

Baby, I Was Born This Way!

How Local Teens Helped a Library Deliver an LGBTQ Collection

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Introduction

While the organization We Need Diverse Books has increased the number of high-quality LGBTQ books being published by mainstream publishers, it hasn't gotten easier for teens to find them on library shelves. They often don't know the books exist and aren't comfortable asking for assistance from library staff. In order to bridge this gap, librarians working with teens need to be more proactive in designing collections and spaces that improve access to LGBTQ resources.

In this article, we outline how Oregon City Public Library worked with a local group of LGBTQ teens to develop a Teen LGBTQ collection. By sharing our experiences and the resources we utilized, we hope to provide other libraries with a process they can use to meet



the unique needs of teens in their communities. While a dedicated LGBTQ collection was the best choice for us, something different might work better for you.

A note about terminology: For the sake of brevity, we use the word “teen” to describe LGBTQ youth throughout this article.



Our Teen LGBTQ section, adorned with unicorns for the article photoshoot, fills two shelves in the center of the library's Teen Area.



Oregon City Public Library

Oregon City Public Library serves a city of just over 37,000 residents as well as approximately 23,000 residents in the unincorporated area of Clackamas County. Our community is predominantly (90 percent) white and middle-class, with a median income of almost \$70,000 and just under 10 percent living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Oregon City is located, both geographically and culturally, on the boundary between the liberal, urban landscape of Portland and the conservative, rural communities of the Willamette Valley. While many teens come from families who embrace their gender identities and sexuality, this is not the case for everyone.

Regardless of their family's attitude towards LGBTQ individuals, all teens in Oregon City are exposed to both positive and negative views of LGBTQ individuals from members of the community. As an example of negative views, three of our four challenges to library materials and displays in FY2018–19 were parental objections to LGBTQ resources offered by the library. Two challenges objected to the Pride Month book display in Adult Fiction and one objected to the inclusion of books with LGBTQ content in the Children's Room.

LGBTQ Book Club

Oregon City Public Library first became involved with *The Living Room: A Safe Haven for GLBTQQ Youth* (TLR) in Clackamas County in 2015. TLR offers a weekly drop-in program for teens aged 14 to 20 every Wednesday evening at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation building across the street from the library. They also host a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) summit for all Clackamas County schools, an annual Alternative Prom, and other activities for LGBTQ youth throughout the county.

Library staff launched an LGBTQ book club in partnership with TLR in 2017. TLR youth selected *More Happy Than Not* by Adam Silvera for the first meeting. The library provided copies of the book to ten TLR members, but only two very enthusiastic teens attended the discussion. TLR's program coordinator reported that not everyone who wanted to read the book was available on the date of the book club, and some of the teens just wanted to read the book without participating in the discussion.

After we completed our discussion, the book club attendees—who included our Youth Services Librarian and TLR's Program Coordinator—discussed whether to schedule another book club meeting in the future. Teens reported that the discussion, while enjoyable, was less important than getting to read more LGBTQ fiction.

What Else Could We Try?

Over the next year, the library and TLR staff met several times to discuss alternative ways to connect teens with books that reflected their lives.

Simply providing a link to all LGBTQ YA fiction in the online catalog wasn't feasible, since there was no single subject heading being used to identify all LGBTQ fiction. Books were listed under a variety of headings—homosexuality, bisexuality, gay teenagers, lesbians, transgender people, etc.—that weren't always applied consistently.

Since #weneeddiversebooks and #ownvoices had begun to reshape the publishing industry by 2017, library staff doing materials selection anticipated an increase in high-quality LGBTQ YA books. Any book list the library created would become outdated almost instantly and there was no easy way to share the frequent updates with TLR youth.



Finally, we discussed the option of creating a Little Free Library. These books would be stored in the TLR meeting space for easy access. Library staff would maintain an Amazon wish list, which donors could use to purchase copies of books for the group. The Little Free Library was deemed unworkable—especially since the logistics of setting up the donation process would have been time-consuming and difficult to promote.

Solution: Create A Collection

By the time we'd ruled out the Little Free Library option, however, the library had hired a Youth Services Library Assistant who was passionate about working with teens. Our Library Foundation, which had met its commitments for the recently completed building renovation, indicated that they would be willing to accept funding proposals for additional library projects—including seed money to create a new LGBTQ collection.

Library staff brought their final proposal to TLR and asked what they thought of us creating a separate LGBTQ collection in our Teen Area. After all, we were right across the street from TLR's weekly meeting site and all TLR attendees were eligible to sign up for their own library card as long as they had a school ID. The response was a resounding "YES!"

What Do Teens Want?

The goal of any library is to be relevant to the community it serves and developing our LGBTQ collection was no different. In order for us to reach our goal, we needed to have meaningful conversations with teens in the community who identified as LGBTQ. TLR was instrumental in this conversation and the development of our collection.

When asked what type of books they'd like to see in the collection, TLR responded with enthusiasm! Some requests were broad, reflecting the teens' eagerness to read anything and everything LGBTQ. Others were very specific, such as space opera lesbian romance books. At the core of their requests was the desire to have easy access to books featuring teens that represented their community. That led nicely into our second question: how did they envision the collection within the teen section of our library?

We were moved by the teens' thoughtful approach to this question. Without prompting, they considered not just their own wishes but the needs of youth who may not have a safe space, be out of the closet, or be comfortable browsing a special collection in a public place. Together we determined that for easy access we would create a custom spine label for easy identification and a dedicated space for convenient browsing.

Naturally, it was of utmost importance that we utilize the majestic rainbow unicorn as our LGBTQ collection label. Keeping in mind the teens who may not be comfortable with those options, we then decided to add duplicate copies of each book interfiled in fiction, graphic novels, or manga without the rainbow unicorn sticker. Once the collection was complete, we created a small flyer letting browsers know there were duplicate copies elsewhere.

Finding the Books

Looking for LGBTQ YA books in 2019 should be easy! It's not. While there has been an increase of LGBTQ YA publications in recent years, the numbers are still very low. In 2018, mainstream publishers published 108 LGBTQ YA books. This is a significant increase from statistics gathered for years 2003–13 (collectively), which concluded that roughly 15 titles were published per year (Lo, 2013; Lo, 2019).



Knowing the challenges of finding LGBTQ books, we began by looking at lists and reviews from sources such as The Stonewall Awards, LAMBDA, *School Library Journal*, and Rainbow Book List. These reviews and booklists regularly featured books from mainstream publishers.

We would need to dig deep to find lesser-known but equally important titles for our collection. With many sources mostly highlighting the Big Five publishers, we turned to lists and reviews from alternative sources such as Bookriot, Goodreads, and occasionally Amazon.

Another challenge we encountered was books described as LGBTQ literature that did not feature a primary LGBTQ character. While it's okay to include some of these books in the collection, our goal was to try and feature books with LGBTQ primary characters.

Kirkus Reviews does a good job of highlighting the character diversity, which is helpful in collection development.

None of these challenges address the lack of nonfiction books available for teens regarding LGBTQ issues or biographies. Our nonfiction section is small but it does include titles that celebrate, advocate, inform, and guide young people who are facing a myriad of emotions as they traverse their own journey.

Launch Party

As with any great achievement, one must celebrate! TLR expressed interest in having a party to unveil our new collection to the community. We invited members of their group, the Library Foundation, and library staff to attend on an evening in late February.

One can never have too many rainbow items. Therefore, we hid the books on the shelf behind a large rainbow flag and set up a photo booth with a spectacular rainbow backdrop. We included prize giveaways such as LGBTQ paperback books, bookmarks, buttons, candy, and the most exquisite rainbow unicorn balloon.

This event gave teens from TLR first dibs on the collection. While looking through the materials we overheard teens recommending books that they enjoyed and discussing new discoveries with each other. The event also provided the opportunity to express our gratitude for TLR's involvement and the \$1,200 seed money donated from the Library Foundation. The small, intimate celebration was a success!

Creating this collection would not have been possible without support at every level: feedback from the teens at TLR, a staff member who was passionate and knowledgeable about developing the collection, enthusiastic encouragement from library management, and



The exquisite rainbow unicorn balloon poses by the window during the Teen LGBTQ collection launch party.




funding from our Library Foundation. If any one of these stakeholders hadn't been invested, we might have encountered significant roadblocks or a less successful result.

Circulation Statistics

Between February 28th and October 20th, 2019, our 192 Teen LGBTQ titles circulated 674 times for an average of four checkouts per item. (This does not include titles interfiled in general fiction, graphic novels, and manga.) 6 percent of the items were not checked out at all, 15.5 percent of the items were checked out once, and 78.5 percent of the items were checked out 2 times or more during this time period.

Conclusion

We know that there are more diverse books being published than ever before, but connecting teens to these books can still be a challenge for many libraries. Adding more LGBTQ books and making them easier for teens to find has helped Oregon City Public Library bridge this gap. We hope our story has helped you identify the questions you need to ask in order to connect teens with LGBTQ literature in your own libraries and communities. 

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