FEATURE

SCHOOL AND

A Collaborative Conversation

PUBLIC LIBRARY COOPERATION
This article is a conversation between Shelley Dorrill, school librarian at Paul W. Bryant High School (PWBHS) in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and Jana Fine, former youth services coordinator at Tuscaloosa Public Library (TPL) now youth services consultant for the Florida Department of State, Division of Library and Information Services, Bureau of Library Development.

JANA FINE: Shelley, the collaborative efforts between TPL and PWBHS have been very successful for quite a while. I never thought that I would be so fortunate in working with such a great group of people in Tuscaloosa. When I worked at the Clearwater Public Library I had such great collaboration with K–12 schools, but I was hesitant to believe that I could be so lucky again. Boy, was I wrong!

SHELLEY DORRILL: Yes, we have worked together over five years now, and it has been so beneficial to both libraries.

JANA: I remember the first week I was on the job in 2006, a woman named Judy Johnson came in, introduced herself to me and asked, “So, what are we going to do for YALSA’s Teen Tech Week?” My mouth flew open, and I was speechless since that was the very first time a school person ever approached me first. Once I got over my shock, I was able to start a very meaningful dialogue with her and her fellow librarian at the time, Shannon Bogart. We came up with the first gaming event that combined the talents and resources of all the librarians involved. Even though the turnout wasn’t the greatest, the event started a successful relationship between us.

SHELLEY: Yes, and I was fortunate enough to join in that collaboration when I came to the PWBHS media center in the fall of 2007. Being mentored by librarians who always strove to cooperate and support others led me to see that there are incredible advantages when the library community works together. The first joint library event I remember was for our 2007 Books with Bite Teen Read Week program (see Figures 1 and 2 in page 48). That was the year the Twilight movie was going to come out, and the kids were agog with all things vampire.

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We ran with the horror theme and turned the school library into a 1950s drive-in. The students sat in cars, ate popcorn, and enjoyed a video we made of horror clips from throughout film history. We then had classes in for that great game TPL created and led.

**JANA:** That’s right. We decided to present a *Twilight* Family Feud Game for YALSA’s Teen Read Week. The youth staff at TPL worked for several months, in collaboration with PWBHS librarians and student workers, to come up with questions and answers about the *Twilight* series. Once it was ready, Shannon worked with the English department to have students attend the presentation at the school. It was great fun, and the winning team won *Twilight* messenger bags (which I made for the occasion). The program was so successful that we presented it at the local Barnes & Noble store for the release party of *Breaking Dawn*.

**SHELLEY:** Our students loved that event. I think I will never forget the *New Moon* reader’s theater that TPL youth services wrote and our PWBHS students performed at the TPL *Twilight* event on the opening night of *New Moon*. *Twilight* was such a big draw we even had teachers competing for those prizes (see Figure 3).

**JANA:** I do remember that! I had such a great experience with that Teen Read Week event. You all did so much work, and it was so impressive for everyone. I still can’t believe that we were able to put such a large event together in about two months.

**SHELLEY:** It was our first big collaboration, and it was immediately evident how we could accomplish so much more together than either library could separately.

**JANA:** I also remember that Shannon had a great book club that discussed banned books. You asked me to come in and discuss with the students several of the books. I was impressed with the students as they were very prepared for the discussion with smart and curious questions. I felt much honored that your graphic novel book club discussed YALSA’s Michael L. Printz Award-winning *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang. I was a member of that 2007 selection committee. I had no idea how you and Shannon did so much with all of the other work you were responsible for. It’s amazing that the two of you had at least ten book clubs going throughout the year.

**SHELLEY:** School librarians do have very full plates. We wear so many hats in the school. While we are librarians, the school’s...
needs force us to focus on a huge number of nonlibrarian roles. However, that is precisely why collaboration with public librarians is so essential. Neither of us can meet all the literacy and information needs of our teens. However, as a community we can help each other fill in the gaps and add enrichment to the curriculum.

JANA: Do you remember the Halloween Horror event that you had at school? I had such a wonderful time telling some scary stories to the students. I even think they were surprised they could be scared at such small and unexpected jump tales.

SHELLEY: That is a great example of how your talents and skills made a school library program possible.

JANA: What I also enjoyed was the time when my youth librarian worked with several of the students to present a "Hunger Games" party at the public library. They played a quiz from a website, and then had to race in teams of two to dress in a style from each of the districts. Prizes included books and jewelry. There was also food representing the different districts. All in all, the girls and guys from the public, the high school, and the University of Alabama School of Library and Information Studies who attended had a really enjoyable time. It was truly a very creative idea, and the students from PWBHS were fantastic!

SHELLEY: I know the teens liked it as they spoke to their friends about how much fun they had at the public library. It was gratifying to know they felt comfortable enough to express their enjoyment of this collaborative event. It is interesting to note that at this point in time our teenagers flowed so well between the two library worlds—it was almost as if we were just different branches of the same library system.

JANA: That’s pretty incredible, I must say. Another great program was the "Books with Beat" program during Teen Read Week. I was excited when you asked if I could come and help out. I got to watch the boys and girls act silly and dance different dances from different eras. It was so inspired. How did you come up with that idea?

SHELLEY: Well, we had already done the drive-in in 2008. Then, the next year we took the Teen Read Week theme of Beyond Reality and created Star Trek "holodecks" throughout the school library. Led by our library student assistants portraying Starfleet officers (see Figure 4), the school’s students went to each of the holodecks and experienced different fantasy books complete with actors representing book characters. I don’t know if you remember how much help TPL gave to the creation and production of that week-long program. From helping to build the sets to being actors in the holodecks, we couldn’t have done it without you. So, it was natural we would want to include you in the next year’s program. We knew we wanted the students to be more interactive in the 2009 program—participants and not just observers. When we heard the theme was basically music, Shannon and I looked at each other and just thought, "Hey, let’s have a 1950s sock-hop!" So, we did. We decorated the outside of the school library to look like the entrance to a high school gym from 1955. The sock-hop experience included a video highlighting 20th-century youth music, costumes, a jukebox, and even Coke floats. All of it just seemed to flow from the initial idea as we tried to make a media center into a dance hall.

JANA: I think we all had some creative moments when we saw the ways the students responded to technology at that program. When TPL purchased a Wii and an Xbox 360 Kinect, I thought it would be interesting to bring the games into the school to see if the students would enjoy it. I believe it was during a time when the students who had finished testing could come to the library, wasn’t it?
SHELLEY: Yes, it was a huge part of our Teen Tech Week program that year. Even the school administrators started dancing.

JANA: That's right. It was so funny to see the guys having dance-offs with each other!

SHELLEY: It was funny, but it was also just fun. In our world of high-stakes testing, modern-day high school students don't have much fun. One aspect of our library philosophy is that the school library needs to be a place of enjoyment. It needs to be a hub of all sorts of learning and amusement in the school. I am constantly thinking how I can market the library. We could have the greatest resources available for our students, but if they don't want to be in the school library and they don't see us as a go-to destination, those resources won't help students. In a school of roughly 900 students, the library had over 40,000 student visits last year. Those visits can be attributed to several factors, but one of the main causes is the programming created and produced through the relationship we have with TPL.

JANA: After the tornado disaster in Tuscaloosa, storyteller Regina Ress contacted me and offered to visit and tell the students stories of survival and hope. I immediately accepted her kind offer and thought of PWBHS first, as I knew high school students would have a harder time recovering emotionally. The students were fantastic—very respectful and attentive. She was duly impressed with the youth who attended.

SHELLEY: I was so thankful for that program. Our students needed it. Few people have experienced their neighborhoods wiped off the map by an F4 tornado. Few people
could share surviving that level of tragedy. Ms. Ress’s stories of survival in New York City through the 9/11 attacks gave them that cathartic experience they needed. It couldn’t have happened without the public library connection.

JANA: While my job has changed, and now I work and consult with public library staff who work with youth, I do reflect back on the numerous conversations that we had about all the commonalities we shared, and the joys and frustrations we had in working with teens. It is so gratifying to know that there are librarians who care about the teens and want to bridge that gap between school and public libraries. I know you always promote the public library with your students and have gone so far as to make a mini-public library movie place at school.

SHELLEY: Yes, as a school librarian I know I can learn from the public library sector. What serves your patrons can often serve my students as well. Having seen the popularity of DVD circulation at TPL, I just wondered why we don’t do that. So, Shannon and I built an entertainment movie collection available to students. Again, it was just marketing the school library by first enticing the students with something fun. We have literally seen students move from checking out the latest Madea movie to reading The Color Purple.

JANA: I believe that from the onset, the initial welcoming reception I had from Judy Johnson and Shannon Bogart propelled me to reach out to other school librarians in both the Tuscaloosa city and county schools. A large majority of those women and men were very receptive to cooperating and collaborating with the public library, and great programs, such as storytelling, summer library promotional programs, Wii and Kinect games, author/illustrator visits, and special themed topical programs, were created and enjoyed by youth from Pre-K through high school.

SHELLEY: Again, I cannot overstress the power of collaboration and community. In the education world, the school library is a collaborative element in the school, yet we so often isolate ourselves from resources, people, and ideas outside of our school or school librarian groups.

JANA: And so many public youth staff never seem to grasp the idea that both school and public librarians share the same demographic. It is extremely important that school and public librarians work more closely together to promote literacy initiatives. I feel it is essential that public library staff reach out to school library staff and create a collaboration that will serve them well over the years, especially when the Common Core Standards become official in 2016. What I truly treasure from all of this is the friendships I have enjoyed with you, Shannon, and the other school librarians I worked with in Tuscaloosa, as well as in Florida, where I worked for many years as a youth librarian.

SHELLEY: Jana, you are right. With the Common Core, expectations for student abilities and knowledge will be set higher. Our youth need us to work together to provide them with the literary and informational help they will need to succeed. When we collaborate, we all win, we all feel supported, and our youth receive the best from us. I know I would not be the librarian I hope I am if not for the friendships, support, and lessons I have received through school library and public library collaboration. Ultimately, without this collaboration, I know my students would be the ones who didn’t receive the best they could, and really, they are what this is all about.

With increasing student-achievement expectations and decreasing finance and personnel both in schools and public libraries, it is more important than ever to connect and collaborate. Once cooperative communication with either a school librarian or public librarian has been made, word will spread and a larger connection will form. Once those connections have been formed, then youth will have the best possible chance to excel and thrive in today’s and tomorrow’s world.

Shelley Dorrill began her work in the Paul W. Bryant High School library in 2007 after a stint in the public library world. Having been mentored by phenomenal school librarians and public librarians, she believes the school library and public library play an integral and collaborative role in educating our children.

Jana Fine has worked in public libraries for over 30 years. She has been fortunate to work with a variety of ages and enjoys programming. Jana is passionate about school/public library collaboration and is very lucky to have been given opportunities to work with equally passionate school librarians.