***Can’t Shelve This* Episode 2**

**“Advocacy 101” with Gail Meyer and Deb Will**

Leah: Welcome to *Can't Shelve This*, the podcast where we hammer home the importance of school librarians. I’m Leah Gregory and I'm joined by my co-host, Janette Derucki.

Janette: Hey, everybody.

Leah: And today, we welcome two guests. Gail Meyer,

Gail: Hi. Glad to be here.

Leah: And Deb Will.

Deb: Hello. Thanks for having me.

Leah: We're going to talk about school library advocacy today. And we're going to talk about some of the challenges and difficulties that school librarians face in just keeping their program going and fighting for their jobs and fighting for funding and all of those things that are so important. So, to learn about how you can best advocate for your library and your library program, whether you're a school librarian, a teacher, an administrator, or a community member, we've brought in Gail and Deb to speak about their real-life advocacy and their experiences while advocating for school libraries.

Okay. Before we dive into school advocacy, we have a little fun get-to-know-you question. We're going to ask our guests to weigh in on whether they prefer audio, e-book, or print books. Tough questions here.

Janette: These are the things the people really want to know. So think hard about your answer.

Gail: Well, ladies, I'm glad you've asked because this makes a difference in everything I say going forward from this point. But I'm honestly a print book person. I've learned to embrace e-books when I'm out somewhere and need something to read. I pull up my public library on Libby or Hoopla and download something from the available now list. But if you give me the choice, I'm going with the print.

Deb: For me, it's very different. I prefer a print book, but as my eyes have aged, I have had to go more to audiobooks and to e-books where I can adjust the font. So I prefer the print book, but I can't always read it. So there it is.

Janette: I have that same problem, Deb. So I'm right there with you. I used to be like almost exclusively print, but I am now, I'm a Team e-Book girlie That's where I am. So that's usually what I read.

Leah: I used to be strictly print, and I was fighting e-books with everything I had, but then I just somehow got sucked in. And so now I'm pretty much all e-books because I want them with me wherever I go. So.

Janette: I do have one follow up question for Gail, since she's like the dissenter in this group. Right, the print. Paperback or hardback?

Gail: Hardback.

Janette: Yeah. I love a good hardback.

Gail: I don't like breaking the spines on the paperbacks. I have vintage ones from when I was a child in the nineties, all those V.C. Andrews and they crack and I feel bad.

Janette: And then they had the white lines. Those that had those like beautiful black covers you could tell as soon as someone read it because it got that white line down the spine.

Gail: Yeah.

Janette: My sisters, I hope they're not listening, but man, they cracked every spine. Anyway, go ahead.

Leah: Paperbacks are easier to replace when you inevitably drop them in the bathtub with you. So

Janette: This is true. That's a good point. Don't drop your Kindle in the bathtub.

Leah: I don't take, that's the one place you do not want an e-book is in the bathtub. So. So before we get started talking about all things advocacy, I want to hear about how each of our guests kind of got started in their library professions.

Gail: It was kind of a roundabout path. I was a public librarian for about seven years and I got my master's in library science, obviously, and was at work one day going about my business. And the assistant principal of the local high school came over to to chat and to say, do you have a school endorsement? Because our librarian is retiring. And I said, actually, I do. I got it along with my degree just in case. And she said, would you like a job? We pay a lot more than what you make. I said, sure, let's give it a shot. And here I have been for 16 years now.

Janette: At the same school?

Gail: Yes.

Janette: Oh, wow.

Gail: The only school I’ve ever been in.

Janette: I wanted to just add, the school that Gail works at is actually the school my mom went to. So I don't think I've ever told her that.

Leah: Fun.

Gail: We have never discussed that.

Janette: Every time her name comes up, I'm always, like, TF South, yay. Yeah, that's where my mom graduated from a long time ago. But yeah, so not while Gail was there for sure.

Deb: Well, like Gail, I had a principal who made a difference for me. I was interviewing for an English teaching position. I had been substituting at this campus for a few months for a friend of mine who was, a friend of mine from college who went on maternity leave, and I was her long term substitute. So I was interviewing for a full time job for the following year in the English department.

But in the middle of the interview, the principal stopped and said, I got to tell you, the truth, this is only a courtesy interview. There's no job. We're going to, we're going to fill this position by expanding class sizes because we're going through these cuts. And she said, I don't have an English teaching job, but I do have a library job. Would you like it? And I was like, well, I have an undergraduate degree in theater arts, and I don't have a degree in library science. I'd never worked in the library. I had been to a lot of libraries, but I was an actor and I'm like, well I can act like a librarian for a year.

Janette: Gives new meaning to the not a librarian, but plays one on TV.

Deb: That was like literally, I was like, okay, go buy a cardigan. And so I went out and I read every journal, like every library journal, school library journal. I collected them for the summer and I did a real case study on what a school, I read *Information Power* and noted it like crazy, okay. Like, like a crazy person. And I came in going, well, this is what a school librarian should be. And they believed me. Like, everybody believed me. And I’m like, all right, so I was a school librarian, but without certification. And I know you all are going to go, what, Deborah, are you kidding me? For a few years until I finished my master's degree in English and then, because I'd already started that, and then went back and I fell in love with this job, you know, you can only fake it for so long, right?

You can't, you can't continue that. So I went back and got my library science degree and I credit Miss Sandy Galgan for seeing in me what I didn't know in myself. And she's, she knows this about it. So I really, really am grateful to her for helping me find a job I love. And I've been in the same campus for now, this is my 25th year.

Leah: Wow. That's what I was going to ask now.

Janette: That's amazing. So, like, the amazing thing is like, kind of like the commonality in both of your stories, right? Is that neither of you went into this really intending to be a school librarian. It kind of is something that just happened to you, which is just amazing to me.

Leah: I find that a lot in school libraries because so many people become school librarians after they've been teachers and we talk about this all the time, school librarians are teachers. So. I did want to point out that we, Janette and I know Gail and Deb from our work with AISLE, which is the Association of Illinois School Library Educators. And we're not going to talk a lot about it today because we're going to make that the focus of another episode.

But that's how we know each other. And a lot of our advocacy work is done through aisle and through some other state organizations. So we'll talk more about that later. But can you tell us some of the challenges or the problems that you saw that led you to want to become advocates for school librarians

Gail: I came into a library that was a little neglected and nobody knew what the librarian did. And my experience was in public libraries, so I was not a teacher first, and I just jumped right in with programming sort of things and book talks and what public libraries do. And it was advocating without knowing it and people around me were, wow, what's going on in the library? We never had that before. And I realize it was just, it was making a difference without even trying. And a few years later I went to my school board and did a presentation on why I needed an assistant. I advocated for that because nobody should be doing this alone. It's a job for more than one person in 90% of schools, and they gave me an assistant based on everything I presented. And then I was on the AISLE board and they asked me when my term was up, would I like to take over advocacy? And when you give me a job to do, I'm going to do it.

So here I am. I am actually the head of the advocacy committee, and I have embraced it in part because that's what I was assigned. That's what I volunteered for. I mean, I suppose if they gave me the job of organizing volunteers, I would have spreadsheets and stuff for that. But here I'm in charge of advocacy and they're stuck with me for a while.

Janette: Can you tell us a little bit about what the attitude was about the library when you got there? Just because coming from a public library, I think there's a very different approach or a perspective on that type of work. It's like you go to the public library, you understand why it's there, right? Like, I'm here to get books or resources or things like that. So coming from that, you know, arena, for lack of a better word, and moving into a school like, there's a lot of different attitudes and feelings and beliefs about school libraries. So what did you walk into as a brand new person?

Gail: The library was a holding tank for kids who were kicked out of class or kids who were on PE medical. The library still had closed stacks. This was in 2008. And you still had to ask for the books on sex, drugs and rock and roll. They were behind the desk. Michael Jackson was safely behind the desk, and nobody really knew what the purpose was other than stamping books, check in and check out dates. it was just the very basics of, no, I'm here to provide not only books but information. And I had to do, through my own choice, I had to do quite a few presentations that first and second year to each department on, here's what we can do for you. Here's what the library is supposed to do for their colleagues and teachers. And there were a lot of people that said, wow, we never had this before.

Janette: That’s a lot of work. That was an uphill advocacy battle just to demonstrate your own value to your colleagues

Gail: Very much.

Leah: And people don't realize that that is advocacy. When you, when I started my library job, my school library job, it had been a place where people were not welcomed, maybe, by the previous librarian. And so people were in active avoidance. And so my immediate job began by, I was beginning by showing them what your library should be to you, and that is advocacy. You just don't think of it that way.

Gail: Exactly.

Leah: How about you, Deb?

Deb: Well like Gail, I walked into a sorely neglected library and it had previously been well loved, actually. And but then by the time I got to it, the average age of the collection was 1978, and this was in 2000 and average age of the collection in 1978. The walls are what can only be described as baby poop yellow. All of, all of the, all of the tables were bright orange and the carpet was blue and held together by duct tape. And this is what, this is what we have. Right. And so my first piece was to kind of figure out what people needed.

And so what I did was I literally just went around and I went to department meetings and I went into offices and I shut up. I just shut up. And I know that's hard for some of you who know me to believe, but I did. And what I did was just ask the questions of, what do you need? You know, what would you like to see in this library? And started asking those questions of some of my colleagues who had remembered times in past, and there was a wonderful librarian by the name of and you might know her, some of you might know her if you're listening, but her name is Maggie Schmude, and she was a lovely human who went to be the head librarian at New Trier High School. Before, she was at our school. And then there was a series of librarians in between the two of us. And I, and every time I turned around, I would hear, well, when Maggie was here, well, when Maggie was here. And so I sort of realized I was going to have to restore the library to its former glory, you know, and and figure out how to tap into this great energy of when Maggie was there. And so trying to reestablish that was my first priority.

And then I had a mentor who looked at me and said, I told this to Gail last night. I had a mentor who said, okay, so here's the deal. You're going to have to toot your own horn because nobody's doing it for you. And I was like, okay, she's like, you're it. You know, you're on your own kid. And at that point, I was like, all right, I guess it's not bragging. Markie is telling me I've got to get this done, and that's what I'm going to have to do. And so there we are.

Leah: I have a whole presentation that I do about library advocacy called Shameless Self-Promotion, because you have to tell people what you're doing and why it makes a difference. So I am right there with you.

Janette: Well, and that's something too, Leah, that is like really hard to do because, you know, I don't think it comes naturally to a lot of people. And you're in the middle of doing all of these really great things. So I think it's hard for people to carve out that time to really talk about the work that they're doing because they're so busy doing it. And sometimes it's also not clear to them like, what do people want to know? Or what should I be even using to sell myself, right? The things that you think are a big deal in the library, someone else might be like, well, whatever. Everyone does that. But then they're, you know, sometimes they are really overlooking, like, amazing things you're doing as routine.

Deb: Right? Exactly. Exactly. And the really hard things that you're doing, too, like they think magic elves completed, you know, the cataloging and text selection and things like that, that there's no one doing that except the person behind the scenes.

Janette: So you mentioned that the age of your collection was from the seventies, which, you know, I believe Leah and I are also from the seventies. So anyway, that is a whole separate discussion. But what is the age of your collection at now? Like, how current should a school librarian keep their collection? We get that question a lot, actually.

Deb: Well, for me, I'm happy if I'm getting it into the mid 2010s, 2015. You know, that's where, and we're about there right now. Because there are going to be some things like my philosophy books are in great condition and Aristotle is still going to be there. Do you know what I mean? So it depends on the, it depends on the Dewey category. That's what I tend to look at, you know. But my current fiction, I want it to be current. You know, I want people to have cell phone in current fiction, you know. So when it kind of, and there are some good things. There's some oldies but goodies, but sometimes we have to be willing to make room on the shelf for the next best thing instead of holding on to the thing that we loved ten years ago.

Leah: That was hard for me, when I was weeding, I'm like, oh, but I loved this book when I was, you know, in middle school, which has been a very long time. So it was probably time for it to go.

Janette: It is really, it's hard to let go of your own sentimentality, right, and be objective about that type of decision making. What would you say, like I mentioned that a lot of people talk about how they don't have time to do that type of advocacy work for themselves. So what would you say is the most important thing a school librarian can do to advocate for themselves? If you could pick one thing.

Gail: I think the most important thing is the most basic thing. Spread what you do. Like Deb was saying, she goes to the departments. In high school, we have weekly department meetings. I go to different departments and I might share, hey, the state of Illinois just got us this really cool database package. And here's the ones that might be good for social studies and you can come talk to me. And just something that small is advocacy. Even if you don't realize it, you are making people aware of what you do and your role in the school and I think if a lot of school librarians look at it objectively, they are advocating and not realizing it because they wouldn't call it that.

But every year, for example, I think it's super important. I send out annual statistics. You know, people may not realize I had 43,000 students walk through those doors and we only have 1,500 in school. And I copy the board president on it, whether I should or not, just that little seed in there that's, here's something going on that you probably didn't know about. That's advocacy.

Janette: Visit rates are something Leah and I talk up a lot when we do professional development sessions or just in conversations with school librarians. Like I think that's a metric a lot of people overlook when you're talking about marketing yourself and very few teachers in a school building, whether you're an elementary school, middle school or a high school, see the entire student population. Right? And then you think, okay, well, who's in the library? The library has classes that are scheduled. There's times for everyone, but students are also coming in outside of those times. And how do you manage that workload? Who's helping those kids? Where's the readers’ advisory, the research assistants? All of those things are also part of what you have to do. So I'm glad you really brought that up because I think that's one of the most untapped sources of advocacy a school librarian can have.

Leah: I tell school librarians to count everybody that comes in, even if they only come in to borrow your stapler. They were there and you helped them. So.

Deb: Yeah. And I think that too, we have to, and Janette, I think you're going to love what I'm going to say right now because it's up your alley. But I think data is our friend with this and yes making certain that we are doing that counting. Not only counting the students who are coming in our doors, but also counting the staff members, because we have these conversations with a staff member and another conversation with a staff member. And then we do this, but we need to also count that data as well. And so we're keeping track of the number of even casual conversations we're having with our colleagues so that, so that we can show that we are working collaboratively.

Because the world we live in, our administrators are speaking in data terms, and so we have to speak their language instead of asking them to speak ours. And so just having that complete, you know, having that at the ready, you know, when I can say, well, yes, the library can be closed in the morning, but that will affect 200 students, right? Yes, we can do that. But that will affect 30 staff members who are typically here in the morning. You know, yes, that can happen. And you have to understand the consequences of that action. So, you know, and that can tend to put things into perspective in ways that people understand. You know, concretely.

Leah: When you can say that you have hard data to back up what you're claiming, because people do tend to think of the library as just this big empty space that is not getting used, which is sad.

Janette: And, well, Gail mentioned an annual report of sorts. Right, you know, conveying that information annually. And I know, Deb, you and I have spoken previously about, you know, doing the same type of thing. And so I want to, if you don't mind, talking a little bit about how you represent that, because that's also a big component of advocacy is like, the sell. Like marketing is not just me telling you I'm doing something, right? It's like, what does that look like when you're presenting it to someone else?

Gail: Each year the AISLE advocacy committee actually makes up a Canva document and sends it out to members where they can fill in their own numbers Because maybe you're not sure what to put on it. Mine has number of books checked out, number of classes that have visited, number of students that have visited. We send out that template and then we send out suggestions. If you're in an elementary school, maybe the students aren't coming during study hall. So maybe you want to do number of story read-alouds you did. Maybe you want to include this other statistic. One that I include is database searches. EBSCO can pull up those numbers.

And we do send that out and make it publicly available for anyone. So librarians can just plug in their own numbers, save it as a PDF and email it off to everyone. Last year I emailed it to the secretary and said, can you send this to all staff? And whether a math teacher or a PE teacher decides to open it, it's still an email from the library. I printed it and hung it on the door so that kids coming in can see, wow, my classmates really like this library. I hope.

Janette: That's a good, it's important. I mean, I'm sorry, peer pressure does work sometimes.

Leah: It does.

Janette: Positive peer pressure is a good thing. How about you, Deb? Did you want to add anything?

Deb: Yeah, and I love that. I love that Gail does that Canva document because I think that is, it’s extremely important that we're using like a one-pager because I used to print out like multiple pages where I was tying everything to standards and, you know, sending it to the administrative team. And I would get exactly zero reads on it, like literally, you know, I spent hours doing a 15-page document, you know, and, and instead this time I said, well, they're not reading this. Why not give them an infographic, you know? And so that's what I started doing each quarter is an infographic with one page of all the data. And, and they really liked that. People were responding to it. Now we could know, you know, and I love what you said, Gail, about putting that as a poster for students, I'm going to steal that idea pretend it was mine.

Leah: I think that's a great idea.

Gail: You may steal all my ideas.

Deb: I love it.

Janette: That’s the thing about working in a school, right, is like, why reinvent the wheel?

Leah: Exactly. One thing I want to talk about a little bit that I think is important for school librarians is that you have to make yourself visible as a member of the faculty. I think we, since we're there by ourselves and we fly under the radar a lot, we tend to get overlooked. So I really fought at my school to come to, you know, department staff meetings and we had a thing called Student of the Month, and I fought for the chance to nominate a student because I know all of these students. I am a teacher to these students just like they are. So I just think that, as much as it might be nice to get left off the bus duty roster because they forget that you're there, you do have to kind of say, hey, like put your elbows out, make room at the table, because I am a valued member of the faculty here.

And I think that's really important. But that leads me to a question that we want to talk about this, I think it's my favorite question of the day. Why do you think that librarians have to advocate more than other staff members in a school?

Deb: A lot of what we do is quiet work. It's behind the scenes. It's things that like some of our most difficult things that we do including, you know, text selection and cataloging and all of the, you know, database like all of the, the online work to get our websites, you know, working and all of these things that we are doing. It's work that's done quite solitary. You know, it's quite lonely work. It's, you know, alone in your office getting it done.

Leah: And that's why we have a podcast, so you can listen to it while you do that work, right?

Janette: I think that's why you need an assistant, someone to sit next to you while you're doing, while you're doing this.

Deb: I mean, really it is. It's just this behind the scenes. And like I said, you know, there is no, there's no magic elves making that happen. It's the school librarian. You know. And so, and because of that, you know, people just assume that it's going to get like, things will happen. Like things get done until they don't.

You know, and then all of a sudden and when there's not a school librarian, people go, wait a minute, who did that? Oh, she did. You know, he did. So I think that number one, it's that the work is quiet, so we can't be, you know. I mean, and so we have to, we have to tell people about that work. And then the second piece, and I know Gail might get into this a little bit more, is that, you know, there's unfortunately they must have a certified person in the first grade or second grade classroom, but they don't necessarily have to have a certified school librarian and I think that's unfortunate and tragic, quite frankly, because that quiet work needs to be done with, you know, with precision. It needs to be done with, you know, ethics and, you know, it needs to be quality work.

And people who are well-intentioned and lovely humans who are attempting to do the best work that they can, as I was when I did not have my degree, right. Well-intentioned. But boy, did I make some interesting mistakes, you know. And so I think it's really important that that we, you know, advocate for having people in these roles who really are dedicated to the profession.

Janette: Yeah. I think a lot of it, you know, there's been a lot of research on this, certainly. I talk a lot about the SLIDE study or SLIDE project, which you may have heard of. That was a three year IMLS-funded project that was examining the decline or evolution in school librarianship because of this decrease in the profession that we're seeing. Right. And one of their key findings that I think is really relevant here is that, you know, they found that spending in school districts really depended on the opinions and attitudes and beliefs of the administrators. So the people who were controlling the purse strings, whatever their priorities were, that's what got funded. Sure, like you said, you need certified staff in all of your grade level, you know, classrooms, certain subject areas have required staff. But, you know, if they didn't understand what a school librarian did or the importance and the function of a really great school library, that might be the first position that they cut.

You know, you hear the phrase all the time. We have Google. Why do we need a school librarian? You know, why do you need a school library? It's all online. But, you know, spoiler alert, it's not all online. So, you know, it's I think that that's an important piece of this. Right. And so the advocacy work and really building yourself up becomes almost a part of what you have to do to constantly educate the people above you as to what you're doing.

Gail: People view us, unfortunately and wrongly, as expendable,

Leah: Exactly.

Gail: People who don't know what we do are willing to cut the position. There needs to be a class for administrators in their administrative certificate degree on what school libraries and other outside-of-the-classroom certified staff do.

Leah: I wonder sometimes, we've all heard stories about kids who are made to feel small or stupid, even, by a librarian in their youth. And then I wonder, were some of these administrators like not having good experiences in their school library? And it's entirely possible that they did not have a school librarian or a school library, so maybe they just had never had that experience.

Janette: I also think it's like, if you consider the stereotypes around school librarians, Deb already mentioned the cardigan, which I'm sorry, that one never went away. I don't think it ever will. And we have leaned into that hard. We're not letting it go. But I think you also have the like, stern, must be quiet. It's the shushing. It's all of that. And so if you really do believe that's what, I mean, libraries are quiet spaces because they need to be quiet spaces for people to think and learn. They're not quiet spaces because we want you to be quiet and we don't want to hear you. Like, librarians are great listeners. They love to engage and talk about things that are important and get to know their students.

But how do you break that stereotype and make it so that it is this warm and inviting environment and that your administrators understand that that's what you're doing?

Deb: Well, and I also think, and when we look at it, like, what we want the library to look like, yes, I agree completely. It should be this, it should be a working space. Right. And so like, one of the things I say is like the libraries, my school library is a place to do, not just to be. Like, we do, we do here, we do the things. But one of the struggles I have sometimes is that some people believe that in order for a student to be working, it must be loud, right? It must be like this massive team work that is happening. And I'm not saying like, I don't have a, I don't have a silent library. It's quiet, but it's not silent. But students who are introverts, students who are trying to focus and have quiet space and have focused time, right, they should have a space too. If we think about how our classrooms are currently designed right now, a lot of those classrooms are revolved around this, the idea of collaboration and teamwork, which I think is lovely. It's good. It's good ways of learning. And sometimes a student needs to have a place where they can decompress and internalize that learning that happened in that classroom and make it individual. Because that student is going to be taking a test or writing a paper and they're going to have to, sometimes have to do that by themselves. And they may need a space in order to focus that learning. And so that's sometimes where the library can really help and provide that space. So every kid gets the space. You know, it's not just the loudest and the, you know, and I'm not, believe me, we have done some loud things in our library. We’ve done some really loud things, but it's not an every, you know, it's a balance. It's a, there's a place for everybody. And it's not just some of our kids. It's all of our kids. Even the quiet ones have a place.

Leah: That's what I love about a library and why, when it gets cut, it is so enraging because a library is there for every kid in the school. You don't have to be on a team. You don't have to be in the band. You don't have to be in a club. You don't have to be part of something because some kids are just not joiners, but they do need a place to go and the library can be that place for so many kids.

How can library staff and school librarians and library aides and paraprofessionals and anybody, really, who supports the library, how can you begin to advocate for your library? And we're going to talk about some of like, maybe the most impactful or sometimes maybe the easiest ways to get started. Because a lot of people, I see this a lot. A lot of people are like, I'm not an advocate. That's not who I am. I am not cut out to go speak in front of a large group and talk about the importance of libraries. And you don't have to start that big. You can start very, very small. And I think we've seen some examples here. Sometimes you just start by being there.

Janette: I'm excited to hear what you both have to say about this, because I do think this is what stops a lot of people, right? It's the, I know I should do a thing, but what thing do I do? And there's a lot of options for where you could begin. And we have talked a little bit about them, you know, starting within your own school and just talking to your colleagues or putting up a poster on your door so students see it. Things like that, you know. So where do, where would you recommend someone starts?

Gail: I am not a public speaker and you may find that hard to believe as I sit here being interviewed, I've spoken at school board meetings, etc. I am not a public speaker. It's never been my thing. But, so, I will be the first to say that's not something you have to do to consider yourself an advocate. You can write an email. It can be that simple. You can write a letter to an editor for your local paper. We have a small local *Lansing Journal* here in town. They're fabulous. If I sent them a letter to the editor, I'm sure they would consider running it, just about the importance of a school library in general. You don't have to necessarily call out your school. You can, the AISLE website has templates and forms for that letter. You don't even have to necessarily compose it yourself. You can pull it off there, change your signature at the bottom, tweak a few lines about how students need school libraries and librarians in their lives and send it off to the school board, the principal. The local paper, if you're feeling ambitious. As a taxpayer and community member, you employ the school, you employ the school board. They need to know what you think and what you value. And I think listeners of this podcast value libraries and we need to spread the word on that.

Deb: I could not agree with you more, Gail. I think that too, it doesn't have to be a big thing, you know, it doesn't have to be large. All of us who work in schools know that one parent phone call can lead to a lot of different things, especially if it's, if it's kindly done. But it’s just asking a question. I just want to know how many school library, certified school librarians do you have in your building? And you can look that up yourself, but you calling and saying that makes a much larger difference than a Google search. You're at the school board meeting, you're at the PTA meeting, you just simply say, you're doing this new literacy program. Is the school librarian involved? What kind of resources would, you know, I'd really like to, and I've done this in different ways and contexts, but you just say, you know, I'm very interested in supporting the school library. Is there a way, how would I make a donation? Okay. Or can I talk to the librarians for that? Right. I mean, and it's just, you're constantly reinforcing this idea that they should have one.

Leah: Well, of course you have a librarian.

Deb:

Of course you have, it’s not even a question. Just put them on the phone. And then, and now I'm going to just say this for all of you, like, if your child is in elementary school, okay, and there's parent teacher night, visit the school library. Visit the school library. And, at Christmas time, when you send the teacher a gift, maybe, you know, make a little card for the librarian, too, because she didn't get anything. Okay. And I don't expect it from my high school students. Let me be very clear on that. But when my child was in grade school, you know, yes, I'm going to include the librarian as one of her teachers, one of her special teachers. And let me tell you, that really goes a way so that the librarian feels seen and heard.

But also, when they did try to cut the librarians at my daughter's elementary school, I did show up at a board meeting. And I did say, hey, you know, do we have extra test points to lose here, and I'm unaware of it? Because all the research says that this is going to be beneficial. But unbeknownst to them, they had done a very poor, made a poor choice that they had this hearing on the same night that they were also considering eliminating some band programming. The band parents hear this and go, of course you can't cut the band and not, and the library is just ridiculous. You know, you can't cut that either, you know. So the idea that you are willing to, you know, show up for those board meetings, pay attention to what's going on and talk to other parents about, hey, you know, well, of course I got, of course I'm asking about that. Of course, I'm going to go into the library on parent teacher conference night. Of course, I'm going to ask these questions about the school library. You know, you don't have to speak at the board meeting, but you can definitely create a buzz.

Janette: A lot of what we've talked about so far is under the assumption that you have a librarian, right? Like you have someone who's working in that space to advocate for it. And I want to just interject a little bit here to say that we are fully aware that every school in at least Illinois for sure, does not have one. We know nationwide there are plenty of schools that don't have libraries, and even if they do have libraries, they don't have librarians. There's no one in there. And I don't really know what happens in those spaces. Like there's a varying degree of things that people have reported, whether it's, you know, students can only go in there with their teachers or they have a, you know, parent volunteer or a parapro supervising circulation. But, you know, I just want the listeners to know that we're aware of that. And we would love to hear from you if you're in a school that doesn't have a library or a librarian and kind of see if we could help you or talk about, you know, what that experience is like too, because this type of work in those situations is really crucial because school libraries are so important for learning and for students throughout their lives.

Leah: I have started to get parents from communities calling me, and they're under the mistaken belief, unfortunately, that we control the libraries, which we don't. We support them and we are always there working with them. But they're like, you know, my child goes to this school district and there's no school librarians. And when he got to college, he couldn't write a paper and he's never seen a database and he doesn't know how to cite a source. And I strongly recommend that if you are a parent in that situation, contact your school board and your school administrators and let them know that you are not happy. As somebody who has paid a lot of money in taxes to the school to turn out a child who cannot succeed in college because they did not have a school librarian.

A lot of people, I suggest go contact your school librarian. And then they’re like, oh, but I don't want to bother them or I don't know when they're there or, and here's the secret, and I always tell everybody this, if you're calling a school to speak to somebody specific, you're never going to get them the first time because they more likely than not will have students with them. But they will either transfer you to the voice mail or they will take a message and leave it in their mailbox. So any time is a good time to try to reach your school librarian or you can usually, even if the school librarian is not listed on their website, you can kind of guess what their email is based on other people's email addresses and just email them and just let them know we would like to support you. We think you're doing a great job. That goes so far. It’s so rare, you know, teachers get notes of appreciation, not as many as they deserve, obviously, but they do get them. But I can count on one hand the number of times somebody reached out to me as a community member and said, we think you're doing a good job as a librarian. So.

We talked about, like counting visits. What other kind of data do you guys collect for advocacy? You know, obviously we use the SLATE project. We love Janette's data, but I used to keep just like, like before I automated even, I ended up going with some software that tracked who came into the library. And I really, really love that for two reasons. One, so I could say like, you know, I saw 300 kids today, but also if a teacher came to me later and said, was so-and-so in the library? Because I kind of think maybe he was wandering the halls. I could go back and check if he actually made it so.

Deb: Yeah. So I do, I keep track of all the classes that are coming through the library. And so like, for example, this morning we're in the middle of this massive renovation project. And my superintendent is asking me, you know, how are you feeling about things? And I'm great. I'm feeling great. It's going to be amazing. And then I followed up with yes, and those books are coming back on Tuesday and Wednesday. And by the end of September, I'm going to see three quarters of the school through the library. By the end, by October 1st, three quarters of the school will have been through this library. And he's like, we got to get moving on this. Yeah, you think? We’ve got to get the books back.

But it's, it's being able to come up with that in that 30 seconds, that can really be impactful sometimes. And so having, you're having you know, it's not even a full elevator. It's not a two and a half minute speech. It's a 30 seconds of what I'm, what I need from you today and what I, what the next goal is going to be and how we're you know, there's a reason why I'm like, yes, I can remember that what my average age of the collection was, because I must have said 1978 like 25 times a day until it was no longer 1978. You know. Because at some point, you know, I always do carry around, it was a book called *The Orinthology of North America*. I think it was published in 1911 and it was on our shelves. I'm like, do you see this? No one is inspired to read this book. But that's the kind of thing you just have to have it kind of at the ready, at all times, no matter who you're talking to, you know, where you want to go and what your current stat is.

Janette: I love the idea of the elevator pitch like and you have to constantly update your elevator pitch, too, right. Like, it can't just, I mean, I am a person who gets really comfortable. I'm like, this is what I do. And then I start do something else. I'm like, wait, how am I going to change it now? And you know, but you do have to constantly revamp and rethink and update it to, you know, your most current work and what's most important or valuable that you're doing. So that's great.

Deb: Well, and Gail and I talked about last night the idea of every day when somebody asked me how I am, I'm going to try to say I'm doing great and then tell them something wonderful that happened in the library today. What happened? What great thing happened with a kid? You know, because the more of those anecdotal things that people hear about, that's advocacy too.

Leah: I always tell librarians, like, you have to have the data, but you have to have the story to go with it. You have to say, you know, I saw 300 kids today. That's amazing. But, you know, the most amazing thing is a student came to me who is professed to have never read a book in their whole lives. And they came and asked me the sequel to a book. And like that, one student is worth more gold than the 300 that may have just walked through and grabbed a book, you know, because you really feel like you made a difference there.

Janette: Well and I mean, I do obviously, a lot of what I do is work with data, right, about schools. And it's, there's a big difference in handing someone an infographic and handing someone a spreadsheet. You know, one thing has a lot more impact and it is very easy to put your message and your emphasis into the infographic and really call out the things that you feel are the most important, or the things that you want to be seen in your story. And every library does have a story to tell. It's just, you know, like the tools, like Gail was talking about this template that AISLE has or, you know, other things people create that help you tell that story, you know, are very important to use because no one wants to see a table of data.

I'm a data analyst and I don't even want to see a table of data. Right. I would much rather if you hand me a report, I want to be able to easily visually digest it. Right. Like people don't have time. We're all we have much information coming at us and we understand the importance of knowing and being informed. But like, I'm not going to I'm sorry, I'm not going to read your 15 page report. Probably, I mean, depending on what it is. But.

Deb: You aren't alone, Janette. No one read that report. Yeah,

Janette: I’m much, I shouldn't say I would never read it. I'm much more likely to engage with that infographic or something that has, that tells me also something about you and what you feel is important about the work you're doing.

Gail: Yeah, and school librarians can use data in so many ways. So you didn't have 600 classes come through your door and you look at our sample and think, I can't put anything on here. Turn it around. Maybe you had six fifth grade classes and zero eighth graders. So you can say, hey, fifth grade classes are 75% of our visits. Because I did, I broke it down by class last year and I just said, hey, look at the ninth graders are here this much, 10th, 11th. And I had three administrators, new record, say, why aren't the seniors coming to the library? Like, maybe we should talk to their teachers. So I don't want to say you can manipulate the data, but you can choose the data that's best going to show people what you do and what you need going forward.

Janette: Yeah, you have to make data work for you.

Deb: I actually think that we are sometimes our own worst enemies with our data, right? That sometimes we'll say, we'll see a number like 67% or 68% or something like that, and consider that as failure because in the educational world, we'll look at that as terrible, right. But in the reality, in the business world, if any company had 68% of the market share, they would be doing a happy dance. Right? So I think what we really have to do sometimes is, is, you know, do that highlighting of the yeah, if you can get over half of your students to do something that's most of your kids doing something and then you can use that positive peer pressure in order to create more buzz. But I think that we have to re-understand our, our metrics, sometimes. Because we are on an ABCDF, you know, system and that's not how the world works. Not really when it comes to data. So we have to kind of re-imagine that a little bit.

Leah: 67% is not a D so.

Gail: And not saying, oh, only 52% of students came. No, over half of students came.

Deb: Yes. Right.

Janette: It's all about perspective sometimes. And you know, even if the data points that Gail is using or Deb is using at their, you know, in each of your schools isn't something that works for someone who's listening or someone out there, there are other data points that you can call out. That's the great thing about libraries. There's so many different things that you can emphasize that stress the importance of what you're doing and the, you know, the value to your school.

Gail: I was going to say, email one of us and tell us what you do and we'll tell you what data points to pull out and put in your report.

Janette: That's a lot of what I've been doing. I've been so fortunate since I've been working for RAILS to be able to connect with a lot of school librarians, and I have helped several develop reports or talk about, you know, here's what's happening. How can I, you know, advocate for an assistant, how can I do this? And it's, that's literally, that's my wheelhouse, you know, full stop. So I love doing that type of thing. I'm happy to talk with anybody who needs a little bit of guidance or wants to just talk through what they're doing.

Leah: I have a school librarian who is always very like apologetic that her circulation rate isn't very high because her kids just don't want to check out books. But every single time I go there, her library is full of kids doing STEM or robotics or some other crazy creative thing. And I'm like, don't measure your circulation. Measure how many kids are showing up for these activities because they're not just goofing around, they're learning. So it is important to, I mean, circulation data is an age old metric for librarians, but it doesn't have to be the number one thing.

So let's pivot a little bit and talk about AISLE and their advocacy efforts, because a lot of our advocacy goes through the partnership. So the AISLE partnership is comprised of RAILS and Illinois Heartland Library system and also AISLE, the Association of Illinois School Library Educators, the Illinois Library Association, representatives from the Illinois State Library and also the Illinois State Board of Education. And I believe also CARLI, which is an academic resource sharing group.

Leah: So one of the big things that we recognized in this partnership is the huge gaps in Illinois schools where school librarians and libraries do not exist. And that is something that everyone in the partnership takes very seriously and was very disturbed and upset by. So out of the partnership came the AISLE task force. And that's something that all of us have been involved in and various reasons. But we'll let Gail talk about that because she's now leading that task force.

Gail: AISLE certified librarian task force was created with the goal of every school hiring a certified librarian, meaning a librarian that not only holds a professional educator's license, a teaching degree, but has the endorsement from The Illinois State Board of Education in Library Information Science Specialty.

Janette: It’s the Library Information Specialist endorsement.

Gail: There you go. And so we have been working with ALA. We've been working with their lobbyist, trying to figure out the best path forward to bring this to legislators attention. Because I've spoken with a few legislators myself, and they don't even realize that in school districts’ evidence based funding plan, that the state of Illinois has them do, there is a line item not only for certified librarians, but for library support staff. And it calculates how much money your school districts can afford to spend on these positions. But the school can choose to do so or not do so. And we're trying to make the legislators aware that even though it's been proven time and time again that a school librarian makes such a huge difference in a student's education, the schools are choosing to spend their funding elsewhere. It's going towards parking lots and football fields and all sorts of other things. And the more people we can make aware of the benefits of school libraries, the more likely we are to be able to, as a task force, have each school in Illinois, north, south, across the state, have a certified librarian in their school library for their students.

Janette: So with that, I mean, I'm guessing the hopeful outcome of the task force is eventually legislation that would mandate that statewide? Is that?

Gail: We would like legislation in the same way that there's PE teacher legislation, there's early childhood legislation, there's special education legislation. Everybody's, not everybody, a lot of people will argue with me that local control of a school, the school board can best decide knowing their community. Correct. But the school board also then can't say, we only have two special ed kids, get rid of all those teachers and those kids can sink or swim. It apparently needs to be the same for library staff because the administrators are saying get rid of the librarians, they can sink or swim. We need to be written into school code the same way those other positions are included.

Deb: As we've learned through doing this work, many people are just unaware of the work that we do and how we can not only affect our students but also, you know, support our teaching staff too. And so sometimes we'll be in teacher meetings and, you know, I'm also an English teacher, former English teacher, and so I'll be at their conferences and they'll be talking about how stressed they are and how they have to do this. And they can't do this. And I'm like, well, why aren't you working with the school librarian? And then they realize that there is support there if they have one. And some of that, the number of times I hear we don't actually have one. And the level at which we can support teaching staff with our school librarian staff who are, you know, like we are co-teachers in this process. You know, this is, you've got someone who knows the research piece of this who can really come and co-teach with you instead of, you're trying to recreate the wheel, especially for our new teaching staff, it's very difficult. But together we can really make things happen for students. And so that's what we really want to see, not just in one district but in all districts throughout the state.

Leah: And this is where if you are listening to this podcast, you can write to your legislators and tell them to support school librarians in every school. That's a very simple thing that everyone can do to advocate for school libraries because legislators, they want to know what's important to their constituents. So be sure you let them know.

Janette: Gail mentioned the evidence-based funding as determining the financial impact of providing the required staff for every school. Right. And so part of the work I've been doing with my project SLATE is examining that funding model and, like, schools' current status to see are there districts out there.

Part of that model is a student-to-librarian ratio for staffing. And I will tell you the findings are kind of grim, you know, even for what we think are districts that are well-funded, well-resourced, well-staffed. There is not a single district that I have found yet in the state that is meeting those ratios for both librarians and library support staff, not a single district. Some of them meet one or the other, but none of them meet both. So that's that was a very sobering finding. And so we have a lot of work to do to get, you know, students the resources and staff that they need to have effective learning.

Leah: And one of those ways that we are trying to get those needs met is through AISLE’s letter-writing campaign, which is a brilliant, I think, tactic that Gail is leading. I love it so much, so do you want to talk about that a little bit?

Janette: It's been very effective. I mean,

Leah: It has been.

Janette: I’m excited for her to share this.

Gail: I sure hope it has. When they asked me to take over advocacy, the focus had always been how to advocate for yourself. And my thought was, AISLE is a statewide professional organization. Why aren't we using that name to advocate? And that group, the power behind a state group to advocate for librarians.

So we sent out a form saying, do you know a librarian who, or maybe you are, a librarian who is retiring and not being replaced. Do you know a district that is eliminating a position And we as a committee were overwhelmed with responses, probably 30 in the first week of people saying, yes, I'm retiring and they're not replacing me or my district is moving me to a science classroom and the library is going to be closed except for 2 hours a week. Imagine the scenario and it probably was happening.

So what we started doing was taking those schools and writing a letter expressing the importance, using data, expressing the importance of school librarians and the role they play, and including the ratios of recommended. In some cases, including what their neighboring districts already have. And that letter goes to, here's the list. All the school board members, all the administrators in the building, any local media, any parent organizations or community organizations that may be interested. ILA, ALA, AASL, RAILS, Heartland. Pretty much any name you can think of. If the person submitting it says, and we have a foundation that gives the library a lot of money. They get a copy of the letter.

Again, it's advocacy in that it puts the library on the radar and the responses are across the board. I've had superintendents argue that they have an aide in every school. That's great. That's not what the letter was addressing at all. I've had reporters call more than once and want to talk about it. There was a story in the spring that ran in *The* *Southtown* about a situation in Orland Park where they were eliminating librarians because of one of them contacting AISLE advocacy. I don't know what kind of difference it is making, but Janette and Leah swear to me that schools are noticing this and taking it maybe not under advisement, but into account when they make their decisions.

Leah: I can tell you, Gail, that one of the schools that you wrote a letter to that I reported to you not only hired a certified librarian to replace the retiring, but hired an aide. So they hired two people, which is amazing. So that is such great news. So it is working. Now, there are a few that you have written where we get like radio silence. We have, we're not making an impact there, but people are contacting me about those schools. Do they really not have a librarian? Why don't they have a librarian?

And I also want to add that when Gail sends those letters, many of those organizations, including ours, because we just had our board pass this resolution, we will respond to everybody as well, saying our organization supports this advocacy and agrees with AISLE. So. I think at the very, very least, we're inundating these people with,

Gail: Oh yeah.

Leah: They can't claim they don't know.

Janette: We're I mean, we're also aware, right, that sometimes those schools have bigger fish to fry, like for lack of a better way to put it. Like we know that a lot of times there are districts where many, there are many things on fire and the library is just one of them. But I don't think that you can back off, right? I think it's still right to bring that to their attention because sometimes they're trying to, just like we're trying to take these small steps toward a larger goal, which is the goal of the task force, you know, to have certified library staff and adequate library staff in every school.

But, you know, sometimes the baby steps are like maybe I have enough funding for a library aide this year. Maybe next year I have enough funding for a certified librarian. Like, identifying that path is just as important. You know, there's a lot of talk about there's a teacher shortage. We have a teacher shortage in Illinois. There's a nationwide teacher shortage. We have a certified librarian shortage. So, you know, it's addressing those things, too. And that's all part of the advocacy work, right? Bringing that to everyone's attention and having people understand, like here are the pathways to get certified, here are the pathways to educate yourself.

Leah: Also, we can highly recommend that you attend the AISLE conference if you are interested in, if you're a school teacher who wants to maybe investigate being a school librarian, or if you are a school librarian and you've never been to one, or if you are interested in advocacy, we will all be there. So find one of us and talk to us about advocacy.

But to wrap it up for today, we're going to move in to our regular feature called Shelf Care, and we're going to talk about something that's important to school librarians because we know that being a school librarian, especially if you are advocating hard for your program and others in the state, it can be hard on you mentally. So we ask what are you doing to take care of yourself?

Deb: So during the summer months I usually head out on my kayak and I just sort of de-stress in the kayak. But during, as we start the school year, I like weightlifting. And so I go out to Planet Fitness and I, I hit the weights pretty hard. And it really keeps you in shape for moving those big boxes of books.

Janette: That's a good extra benefit. Stress relief and muscles. Okay.

Deb: Exactly.

Janette: That’s a good one.

Gail: There are plenty of days that we're so busy here. We're on our feet running nonstop from bell to bell, and I get home and all I want to do for my self-care is put on some sort of true crime on Netflix and cross-stitch.

Leah: Gail, you and I are the same person.

Gail: I am finally almost old enough to claim the old lady hobby of cross-stich as my own and as a visual aid I have brought you guys one of my cross stitches.

Janette: Oh, let's see it.

Gail: I finished not too long ago because it is library themed.

Leah: Oh, it's beautiful.

Gail: This is called the Haunted Library.

Leah: I think I actually have that pattern.

Gail: Do you?

Janette: I love that.

Leah: I love it.

Gail: That is what keeps me sane and keeps me going in this struggle that we all are facing.

Janette: So I have to ask you, Gail, how long has it taken you to create that? That's amazing.

Gail: I've been asked that so many times today, and I don't particularly remember. I would say 6 to 8 months because it's not an everyday thing. I do have children that need things once in a while.

Leah: I know those pesky children, right?

Gail: We love them. But let me sit down with my needle and thread please.

Leah: So we would like to thank you both, Deb Will and Gail Meyer for joining us today. We appreciated it so much.

Gail: Thank you for having us. It was wonderful.

Deb: Yes. Thanks for the opportunity. You all are wonderful and it's always great to talk with you, so thank you.