

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 book shelves in every place I've lived. Books feed my mind and soul and 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 from years ago 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% African American, 15% Hispanic, and about 5% 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, students who would shelve books and create posters and suggest 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, African American, flamboyant, cultured educator who alternated between being stern and making us laugh and 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, he encouraged me to strive for more, we talked a lot, we later wrote holiday cards to each other, and I have regard and fondness for him 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, the cutting edge of legal research was Lexis/Nexis and Westlaw; proprietary databases of state and federal case law. Westlaw representatives who would tour law schools would come to our campus to teach us how to use the databases. But we made our bones as lawyers pulling case law from dusty books off the shelves. We would spend 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 head down on the pages, until we were stirred again.

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

I think of the work that Lee Keesler and his team are doing to transform the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Library and provide a Center of Opportunity, a People's University, and a Public Commons for all citizens of the region. Free and open access to the world's information that brings us together, that teaches us literacy, that is the scrapbook of our community, that helps us find jobs and start companies, that provides refuge and sanctuary, that welcomes immigrants and newcomers, that is an extension of the schoolhouse and school day; there is no greater act of citizenship for us to support.

And now the 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 re-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 all of us can and should embrace.

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