

Annicon and Librarianship with Mrs. Kim

An interview by Jay Clark

So, first question, who are you?

Who am I? Okay, well, Kim Westbrooks. I am a librarian here at Jacksonville State University. I am a Business and Social Sciences Librarian, which means I get to dig into all sorts of fabulous information every day. Also, I get to share that with students and assist students in finding any sort of information they either need for their assignments, for their personal interests, or for life in general.

Well, what do you do as the Business and Social Sciences Librarian and this fourth floor basically?

That is a great question. I love my job because I get to do different things. I have different parts of my job that I attend to every day. Sometimes I'm in the classrooms and I speak about how to access information for either that subject in the social sciences or business, or how to access information for a specific project. Very frequently, these are in upper-level classes. Sometimes I get to introduce myself in an intro class, but I am in a lot of junior and senior level classes in Brewer Hall and in Merrill Hall. And I get to be with students, as they are navigating the vast amount of information that exists in the world on their topics, to guide them through that information, make sure that they have the information that is going to be best suited for their topic, and I get to save them massive amounts of time. As I navigate that sea of information every single day, I can help them direct their path through that.

So, that also includes many one-on-one appointments with students; I get to talk to them individually about their individual needs, because the social sciences and information here on the fourth floor is vast. We have emergency management, sociology, social work, gender studies, and criminal justice on this floor. All business topics - management, marketing, accounting, political science are on this floor, as well as public administration. There is so much to discover here, basically, any information dealing with one person interacting with another person or group of people, whether that's good, bad or otherwise. That's a huge amount of information. The other part of that is of course collection development. So, making sure that I'm staying on top of information and information technologies so that I have access to that information across all this content to support the curriculum here and of course, first and foremost, the students.

Where are you from?

I am from Rome, Georgia. So, it is only about an hour away from here. I came here in 2002 to get my undergraduate degree. While here I played flute in the Marching Southerners. I finished in 2007 with an undergraduate degree in music, specifically in performance. I also minored in mathematics and english, because I knew having a broad array of education and experience was important when moving into the library field. I went on to the University of Alabama and got my master's degree in library and information science, but I did that mostly online and through the Gadsden campus.

I heard that you're an amazing singer. Do you have a favorite song that you like to sing?

Oh, thank you. So, I love to sing. I love making music. I still love to make music. I sing a lot in my spare time with civic organizations, with church, and for fun. I have a lot of friends that are still interested in music, I love to support them and go to their concerts. My favorite song? Oh, it changes about every day. I have a lot of different pieces that I enjoy. But probably the most fun piece for me to sing is "Vissi d'arte", which is from an opera called Tosca.

Where's that from?

So, it is an Italian opera by Puccini. "Vissi d'arte" means "life for art". It's very dramatic and soaring aria is a pivotal point in that opera. I love it so much. But recently there's a pop group called ANIMA! that put out a new release. This month is their 2023 album, So, I've been listening to that a lot.

You hold an undergrad in music from JSU, how was it going from studying at JSU to working here?

It was excellent. So, I spent some time away between graduating and coming back to work here. I graduated in 2007, and then I went on to get my graduate degree. While I was getting my undergraduate degree, I worked at Jacksonville Public Library for four years in their children's and teen sections. I got to play a part in developing the manga collection. There was a lot of fun helping with programming for summer reading, and I got to do storytelling every week with a preschooler. There was a vast amount of content that I got to devour each week, but I still got to see a lot of Jacksonville residents. I sort of deepened my roots, if you will, with Jacksonville and what was going on here. After working there I went on to the Public Library of Anniston, Calhoun County.

When I'd finished my graduate degree, I was head of youth services there, and got to play a part in developing the teen collection and teen programming. So I got to build that collection from the ground up with fabulous supportive administration there. It was just amazing getting to be in the center of Anniston just at the heart of Calhoun County, looking at what can I do to serve the community. I think it was there, that I really started to understand a bit better that it wasn't just necessarily who was walking in the door that I should be serving. I was looking at the Census, I was talking to people, I was talking to people that were a part of different groups within the community. I started looking at the bigger picture and understanding, for one reason or another, that there are people not coming through these doors. Why? How can I develop programs? How can I develop collections? How can I spread the word that this is a space for everyone?

So, while some of this was being done, I got to sort of broaden what I was doing there with the collection offerings available. I stayed for four and a half years, and then I came back here to JSU in January 2016. It was great coming back, I still had friends here in the building, and I had phenomenal mentors at Houston Cole Library. When a problem was too big or my understanding too small, if I needed an expert in a particular subject, if I didn't know somebody already here with that expert knowledge, they would know exactly who to talk to. It was like having an enormous network of not only knowledge, but people to reach out to, which I think is so critical in those community organizations. And of course, I stayed in touch with Mrs. Charlcie Vann, who was the second-floor librarian here. She made a tremendous impact on me in my professional career. She also provided support to me as a working mother going through graduate school, having a full-time job, and also community commitments as well.

How did you become a librarian?

I became a librarian from a conversation that I had with, at the time, the sixth-floor librarian here. His name was Dr. George Weitzel; unfortunately, he has passed away. He is actually the person whom the multimedia lab on the sixth floor is named after. It was through his generation donation that we even have the multimedia lab. Dr. Weitzel was absolutely a huge influence on me. He is the first person that talked to me about music collections, about music, librarianship, and all my different interests. He showed me how librarianship would fit well with all of those, and how I, a loud extroverted person, would not only be welcomed, but appreciated in the library world.

Was being a librarian something you always wanted to do?

It was not actually. I've always had a love for data and exploring information, and of course, reading has always been a part of that. But when I was in high school, I was thinking I wanted to be an actuarial scientist. Which is like, looking at the risk, particularly in the insurance field. But the reason I had wanted to do that is I'd gone into the Occupational Outlook Handbook at the time and looked at the federal data. I thought, 'Oh, this is one of the top growing fields, and I would make the most money doing this.' So, while actuarial science really wasn't in the cards for me, I had not come to terms with the fact that I would never be happy outside of working with people.

No matter how good I am at working with numbers, I would never be happy just crunching numbers and not talking to people every day. I love the part of my job where I get to talk to different people, help people, and help the helpers, so to speak. There are so many people in very tough positions and going into those tough positions for all the right reasons. I am able to get them the information they need, so that they can go and be the hero that they need to be.

We love that support system. So why did you create Annicon? And how was the process of creating Annicon?

I get many questions about how Annicon started, and I'm hoping to one day write an article about it because I would love to see other libraries and community organizations try to do something like this. Annicon started with interest in the manga section at the Public Library of Anniston, Calhoun County. This interest connected me with my mentor, Hanrong Wang, who is the Law and Technology Librarian on the 10th floor. She is always an ever-present force for this idea as well. So, I had a teen who came up to me, and asked about doing some sort of program focusing on anime, manga, and Japanese culture. So, we had a two-hour event at the public library Just for teens. Our teen programming had just started, so we average between 12-20 people.

When we held this Japanese event centering on information that we had at the library, we didn't even have speakers yet. really. We just watched an episode of anime, we talked about the manga, and had a manga display. We had 50 people show up, which was huge. I had a teen at the time, who has now graduated from here, Tabitha Rayburn, come up to me and say, 'Miss Kim, you should make this a full con'. I sort of laughed and said, 'Tabitha, we don't have the people to make a full con. I barely have enough people for these 50 people, I don't know how we're going to fund this.' The comment did get me thinking, and I do like interdisciplinary, interconnected community events. So, as I got to thinking about it, I felt like 'why is this just here at the library? Why is this just me doing this? This is big, and there's enough people that are interested in this, so let's make it bigger.' You know, maybe somebody can come and talk about Lolita fashion, maybe somebody can come and talk about their food and training. Thus, how Bob from Isshin came to be a part of Annicon.

Cont. from previous page

I talked to Hanrong, who talked about writing systems, and how those were different in Asian countries. Eventually she suggested, 'Hey, why is this just Japan? I know, there's an interest in this came from anime and manga. But I would love to talk about China, I would love to talk about my culture and bring in some of my friends.' She has done that over the years, and the growth has been very organic.

I don't make Annicon, and I don't make Annicon grow. But I, with the help of an entire team, some of them wanting acknowledgment and some not, have joined together with people that are interested in doing this. We formed a planning committee of volunteers who put in their blood, sweat, and tears to plan an event. We have people who come from the community and want to share their experiences, and they have the space to do that. They also have the agency to make it what they want it to be. We have community groups that get together, like the Anime Club and the Korean Entertainment Club. We have gained all these different groups over the years. The Public Library of Anniston in Calhoun County, their teen group, and their teen services librarian, are still active parts of this event. I think the biggest part of Annicon and how it works is the fact that there is no gate keeping people out of being part of that planning process. We always welcome new people, we're welcoming in new coordinators, and new leadership.

You answered the question and added a lot more to it and that's amazing.

With library programming, it is 'okay, we have this event space, and it will hold 200 people. We need to have tickets to allow 200 people.' So, instead of coming in with that mindset, we outgrew the space in 2015, after only three years. We started the Japanese event and then it grew into Annicon next year, and it's been going on ever since. But when we outgrew the space, we made a planning committee, and made the decision of 'okay, we are going to go to another space to accommodate the community, not the other way around.'

You all have done an amazing job. The hard work is worth it. As a founder of Annicon and advisor of the Anime and Cosplay club, what was the first anime that you got into, and if you have any favorite animes, what were they?

I got into anime in college while I was here, and that's one of the great things about Jacksonville State University. Coming from Rome, Georgia, there wasn't the most exposure to that, aside from Toonami and Cartoon Network. There was a little bit of that there of course, I think all of us had a little bit of exposure to that from that era. But I really enjoyed the Excel Saga, ugly and oddly enough. That was the first thing I think I was exposed to and it was just quirky, fun, and ridiculous. It was a welcome reprieve from heavy schoolwork and working two jobs. School was difficult for me economically and financially, so it was sort of an escape from all of that and I loved it in from there. So, Excel Saga was probably my intro into things. My favorite anime? I love Black Butler. That was, just, it holds a special place in my heart. Of course, Death Note I thought was interesting. The first cosplay I ever did was Misa, it was very fun, and that was at the Jacksonville Public Library that I've started doing that. I then went to AWA (Anime Weekend Atlanta) and Dragon Con in Atlanta, and my love for anime just expanded from there. Of course, a Crunchyroll and FUNimation account helped with all those.

Well, then, do you have any events coming up or new updates of any kind that you are that you're allowed to share?

So, now, like I said, we are working on some new directions with leadership. We have five subcommittee chair positions that are currently open due to people moving, or starting new careers. We had a timeline in place for new people to enter those positions in 2020, and a lot of those plans just completely got derailed. Many of us in those positions want to pass the torch, and give people with these fabulous ideas a place to contribute. So, we are going through a process where we are seeking new subcommittee chairs. Instead of doing what we did back in 2015-16-17, and learning as we went, we're going to offer time, mentorship, and training for new people entering so many of those critical positions. That is as much as I can share now on public record, but be paying close attention to social media and our website, because new announcements are coming!

Is there anything else you would like to share?

I'm just excited to be part of the library world right now. Especially with all the changes happening in information, and all the challenges coming with censorship and bans. I'm proud of my profession in their stances of keeping up with information and providing access to all.

Thank you so much for this interview.

Thank you, Jay.

If you have any questions for Mrs. Kim about Annicon or librarianship, you can email her at kwestbrooks1@jsu.edu