

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 24 – Lee Keesler – Community Steward

The Encouragement to Go Far

And now a personal word,

I have been drawn to libraries my whole life, from reading books in cubbies in elementary school to making a beeline to see the lions and the reading room of the New York Public Library to curating libraries of my own on bookshelves in every place I've lived. Books inform who I am at my best. I am happiest when I am learning and when I am surrounded by people who feel the same way.

I have two distinct memories of time in libraries. One was at Horace Mann Middle School in El Portel, a suburb of Miami in the mid-1970s. It was a public school that I would walk about a mile to from my home in Miami Shores. The school population was high poverty, roughly 80 percent African American, 15 percent Hispanic, and about 5 percent Caucasian. This was the time of patches on flared jeans, afros and black power in integrated schools. I was among just a few students who looked like me. I joined the Library Club, made up of students who shelved books and created posters and suggested books to read for fellow students. We were all under the watchful eye of the school librarian, Mr. Rychard S. Cook II. Mr. Cook was a middle-aged, flamboyant, gleefully stern, cultured educator who wrote poetic verses in our yearbooks. Mr. Cook was helpful and generous and irascible as school librarians are. He saw something interesting in me and encouraged me to strive for more. We talked a lot and later wrote holiday cards to each other. I remember him fondly to this day.

My second distinct memory is late nights at the Florida State University College of Law library in Tallahassee, Florida. Between 1988 and 1991, I learned how to research using Lexis/Nexis and Westlaw: proprietary databases of state and federal case law. Lexis/Nexis and Westlaw representatives taught us how to use the databases. But we made our bones as lawyers pulling case law from dusty books off the shelves. We spent hours late into the evenings at tables and carols under fluorescent lights with stacks of books, noting citations and references, hunting down precious volumes, annotating, writing arguments on legal pads, and always, always, falling asleep with our heads down on the pages, until we were stirred again.

The Horace Mann Middle School library and the Florida State University College of Law library and every library I have ever been in offer knowledge and inspiration to grow and contribute to the world.

Lee Keesler and his team are transforming the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library and providing a center of opportunity, a people's university, and a public commons for all citizens of the region. The Library offers free and open access to the world's information, brings us together, teaches us literacy, is the scrapbook of our community, helps us find jobs and start companies, provides refuge and sanctuary, welcomes immigrants and newcomers, and is an extension of the schoolhouse and school day.

Now comes an opportunity to house it all in iconic architecture in the center of the city of Charlotte. Lee Keesler and his team have invited architects and designers and community engagement specialists to work with citizens to envision and create a new Main Library that transforms the streetscape and the human possibilities of the city. A public library that is the center of community life is a statement that all of us matter. That is community stewardship that we can and should embrace.

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