

A TIMELY PROFILE IN COURAGE:

NOT RETIRED LIBRARIAN
GERALD NOTARO'S FIRST TIME
AT THE GAY RODEO

by Aaron Drake, Library Assistant, Manatee Libraries

Book banning seems to occur cyclically. The latest challenges to LGBTQ+ book titles, due to Florida's HB 1557—commonly called the “Don't Say Gay” law—comes as no surprise to gay retired librarian Gerald Notaro.

“Here we are all these years later, and we seem to be in the same situation as we were then,” Notaro says.¹

Notaro, who is an emeritus faculty member of the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, remembers being an active library advocate during the Hillsborough County, Florida, ban on public library displays that promoted Gay and Lesbian Pride Month in 2005. At that time, Hillsborough County Commissioner Ronda Storms pushed for a ban that the Commission successfully passed after West Gate Regional Library took down their display in response to complaints from patrons about the displays there. Hillsborough County's refusal to participate in Pride may have been an impetus for the Florida Library Association's (FLA) passage of a resolution that the association would not host any meetings or activities in Hillsborough County until the ban was rescinded.

Notaro goes on to add it hasn't always been just LGBTQ+ titles on banned books lists. “They didn't even want us to have books about dinosaurs. We had complaints about books about dinosaurs because of religious concerns.”

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Though the ban was lifted in 2013, it led to the birth of St. Pete Pride in 2003 - now Florida's largest Pride celebration with more than 300,000 attendees flooding the streets of Downtown St. Pete each June for their yearly parade. "You never saw people coming over from Tampa to St. Pete for anything; of course, that's reversed now," Notaro shares. "All of my friends that still live in Tampa come over here for everything."

Notaro, who served on the board of St. Pete Pride, was a historian and an archivist for the organization, as well. He used the incident in Hillsborough County as a catalyst to launch a Florida Library Association committee for library employees serving LGBTQ+ patrons. The committee is currently inactive.* Times may be changing, but an LGBTQ+ services organization seems to be something that is still needed.² Notaro recalls:

"I remember another first, it sounds commonplace now, but twenty-one years ago it wasn't. We invited a transgender librarian [to speak to USFSP library staff]. The whole focus of the program that we had was using the right pronouns, how to treat trans[gender] patrons, how to treat trans[gender] employees, and that was a whole foreign world twenty-one years ago. This was long before the topic was talked about as much as it is on RuPaul's Drag Race now, where half the cast are coming out as trans. I learned a lot and I was an activist. It was just one of the things we did to help the patrons."

Notaro went on to assist with the creation of Gulfport Public Library's award-winning LGBTQ+ collection. He started a film series and brought in the Tampa Bay Gay Men's Chorus to perform a Christmas concert in Gulfport, which they still do and is the number one attended event for the library each year.

"I was one of the few out librarians and I had started writing reviews early on in my career and I would request materials," Notaro says. "All of a sudden I got this huge collection at USF that people were always wanting to borrow from because, for free, I had built up this incredible

collection [of materials] sent to me to review and I would put them in. I saw there was a need to find authoritative, nondiscriminating, and inclusive materials and reviews on materials and sources from those materials," he says. "A lot of times there weren't a lot of those materials available."

According to Notaro, librarians were the "first interest group in any profession devoted to securing gay and lesbian rights," Notaro said, with librarians joining the American Library Association's Task Force on Gay Liberation in the early days of the civil rights battle for queer rights in 1971. The group put together a "Hug-a-Homosexual" booth at the annual ALA meeting held that year. This was during the time when 49 states still had anti-sodomy laws on the books and employment discrimination was allowed. Continues Notaro, "[T]he legal system rendered gay people effectively invisible through loitering, disorderly conduct, solicitation, and anti-sodomy laws. Major religious denominations categorized gays as sinners even as the medical profession branded homosexuality pathological."³ (Poole, 2020).

Taking on prejudice from its start, ALA's Task Force on Gay Liberation worked on "the creation of bibliographies, revision of library classification schemes and subject headings, building and improving access to collections, and fighting job discrimination."⁴ Specifically, in the library profession it became about battling discrimination for employees, changing classification and subject headings that were offensive, sharing relevant and current information with those who needed it, including those resources in collection development, and ultimately supporting other marginalized groups.

"I knew library directors that I would see out at the clubs, at Parliament House... they couldn't even be out at work and couldn't join the group because they were afraid," Notaro reminisces. "Some of them have gone on to become library directors in huge systems, and to think that 20 [to] 25 years ago they couldn't even be out in their job is just unbelievable, but that is the way it was. Up until 2010, 2011, I knew library directors in Florida that were extremely closeted because they were in areas [where] they thought

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[their sexual orientation] would affect their jobs.”

Times may be changing again as illustrated recently by libraries censoring themselves. For example, the case of Smithtown, N.Y., whose library trustee board voted to ban LGBTQ+ book displays and remove children’s books portraying LGBTQ+ characters from the shelves, only to be reversed days later after an emergency meeting.⁵ But the challenge is still there and it’s a call to the profession of librarianship to step up.

“There are parents out there who are seeking librarians’ advice on these books,” Notaro states. “And you are doing a disservice by refusing to even publicize the fact that you have the books or have the knowledge of which one of the books to recommend.”

Notaro shares about the time when FLA invited Lesléa Newman, author of *Heather Has Two Mommies*, to speak:

We had librarians who told me that they couldn’t... come to the program because they were afraid their commissioners or taxpayers or boards would be furious with them for even coming to listen to Lesléa speak. I understood and felt bad for them. I told them, ‘You can’t let that stop you from doing what you think is the right thing for your patrons. Not for yourself, but for your patrons.’

Notaro adds, “[Librarians] need to also understand they are in a profession where they’re going to have to make some brave decisions even if they’re ultimately admonished for them or have boards that come and outvote what they think is the right thing to do.”

[1] Gerald Notaro, telephonic interview with Aaron Drake, July 7, 2022.

[2] “The group is currently inactive. FLA requires both someone to agree to chair the group, plus four other FLA members willing to help start it back up. Then it would require FLA Executive Board approval.” -FLA Executive Director, Jennifer Abdelnour

[3] Poole, A.H. (2020). Tearing the Shroud of Invisibility: Communities of Protest Information Practices and the Fight for LGBTQ Rights in U.S. Librarianship.” *Library Quarterly*, 90(4), 530-562.

[4] “Rainbow Round Table History Timeline”, American Library Association, January 25, 2017. <http://www.ala.org/rt/rrt/about/history> (Accessed October 31, 2023)

[5] “Long Island Library Board Reverses Ban on LGBTQ-Related Books, Displays from Children’s Sections.” ABC7 New York, June 24, 2022. <https://abc7ny.com/smithtown-library-board-pride-ban-long-island-month/11991455/>.



Gerald “Jerry” Notaro, Emeritus University Librarian at University of South Florida, St. Petersburg

***Editor’s Note:** While the original LGBTQ Member Group established by Greg Notaro is inactive, FLA’s Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Committee is doing important work. To learn more or to get involved, contact Jenny Abdelnour at executivedirector@flalib.org.