



## More than just a place to get books

Librarians have spoken for years about “library faith,” the belief that public libraries are central to democracy because they contribute to an informed citizenry. Today, the idea is gaining even more traction, and even conservative crackdowns on what’s permitted in libraries reinforce the idea that they’re more than just “book warehouses” but centers for community engagement and representativeness. Jenna talks to two librarians proselytizing for the importance of libraries. Shamichael Hall explains how he brought his experience in tech and faith leadership to bear when he ran a branch of the Memphis Public Libraries, including bringing Civic Saturdays to his community, a program of Citizen University. And public policy advocate Nancy Kranich of Rutgers University shares

the high hopes she has that libraries remain crucial institutions that allow us to engage with our government—and each other.

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Jenna Spinelle: If you’ve been listening to this show, it will not surprise you to learn that I love books. One of my earliest memories is my dad reading the Sesame Street classic “The Monster at the End of This Book” to me over and over and over again. The ending got me every time! When I was in kindergarten, I read every book in my classroom’s library. My teacher, Mrs. Moran, brought me books from other classrooms. I couldn’t get enough. I spent summers in the hot, dusty basement of my local public library, where the children’s department was. It’s been at least 25 years since I was last there but I’ll never forget the musty smell of the books and the delight of seeing my next stack ready to take home.

These days, I’m lucky enough to have access to a public library AND a university library, in my town in Pennsylvania. And going to the library as an adult, I do more than just check out books. I started going to book clubs the public library organized and lectures by authors coming through the area. I even presented a workshop series for people in the community who wanted to start podcasts. I started to meet people and feel more connected to my town.

And that transition—from libraries as places to get books, to libraries as places to engage with your community—is what we’re talking about in this episode.

I’m Jenna Spinelle, and this is When The People Decide. A show about how everyday people are shaping democracy.

When we decided to focus this season on how individuals can engage with democracy, I knew an entire episode needed to focus on the role of public libraries. Because many of us have some experience with a library, whether it’s our polling place on election day or where we take our kids for story time.

Making libraries focal points of civic engagement is something that Shamichael Hallman understands well. Over the course of years, he has worked tirelessly to expand the role of libraries in our understanding of local politics.

Shamichael Hallman: I'm a current Loeb fellow at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University.

Spinelle: The Loeb fellowship is for people working in a variety of fields—including urban planning, journalism, architecture, and public policy—whose work is improving social outcomes through the built environment. But before the fellowship, Shamichael was the Senior Library Manager for Memphis Public Libraries. What he did there, inspired his studies at Harvard.

Shamichael never really planned to work in libraries in the first place. Like many of us, for a long time his experience with them was as a place to get books.

Hallman: I grew up in this little small town in Alabama called Margaret. Super small. We did not have a library in our town but there was a library at the school. And then in, in the town over, in Leeds, Alabama, which for basketball people, that's where Charles Barkley is from, there was a public library. I started going to that library as a teen. And I remember that library because they had an amazing comic book collection. They had a comic book club and it was the first time that I had really seen that many comic books, but also that I had seen sort of a similar group of people, people who had similar interests.

Spinelle: It may have been the first inkling Shamichael got that a library could also be about community.

When he got older, he started a career in tech and also served as a church youth pastor in Memphis. Then one day, he got a job offer from the Cossitt Branch of the Memphis Public Library.

Hallman: In 2016, I got a call from the public library and said, Hey, we're getting ready to renovate this branch. We think there's an opportunity here for you to use some of your tech backgrounds, for you to use some of your experience in ministry to help us in this process of reimagining this branch.

Hallman: And so I stepped in with no library experience at all, and started, lending what I could to this, which it was not really any sort of real understanding of how to operate a library. But I did have from professional experience and from my graduate education, I knew social impact. I knew how to engage the community. I knew how to create and craft innovative products and solutions.

Spinelle: They hired him to reimagine the library—but what did that look like? While they didn't have specific ideas, the library leadership had started working on a strategic plan for the branch. And that's where Shamichael started his work:

Hallman: And in that plan, they talked a lot about wanting the library to be this community anchor, to be this place where diverse people could have shared experiences together. That could be this place that was a place for access to literacy and those sorts of things. So I think being able to sort of put together a strategic plan helped me begin [to say] okay, how do we actually make this work? How do we ensure that, a year down the road, two years down the road, this is not, you know, people have forgotten about this place. Because think that happens a lot with design. That people go to the new hot thing. It's exciting, you go, you get your photo op and then you kind of just disappear, right? And, you rinse and repeat. And I wanted to really think about how do we ensure the sustainability of this place.

- Spinelle: He realized he could lean on his experience as a youth pastor.
- Hallman: I thought that the best way to approach that was to begin to get people, everyday citizens, to see themselves as an integral part of, of the process. Not only in terms of maybe even altering the design a little bit, but just, okay what happens when we cut the ribbon? What does it look like for you to be a part of this branch? That, really, is where I started sort of leaning into the ministry background and really trying to sort of put forth this message of: everybody has something that could be contributed to this.
- Spinelle: One of the programs he brought to the library was called Civic Saturdays. Shamichael heard about this through another organization called Citizen University, which trains people around the country to host this event in their community. One description of the event Shamichael really liked was that it's a civic alternative to a church service.
- Hallman: A typical event lasts about two hours. There is music, there is lively conversation. The ones that we have done, In Memphis, we highlighted Memphis artists, people like Tonya Dyson who would sing songs like Lean On Me, that try to cultivate this sense of community. We would read various passages from folks who I thought played some integral role in the history of Memphis, whether that was Dr. King or Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer. And then we had all sorts of questions that we would ask during these, these moments. We would ask people, How do you see yourself plugging into this community? What are your hopes and dreams and desires for your community? Where do you see the challenges right now? Whether that's, hey, the trash folks aren't running the way that we think they should, or maybe this street is two people are driving on the street too fast, and you know, hey, regardless of how you feel about that, like we want to make sure that our kids don't get hit on this busy street. So could we get together and petition the city council to put a speed bump up or to put some signage up? What are the ways that we can work together? And that's what I think what we've been able to do in Memphis.
- Spinelle: One thing he saw come from Civic Saturdays is people in Memphis who didn't know each other before, coming together over common concerns. A few people coming to Civic Saturdays wanted to talk about homelessness and housing issues in the city. So Shamichael connected them to each other and to other organizations in the community working with unhoused Memphis residents.
- Hallman: I think a lot of great relationships came out of that. I think folks who, you know, organizations who were already doing work got new ideas, new approaches to, to things they were thinking about. If you can get people in the room who are passionate, if you can have them engage in some sort of shared experience, whether that's listening to a song or singing that song or doing something together, that sort of opens up the ability to have these sort of conversations, right? It's through that shared experience that you can begin to develop a sense of cohesion and hopefully out of that cohesion, you can begin to develop a sense of folks working together to solve problems.
- Spinelle: Another way he tried to reimagine the role of the library is how the physical space was being used.
- Hallman: I did an inventory of our meeting room spaces. And I did a bit of an analysis and found that there was a huge opportunity for us to use these spaces more efficiently and more effectively. That they were not being utilized as much as they could be. And we had at the same time a growing community of artists in the city who were looking for spaces that were, as they deemed, needed to be accessible, inclusive and affordable. But you needed

to have all three of those, right? Because in some cases, artists said, Hey, I found this space and it is inclusive and it is accessible, but it's not affordable, right? So my proposal, both to the library and the local arts commission was, Hey we've got space. And let's sit down with artists and say like, Hey, what do you need to be able to do your thing.

Spinelle: So he and his staff talked it over with artists. They realized if they were going to use the meeting spaces as studios, they ALSO needed some software or sometimes basic equipment, like lights. And the library could provide that. By connecting with the community's needs, Shamichael found new ways to use a space everyone was already familiar with.

In February 2020 Shamichael gave a Tedx talk in Memphis about his goals for the Cossitt branch library renovation, while it was still under construction. He talked about how the physical space would look different. There would be a cafe, gardens with yoga and new technology. But he also had a larger goal for the library. He told the audience he wants people to interact with the library.

[Shamichael TED Talk Clip](#): See, libraries are very kind of consumerist, right? We go, we get our books, we leave. We go, we go to the program, we leave. We go, we use the computer, we leave. But I'm asking you to contribute to the fabric of the library.

Spinelle: He said contributing could be volunteering for an event at the library or leading a workshop on how to code or fill out your taxes. Shamichael's second goal he laid out in that Ted Talk had to do with the history of the library. Memphis, like most cities, had segregated public libraries until the 1960s. That's something Shamichael thought about a lot, as a Black man who was in charge of the Cossitt branch, which was a whites-only library until 1960.

Hallman (TED Talk): If there's nothing else that we've learned from the history of Cossitt is the danger that happens when one people group decides that another people group is not worthy of a public space.

Spinelle: His call to action was to make libraries more than a building to use books, or technology, but a true shared, and safe, public space.

Hallman (TED Talk): And so what I would ask of you, when you walk in this library and you see people who think a little bit different than you that you would not other them, but you would invite them into a beautiful community.

Spinelle: Shamichael started his fellowship at Harvard in 2022. He's taking classes at Harvard and MIT, and also doing research on public spaces. After he finishes his fellowship, he says he would love to return to Memphis libraries, but he's also working on a project he's calling Libraries as Bridges. It'll be a collection of case studies from libraries around the country that are trying new things when it comes to civic engagement.

Hallman: So we will publish a report of what we have found: the various ways that libraries of all sizes, all shapes in this country are trying to advance civic engagement, civic knowledge, civic behavior in their communities. And then closely related to that, we will take that information and create some training modules that can help libraries understand, hey, this is what we should do from a programming standpoint, this is what we should do from an outreach standpoint, those sorts of things.

Spinelle: Shamichael's work at the re-imagined Cossitt Branch is getting noticed outside of Memphis. In 2021, Smithsonian Magazine published a feature called "How Memphis Created The Nations' Most Innovative Library." One of the people who read that article, and was impressed by Shamichael's ideas, was Nancy Kranich.

Nancy Kranich: I am a teaching professor at Rutgers University and a librarian.

Spinelle: After hearing about Shamichael's work with Libraries as Bridges, I wanted to dive deeper into the role of libraries across the country as civic spaces. Nancy was the perfect person to lead me on that journey. Throughout her decades-long career in libraries, civic engagement was at the center of a lot of her work. Her first few jobs were at public libraries.

Kranich: I got involved in community information services. So working with community agencies, connecting with people in the community about their specific civic information needs. How do I do different things related to government? How do I apply for food stamps? How do I deal with a dead dog? How do I deal with the noisy neighbors I have? Whatever, all kinds of community-based issues.

Spinelle: Then, she went to grad school at NYU. When she graduated, the director of the university library hired her as an assistant. He also had a background in community information services—something they bonded over.

Kranich: And the two of us kind of flipped the model for academic librarianship to be very service- and community- focused. And from there I just kept getting more involved in some of these issues. Started doing a lot of work with lobbying in Washington. Got involved with a group—during the eighties, the Reagan administration did all kinds of cuts to access to government information—I was incensed about it. And before I knew it, I was not only chairing the American Library Association's Committee to deal with the problem, but we set up a coalition to deal with the problem called the Coalition on Government Information. And I ended up chairing it for 10 years. And that really immersed me in the public policy world.

Spinelle: But after working with legislators and lobbyists, Nancy started to see a disconnect between the people in the public policy world and the people she met at the libraries she worked at.

Kranich: I said to myself one day, well, who is the public that these people are serving? Realizing that so much of what happens in the public policy arena is about very specialized stakeholders, and they don't always recognize who the public is.

Spinelle: Like lobbyists holding a larger sway over legislators, than their constituents.

Kranich: So I started immersing myself into understanding, well, who's the public? And that led me into issues around democracy. And I got very sort of immersed in thinking about what does it mean to have the public participate in our form of governments? And so I was nominated to become president of the American Library Association, and I decided that my theme after I was elected would be libraries and democracy. Partially, not only because I really cared about that issue, but because even though librarians often spoke, for years, we call it the "library faith," that we were so central to democracy and how important an

informed citizenry is to democracy. I thought, well, wait a minute. We have more and more information. But we have less and less participation, so there's something missing here.

Spinelle: Nancy saw the potential for libraries to play a key role in strengthening our democracy.

Kranich: And so that's when I started really getting into the literature of dialogue, deliberation, participation, and seeing that in order for people to be true participants in a democracy, they didn't just have to be a vessel that you poured information into, but they needed to be stimulated to want to participate.

Spinelle: Over her career, Nancy saw librarian work change. And more people embrace her approach to see libraries as civic incubators. Back when she started her career, she says the attitude was that libraries were book warehouses. But as technology changed, and the country changed, she advocated for libraries to focus less on the materials inside the buildings, and more on bringing together the community that the library exists for.

Kranich: They talk about communities now in everything they discuss, it's all about our work transforming communities. It's not libraries, libraries, libraries. It's our community. And that shift in language is huge. The other piece, is getting back to community partnerships, this collective action work that hopefully we're all doing now. I think every community-based group has recognized none of us can do this alone, that it must be a collective effort. So it shifted the whole discourse in our communities around not only what your group or my group does, but what we do together.

Spinelle: Part of what Nancy saw, too, was how libraries became focal points for conflict over our democratic values. In the 2021-2022 school year, there were 2,500 instances of book bans in schools. State legislators introduced thirty-two bills in just the first three months of 2023—that would ban drag performances in libraries, targeting what can and can't be done in public spaces, and policing who is and isn't allowed in them..

Kranich: And so it's become an advocacy war in one way, but it's also become an opportunity for libraries to reimagine how that discourse that they were trying to facilitate about issues in their community is also about the issues that they are personally confronting. And some communities, that's probably not going to work. But I think in many communities it is an opportunity to recognize that when we fight for our values, we don't have to do it in a confrontational way. We can also do it in a dialogic way where maybe we need to sit down and work through the issue. I understand you don't think this is the right item for your child, but I don't think you have the right to make that choice for other people's children. And so play to some of their best kind of value systems rather than just seeing it as this confrontational effort.

Kranich: Now, that can be tough in a world that's very partisan, but I think the library is sort of the last bastion of democracy in America. And we have to remember, democracy is not just about the majority, it's about protecting the minority.

Spinelle: Maybe more than ever, libraries need to be places where we do more than just take out books. They're really one of the last places where everyone in the community should feel welcome, to come together to build relationships, that in turn bolster our democracy. But to build those relationships, it requires everyone to put in a little more effort.

Library staff like Shamichael need to keep thinking outside the box. Leaders like Nancy need to keep advocating for this work at a policy level. And the rest of us... need to show up. Maybe that looks like volunteering for a program at your library, or bringing something like Civic Saturdays to your branch. Maybe it's offering your skills to a library program or attending the book clubs hosted at the library.

I believe if we all show up, to the one place that's free and open to all of us, we'll likely meet more people in our area, and be more connected to the community we live in.

Spinelle: When the People Decide is produced by LWC Studios for the McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State. The podcast is reported and hosted by me, Jenna Spinelle. Our producer is Claire McInerney (MACK-in-urn-ee). Paulina Velasco edited this episode. Erica Huang (WONG) mixed this episode. Fact checking by Fendall Fulton.

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I'm Jenna Spinelle. Thanks for joining us.