

## Episode 1: We LOVE the Library

Hello and welcome to *We LOVE the Library*, a twice monthly podcast brought to you by the San Luis Obispo County Library Foundation. I'm Rachel Duchak, a writer, SLO County resident, and board member of the Library Foundation. Our volunteer board members serve as ambassadors for the library while wisely investing donations and bequests from the community for the benefit of the SLO County Library System.

Now seems like the perfect time to reintroduce you all to the people's champion, the public library. The 14 libraries in the San Luis Obispo County system, as well as the three independent local libraries, are staffed by smart, compassionate people whose primary purpose is to help answer your questions.

My first question for you is, Do you have a library card and do you use it? As you will discover in this podcast, our public library system contains much more than just paper books on shelves. Your library card provides you access to a truly vast and diverse collection of materials, from internet hotspots to digital audiobooks to fully stocked "Explorer Backpacks" to computer repair kits. Did you know that the SLO County Library System has the largest physical collection of films of any library system in the state of California? Have you ever checked out the library's California parks passes and local recreation passes for free parks access? The public library offers so much to our community and the SLO County Library foundation is happy to help amplify the message about the unique physical and digital items in our library system collections as well as compelling in person presentations and library events.

In this first episode, we meet Christopher Barnickel, Director of Libraries for the SLO County System, to learn about how his job resembles that of a symphony conductor. We also speak with artist and educator María Belén Luzuriaga Abad, who explains how and why to set up an ofrenda for Dia de Los Muertos or Day

of the Dead and how this activity can help us to celebrate the grieving process for loved ones. Finally, we hear from Julianne McAdam, the president of our SLO County Library Foundation Board. She makes a great case for supporting the public library through donations and bequests managed for the Library Foundation by professional investment managers. Thanks for supporting your public library!

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A: Hello, I'm with Chris Barnickel today who is the library director for the San Luis Obispo County Library System. How're you doing, Chris?

B: Great, Rachel. Thanks for having me on.

A: Yes, thanks for joining us. You are the Library Director. Could you tell us what that means?

B: Yeah, absolutely. So I've been here since 2013. I would say if there's an analogy, it would be similar to a conductor. I don't play any of the instruments, but I make sure that the musicians are all in line and providing the kind of experience that the listeners are wanting to have. So basically coordinating services, making sure that we have the right people in the right place and we have the budget that we need in order to provide the services that the community is looking for.

A: Cool. And you have a deputy director as well?

B: I do, yes.

A: How many people work at the library? In the system?

B: We have around 70 around in the system. I want to say at last count, we were right around 68 full time equivalents. So you can see in that number that we do have some part-time staff members. That's the disparity between the full-time equivalent and the actual number of personnel. We have 14 branches throughout the county. And the deputy director, Arceli Astorga, she

and I are here to provide support for all of our staff members, again, to provide the services that are asked for from our community members throughout the county.

A: Are you at liberty to tell us how many people have library cards in the county?

B: I am absolutely at liberty. I will give you rough numbers and I want to say it's around 70,000.

A: Wow.

B: As a listener, you could look at that and say, well, geez, we have a quarter of a million people. Why such a big gap? And really it's just a policy decision. So in your household, we don't require that you have an individual card for each member of your household. We give you the agency to decide how many cards you want to have in your household. So certainly we could require a card for each individual in the community, but we want to leave that up to the household to make that decision. And frankly, it's really just cooking the books. If we go out and say, oh, we increased our cardholders because we changed our policy to require everyone to have a card. Our important decision here is engagement and making sure that we're meeting the needs of the community. And I'm not really looking to chase numbers. I'm looking to chase experiences and make sure that our patrons are having positive experiences by getting the resources that they need in their hands.

A: Cool. And one of the most recent experiences I had in working with you is this Outside Together event that happened in early September. And we had a couple months short bit of time to put it together, but that was super interesting. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

B: Yeah, it was such a great experience. I'm so glad we got to have that together. I was really looking for inspiration and looking forward in the form of movies at the time. And so I had gotten out

on a platform that's hosted in the United Kingdom, and it was really focused on more adventure narratives and things of that nature. And so one of the films that I looked at was called *Black People Don't*. And that is a very provocative title because what exactly are you trying to say that an individual or community doesn't do? And reached out to the director and said, gosh, I think that there's so much interesting topic, like topics that we can cover here, from identity to recreation to mental health. Mental health. Absolutely.

A: That was a cornerstone.

B: It absolutely was. And then lastly, just that creative content making. And so together, you and I reached out to various partners within the community to have a discussion, a panel discussion at Cuesta College at the Miossi Performing Arts Center and just talk about those four topics. And we had the privilege of meeting the director and hearing his vision and just the genesis of this film that he created. And it was just such a privilege to be able to have that conversation with the community and for community members to share their own perspectives and their own experiences as it relates to mental health or recreation or identity.

A: It was super cool. And there's an article in *The Cuestionian* that recaps it if anyone wants to look that up. That's Kenny X. Hamlett, who is the director, and he's super nice guy. And he came down from Oregon to be part of the panel and the presentation. And that was really neat. So I hope that we are have an opportunity through the foundation to support the library to do more kinds of things that you want to do in terms of bringing the community together and drawing together these different threads.

B: Absolutely. And I think that's important to acknowledge here is the value that the Library Foundation provides you as a listener in that we have a set budget and we have a limited capacity to share the important services that we provide in the community. And when you look at popular programs such as our Summer Reading

Program that happens every year, we don't have the funds set aside to put on the program that we need to put on for the community. And it's through nonprofits such as our Library Foundation and our Friends groups that help really support these services, both in terms of advocacy and promotion. But really the financial support, and this last year, the Library Foundation helped support our budget to the tune of over \$300,000 to ensure that we were able to purchase more of our collections and provide more of the programs that again, are important to our patrons throughout the county.

A: And shout out to the Friends groups. They participated in the Back to School Extravaganza, which was the capstone for the Summer Reading Program. And I had a chance to meet the most polite group of children I have ever met and wonderful, engaged parents. It was a really, really fun event. I'm looking forward to it next year.

B: Absolutely.

A: So let's cover one more thing. You were talking about collections, and I know that one of the things that the Library Foundation does is to support digital collections and especially ebooks, which are very hot right now, so that people can listen to them as they're driving or whatnot. I know that there's been some contraction in some of the apps or the platforms that we're using. Can you tell us a little bit about that and how that all worked out in terms of the budget and digital collections?

B: Absolutely. So recently we made a decision to really put all of our focus on the most popular platform for our patrons, and that's overdrive Libby. One of the things about overdrive that we've received feedback on is the desire for our patrons to be able to access content on their Kindle devices. And Libby has a corner on that market. The other platforms that we used to provide access to simply didn't provide that. And given our capacity in our selectors, our staff to select items, it really just wasn't as

streamlined when we had multiple platforms. And frankly, even for a patron user experience, they would go to our catalog and maybe they wouldn't see something in one platform when in fact it was in the other. And so the user experience that we have received feedback on is that a lot of our patrons go directly to the Libby app to find their materials rather than to our website. So library.org which takes you to the catalog, which then gives you a full menu of what's available to you.

A: That's the way I look for audiobooks is through the catalog.

B: And I would say you're doing it correctly.

A: I'm just doing it differently.

B: You're doing it differently, but I would say correctly. And I'm going to just qualify that in that what we found is people were missing content and then they would provide feedback of like, gosh, it's unfortunate that their hold queue is so long in Libby or that Libby doesn't have a particular title, when in fact the library system does have the title. It just happened to be on another platform.

A: So instead of having three different platforms, we are down to one. But you've been able to amp up the the collections inside of Libby that are associated with the SLO County Library System.

B: Yes, Rachel. So we are working with the publishers to transfer the titles that were previously on the other platforms over to Libby. So to your point, you should see as a user an enriched collection which will result in shorter hold times for your most popular reading titles. It should also create an experience where you aren't missing titles. I will say that for those of you who find in our catalog or in Libby or however it is you go and search the titles that you don't find, we do have a Suggest a Title portal. So if you.

A: Which I have also used.

B: Excellent. We love that our selectors are phenomenal in providing a collection that has depth and breadth. The fact of the matter is we can't intuit always what everyone's interests are all the time. And we want to be responsive to our community members and their reading desires. And so if you go to [SLOLibrary.org](http://SLOLibrary.org) and you look on the catalog and there is a title that's missing at the bottom, you will see a link that will allow you to request a title. And as long as we can get it through our vendors, then we will purchase that for you as a patron.

A: Awesome. That's so great. One last question. What's your favorite thing about libraries?

B: Favorite thing about libraries is making connections in the community. I've never found another avenue in which you can connect with so many different people and experiences and just shared stories. And I think that we have this opportunity in the library to really meet the community where they are in virtually any subject matter or any experience. And I look at that from the experience down in Santa Barbara when there were massive landslides and the community went to the library to find out when their trails were going to reopen or when they could get access to their neighborhood once again. And while that is technically the lane of the Office of Emergency Services, people go to the library to make connections. And I just, I love that about the library. I just think it's such a unique not only career but but just experience within the community to really make connections.

A: Awesome. Thank you, Chris. Thanks for talking with us.

B: Excellent. Thanks for having me.

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A: Coming up next on We LOVE the Library, because it's October. Let's learn more about the deeper meaning of Dia de los Muertos or the Day of the Dead, and how we can celebrate life and death

in a thoughtful and healing way by assembling an ofrenda. We are here today with María Belén Luzuriaga Abad.

C: There you go.

A: She is an educator, a student, and an artist, and we met recently at the Outside Together event that we talked about earlier in this episode with Chris Barnickel, which was super, super interesting. How are you, María Belén?

C: I'm doing great. Very happy to be here and talk about all these beautiful, enriching topics.

A: Great. Now, you have worked with the library before in giving a presentation on creating an ofrenda. Can you tell us what that is and give us a little bit of background on the presentation you've given at the library?

C: Yeah. So I started to do what I call the tour of the ofrendas, because I worked at almost all of the libraries. And so I created this in hopes to show people how to not only make an ofrenda and decorate, but to explore the different topics of grieving around the world and celebrating the dead. And so I brought in all of these ideas about explore how different cultures approach death and remembrance and how it can bring us together through creativity, storytelling, and ritual. So I focused on building ofrendas that honor the ancestors during the Dia de Los Muertos

A: Which is coming up at the end of October era and beginning of November.

C: That's right.

A: So is this a Catholic thing or is this an indigenous thing, or is it a mixture of both?

C: It's a mixture of both. You know, I think that the Dia de Los Muertos, it falls in with the All Saints Day. And so it's a little bit of a blend of the colonizing factor and then the indigenous that stayed,



you know, all of the symbolism. And so there's just a blend of both worlds coming together.

A: So you were telling me that you had done some world travel and that had inspired you about how people around the world are celebrating grieving or dealing with the grieving process. Can you tell us more about that?

C: Yeah. So I've always been drawn to sacred spaces, ever since I was young and walking through Monte Albán in Oaxaca, Teotihuacan near Mexico City, and Tikal in Guatemala. I just felt that vibration, you know, about the sacred and how life and death, they're all just part of the cycle. And so these places are considered sacred because each city was built as a spiritual center. And while I travel in Burma—you mentioned that you've also went to the pagodas—the energy is quieter, but still, people are lighting up candles, they're putting flowers for their loved ones. And in the Amazon, like in Ecuador, where I'm from, I visited and lived with an indigenous tribe, and I see how close together all of this sacred space is. These spaces, they unite. We're all doing the same thing: following that same path of restoring, healing, and celebrating the ancestors.

A: Yes. And frankly, it's one of the things that every single person around the world shares is that we are all moving towards death, and we will all have people that we care about who will pass before us. And the point is to learn from and celebrate and move through the grieving process and the person that you're grieving. So last year, I put together a little collection of pictures, and I had a marigold plant, and I had some little chocolates. And so I was trying to do my version of an ofrenda without having done any research. I wish I had gone to one of your workshops and you could have helped me out, but I think I was missing a bunch of pieces. Can you tell us about putting together an ofrenda?

C: Right, so there's so many ways of putting together an ofrenda and the intention that you have behind it. But what I was teaching

in the libraries was how there are different tiers in the ofrenda and the Dia de Los Muertos ofrenda. Like, for example, there are the elements, right? The elements are very important when you're creating an ofrenda. And the fire, the candles that light the path for the spirits, water, you know, renewal. Think about, you know, water is a source of energy, right. Or cleansing. And then earth represented in food, flowers symbolizing nourishment and air carried by incense like copal or ruda or papel picado, which is also what we crafted at the end of the workshop. And so all of these elements are really important. And it's important to respect these elements. And then on top of that, we talked about a little bit of the geography of the ofrenda, which is the lower level represents the underworld, the inframundo, where the ancestor rests. The middle is the present, the living. The upper level connects with the skies, the divine. So in each layer, you are able to put something in there. And again, this varies depending on your region, on your family and what you want to do. You know, these are just fundamentals of what I've researched. And so if you want to, on the top, a lot of people will put a saint or the deceased's photos; in the middle, favorite foods and drinks; and on the bottom, like salt water.

A: What is the story with salt? How is that connected to this whole process?

C: So salt is purifying: think about the elements of salt. You know, I mean, we pretty much use them in, in almost everyday life. Right. So all of these elements are just traditional. We used to exchange salt. Salt was like gold. So salt is cleansing. And so then the list goes on forever. I mean, we can sit here and talk about from the flowers to all of the different foods.

A: So it sounds like there is no way to get this wrong. You just need to be thinking about the people that you want to celebrate and you want to remember and take a look at their pictures. Like my maternal grandmother and her dog. So I have a picture of grandma and Digby.

C: Yeah, absolutely.

A: And so I put that up. And so I. Even if I didn't have all the elements, I'm still spending time thinking about her. She's been gone for decades, but I just think about how happy I was when I visited her. And every time I see her picture on our little ofrenda, it was reminding me of those powerful happy times.

C: Absolutely. And again, the intention behind it, you're opening up a portal, you're opening up a door. It is nice to hold those nice memories. But there's the other side of it where maybe there's some unfinished business or maybe you lived in sort of a little bit of a chaotic family or something and you're trying to look for answers. So, you know, I think beyond the, the good feelings, there's sometimes people like to resolve these things while opening a portal. So one has to be mindful of the intention that when you're going into these spaces and how much energy and power you want to put into it and, and what you would like to ask.

A: Right.

C: And also know that maybe you won't get an answer immediately. Sometimes people are seeking for some immediate answers and sometimes you just have to let it flow.

A: You're from Ecuador and you were telling me that instead of just having a little construction of an ofrenda for around October, November, you have one up, at least one up in your house all the time. And so you were mentioning, as before we started to record that the sense of celebrating grieving and being in touch with your ancestors and the spirit world is something that happens for you and perhaps your culture more regularly all year. Is that right?

C: Yes. In particular with my family, you know. There's two worlds in my family. There's a world that is very tied with the spiritual world and there's the other side of my family, who are more religious. I grew up with this: altars every day. You know, we have a little corner of the home where you're always keeping—you

either lighting up incense or you're lighting up something, or you have a symbol, doesn't have to be a picture. So I grew up with my mother and my grandmother always having little shrines in their own way. You know, sometimes shrines or altares look very different depending on who you are, what you want to summon or keep alive. So, yeah, I think growing up with those elements, I always have something with me in my room, in my home. I'm always cleaning it. It's important to clean it, to call upon something that you want to be abundant or if you have any questions, I mean, and then it goes on and on, depending. And also the making an ofrenda for yourself, because we're somewhat grieving a lot of things throughout the day, and it doesn't have to be bad. That's the other thing that I wanted to touch on, that the narrative of grieving has a somber quality. It's sort of sad and dark, but it doesn't have to be that way. So, you know, shedding your skin and then just moving past it. So creating those altares for yourself too, it's important.

A: Awesome. That's so great. I was reminded of, in the *Buena Vista Social Club* documentary, the musician and singer Ibrahim Farrar was explaining his ofrenda that he has in his home in Havana. And he's got a sculpture of a saint. He's got a little cup of rum, because he says, I like rum, so I assume my saint likes the rum as well.

C: That's right.

A: And there are definitely things at the library, films and books that can help you understand more about how these grieving processes happen around the world and see how people use them to just have, in his case, his mother. The sense of his mother was with him all the time because, even though she has passed away, he's been able to think about her every time he sees the ofrenda. It was very sweet.

C: Yeah, no, absolutely. And it goes back to, you know, we all have our culture in altares. You know, we all put in our own things

in there, whether it's something from your childhood or, you know, your dad's old shirt or something, you know, a bottle of rum, whatever. So good.

A: Oh, that's great. Now you were telling us about dances specific to Dia de los Muertos and these grieving processes, even if they're not called that around the world, like in your trips to Africa and whatnot. Could you tell us about that? That was news to me.

C: So there's so many dances around the world. I have not traveled to Africa yet, but have traveled to various other continents. But I do want to bring up a couple of dances from Mexico, from Dia de Los Muertos. So the first one that I want to tell you about is La Danza de los Viejitos, the dance of the older people. So this is a dance that shows life and death are part of the same rhythm. So Danza de los Viejitos is from Michoacan. So it's playful. Dancers are in wooden masks and shoes, and they move like elders. So they're representing all of the elements that we talked about earlier. Earth, wind, fire, water. And it's funny and wise at the same time, reminding us that aging and dying comes. It's a cycle. And then the second one is Danza de los Tequanes is a dance of the jaguar. It's more symbolic, a Mixtec ritual about the tension between God and evil, life and death. And then the last one is Danza de los Voladores. So this one's really cool. It's from Veracruz, the ocean. So four men spin from a tall pole while one stays on top, playing a flute representing the 52 weeks of the year and the balance between heaven and earth. And I mean, there are so many, many different dances that we can research and look into and that are tied with life and death, essentially, because in the natural world, this is normal. This is what's meant to happen.

A: So you are also an artist. Can you tell us how we can find out more about your artwork? How can people follow you on social media?

C: Absolutely. My tag is ancestral girl. So A N C E S T R A L dot girl G I R L. And I talk a lot about ancestry. I talk about the roots of different indigenous tribes. I talk about how I've stayed with, in particular, the Siekopai tribe in Ecuador in the Amazon. And so you guys can find me there. I have anything from photography to stories of my travels to just a little bit of a cauldron of miscellaneous.

A: A cauldron of miscellany. That's so great. Awesome. Well, thank you very much for explaining this really important concept for grieving and getting to a point where you're celebrating the grieving process and using it to move forward and feel happier and lighter.

C: Yes. And then bringing this celebration into the library, I wanted to say, it brought a lot of space for shared reflection while we're grieving and art community could meet. So it's been really wonderful to be part of Dia de Los Muertos and sharing different cultures and how we're all grieving the same way.

A: The same way and reminding us that we are all connected.

C: That's right. That's it.

A: The library is a wonderful place for making those connections very visible.

C: Absolutely. I mean, there's so many stories. The library holds stories, human ones, not just written ones.

A: I like to think of the library as an imagination portal.

C: Ah, yes.

A: So both a place where you can exercise your own imagination and get tools to help you develop your own stories or to read or experience those from other artists. It's a good thing to have in our community. It helps us stay strong.

C: That's right.

A: Thank you so much, María Belén. I really appreciate you coming over to speak with us and sharing this wonderful information.

C: Thank you, Rachel, for having me in your imagination portal.

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A: Finally, allow me to introduce you to our SLO County Library Foundation president, Juliane McAdam. A retired teacher, she's an energetic advocate for our libraries. We are lucky to have her in charge. Hi, Juliane. Thanks for joining us for our first episode of *We LOVE the Library*.

D: Oh, Rachel, it is a pleasure and an honor to be here today.

A: Great. So you are going to tell us about the Foundation. Give us a little quick primer on the San Luis Obispo County Library Foundation, of which we are both members.

D: Okay. The Foundation was actually started back in 1997, incorporated in 1997, when we got a very large bequest. We needed a place to put that money. So the Library Foundation was formed and that money was invested. Over the years, we've received several other bequests, and we work with a wealth advisor to manage that money so that we can help the libraries.

A: What is the mission of the Library Foundation, which is linked to, of course, helping the library system?

D: Well, our mission is to strengthen the entire San Luis Obispo County Library system through financial support, obviously, and also ambassadorship and advocacy. We love our libraries, and we are out telling the people how wonderful our libraries are.

A: And since I have joined the board this past spring, I have been with you at a lot of these events with a table to represent the Library Foundation. And you are often wearing Quincy the quail,

like you are wearing right now. You're wearing some of the Library Foundation merchandise.

D: I love that poppy design.

A: Oh, that's so great. The Foundation does a lot of things like the Summer Reading Program.

D: Yes.

A: And Library by Mail.

D: Yes.

A: And we also have helped fund some of these arts programs that we're trying to develop and target for adults in our community.

D: Yes. The Foundation has financed the Summer Reading Program for many years now, as long as I have been on the board, and that's a long time. We also sort of got in on the beginning of Library by Mail. The library wanted to start a Library by Mail program and we raised the initial money to get that going. This is a program that sends library materials to homebound people who can't otherwise access the library. They can get the materials they want, and then there is a postage paid envelope for them to return them. We have helped finance several of the large exhibits that the library has held. For example, when the Jack Kerouac scrolls came here, we helped finance that.

There was a really wonderful book and art exhibit called *American Farmer*, which we helped to finance. And then there was a reception at the Dallidet Gardens that we paid for. We have also paid for, just for example, if the entire library staff wants to get together for a chance to socialize outside of work. We paid for the refreshments for for them so that they could enjoy it. We try to support whatever the library wants us to do. We try to be there to do it.



A: Awesome. Well, it's been a pleasure to be a member of the board of such an active group of people. Can you tell us a little bit more about the board of directors for the SLO County Library Foundation?

D: I joined the board. I was sort of recruited by the then president of the board to join the board back in 2016. She then left and I became president in 2017, and I've been president ever since. And the board, the number of people on the board has sort of ebbed and flowed. But right now we are at 10 people, some very active people, people bringing new skills to our board. We are an unpaid volunteer board of directors. We meet once a month to discuss what we need to do for the library and to meet with the library to see what they want us to do.

A: You had talked about the Summer Reading Program. You and I both attended the Back to School Extravaganza. And that was a blast. It was really, really fun.

D: It was exhausting and so much fun.

A: It was really fun.

D: By the way, about the Summer Reading Program. Two years ago, the Summer reading program introduced the Quail Trail. It went local for the first time and it introduced the idea of the Quail Trail, that there are 14 branch libraries and you could follow the Quail Trail to visit each one of them. And I thought to myself, gee, I've been on this board a long time and I've never done that. So that summer I visited all 14 branches and it was so much fun. They're all just a little bit different. They all serve their own community a little bit differently. It was wonderful. And this past summer I arrived at the Creston Library just when Reptile Ron was starting his show for the kids.

A: I have seen that picture with you and the snake.

D: They handed me an albino boa constrictor. And so there I was. But the kids loved it. There was a Burmese python there that was huge. And the kids were just stroking it. It was wonderful.

A: Oh, well, you are the perfect person to be the president of our Library Foundation. And it's been a pleasure to help some support the libraries with you. Thank you.

D: Thank you. And it's lovely having you on our board.

A: Oh, thanks.

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A: Julianne would want me to tell you about the fun library themed merchandise you can purchase through our website that also helps support the SLO County Library Foundation and thus the SLO County Library system as a whole. Her favorite items on offer are the baby onesie featuring the library's mascot, Quincy the Quail, and Book Champignon long sleeve shirts with a cute mushroom design. You can see the whole collection of pro-library merch at our website, [SLOLibraryFoundation.org](http://SLOLibraryFoundation.org), that's [SLOLibraryFoundation.org](http://SLOLibraryFoundation.org) and click on SHOP. I have had my eye on the octopus mug that invites everyone to KRAK open a book. It's fun stuff. Next time we'll learn more about memory kits that library card holders can check out of the library. And we'll also meet Berkeley the dog and her friend Kathy Baker, who together participate in the Paws to Read program. The next episode drops in two weeks. Thank you for listening and for helping support the public library, the people's champion.