about pushing out and you connecting in those other places in the learning ecosystem, whether that's in the school or the recognition that kids are learning in their home or in the park, lots of different places where they can make those connections. And you talked very early on in our conversation about inviting other youth organizations into the library space, about setting the norms for them about how you interact with young people. Again, Erin from the Boys and Girls Club mentioned that there are places where the out of school time providers in Portland come together to connect. And I'm wondering how you engage with the other providers more broadly? How you plan and learn and connect together and participate in that?

Kelley Blue ([21:07](#)):

So it sounds like Erin mentioned this, but we are so fortunate through Connect Ed to have this group of out of school providers that meet monthly. It's a huge group. We get to check in about what we're doing. I can't stress how important that is because we can identify where needs are being met and maybe identify whether they're not I might have an opportunity for somebody at Portland Squash or Telling Room that's a perfect fit for one of their teens and vice versa. I learned so much about what they're doing.

And also sharing strategies for how to overcome obstacles and barriers that we see in our community. And the schools also participate in those meetings, especially summer learning and the folks at the schools that help identify summer opportunities for teens and for kids too. So that group is so invaluable. I think for all of us, it takes a lot of work off of our plate of trying to reach out individually to all these different groups. And it also prevents a lot of repetition and maybe doing work in a vacuum. So the out of school network group, Portland out of school network is so invaluable.

Margarida Celestino ([22:13](#)):

So the last question I have for today is, Miss Blue, obviously you do an amazing job reaching out to students, making sure that they're getting the help and opportunity they need, while at the library, making sure they have a safe space and enjoying their time while being there, what's your advice for other librarians? Not only just regular librarians, but the ones working specifically with teens and helping teens navigate their high school life and transition to college?

Kelley Blue ([22:40](#)):

So I'm going to go with my gut and the first thing that comes into my head, which is keep your values at your center. Librarians are like teachers and doctors and lawyers, and we have a core set of values. And I really think about those. They're like my compass. I think about those all the time. So things like access, privacy, intellectual freedom, which is a fancy way of saying you should be able to access all the ideas that are out there without restriction. Access, which says that everybody should be able to use this

space and everybody should be able to find what they need. I would recommend other team librarians, just remember you're there for the teens. If people have an issue with teens, which they often do, you are their advocate. You are there to advocate that they deserve a space in the library, that resources should be allocated to them. Fight for them and keep your values close to your chest and let your values guide you would be my advice to other teen librarians.

Katherine Plog Martinez ([23:37](#)):

I got goosebumps there as you were talking about being that advocate and being that voice for them. So I definitely hear that strong value of being youth centered and helping connect them to all the resources that are available and really taking time to know and appreciate and value them for all that they are and all that they bring to the table. So thank you for sharing your values with us today for sharing the really cool work going on in Portland, and thank you for all you do for your community.

Kelley Blue ([24:06](#)):

Thank you for interviewing. Margarita, it's great to talk to you again. Thank you for inviting me here.

Margarida Celestino ([24:12](#)):

Anytime. Thank you.

Karen Pittman ([24:16](#)):

Portland's teen library and the work Kelley has led with her team demonstrate how cultural institutions can be places that provide not just access to ideas and opportunities, but can respond to the needs of their community. Libraries have been focusing on their role as partners in youth development for more than two decades. The Portland libraries are prime example of what happens when adults think about their role, not just in terms of delivery of services, but as part of an interconnected web of supports that weave together to create a learning ecosystem.

When we take an ecosystem lens, we need to think carefully about how we can fully tap into the power and potential of libraries and other cultural institutions. How can we think outside the box about how you work with and connect to libraries, museums, performing arts centers and other cultural institutions? What might it look like if we considered current workforce challenges through the lens, not just of how do we get more adults into specific roles, but instead, how do we fully leverage all of the adults in the community?

Katherine Plog Martinez ([25:16](#)):

Join us next week as we take our conversation back to Casco Bay High School and talk with school nurse, Becky Bell. Visit us at changingtheoddsremix.com to learn more about the Portland teen library and Connect Ed, the out of school time intermediary discussed in the last two episodes. Follow us on social media to join the conversation about the power of community in learning and development ecosystems.