

Case Study 7: The Man Who Shouldn't Have Been Banned

SCENARIO:

This incident happened at a large urban library. A man was making a disturbance in a restroom in the library, and he was warned several times before the security guard asked him to leave and he was banned from the library for several months to a year. (I don't remember.)

The reason why I paid attention to this incident report is that I knew this man from working at another branch. He was a frequent visitor at a suburban branch and the public service staff would assist him on the computer and try to find information for him. He appeared to have a mental illness based on his behavior. He stopped coming to this branch, but I would occasionally see him in the East Lansing/Lansing area and stop and talk to him to see how he was doing. That is why I was surprised when I saw that he had been banned from the library system. He never displayed behavior that would have led to banning and I've always wondered that if he had been approached in a different way the outcome would have been different, and he would not have been cut off from library services.

RESPONSE:

This is a good case study to end on as it is a good reminder of why this training is important. The key statement to focus in on above is "I've always wondered that if he had been approached in a different way the outcome would have been different." I hope this training prods you to ask this question any time you are involved in what seems to be a challenging or difficult patron encounter.

The writer of the scenario said this patron "appeared to have a mental illness." Is it your job to know what that mental disorder might be? Only if it helps you understand your engagement with him better. He obviously was coherent enough cognitively to receive assistance on a computer task and all indications led to the fact that he was not in the business of disturbing other patrons or staff. The point here is that though this training emphasizes that knowledge is power when it comes to identifying and understanding mental disorders, the bottom line is serving the patron to the best of your ability. If that means considering (or even asking about) a particular diagnosis, then so be it, but that doesn't have to happen necessarily to reach that goal.

I, like the scenario writer, am left to wonder what happened between the time he was getting assistance on the computer and exhibiting behavior that elicited a ban from the library system. What does "having been approached in a different way" look like? Details are scant here, but a few questions beg to be asked:

- Did someone take the time to get to know him beyond seeing him as a "man with odd behavior at the computer station"? What would that engagement look like? Would it mean anything different than an encounter with a man or woman with "not-so-odd behavior"? What stereotypes and/or biases might have come into play that could have impacted the outcome here?

- Did someone miss vital cues that the patron was approaching a mental health crisis? Identifying signs like agitation, erratic energy, or more withdrawal could have led to de-escalation of a confrontation and maybe the individual would not have been banned?
- If a mental disorder became apparent or suspected, what was the missing step that led to his banishment? How could the reference librarians or branch managers come together to work to understand the patron before they judged him on his behavior?
- Did this library system embrace a trauma-informed approach to its services? If not, would that have produced a different outcome? If so, what about the understanding and implementation of that approach in the system “failed” the patron in this case? What trainings would have helped staff members to engage in a way that kept him at the disposal of library services?
- Whose responsibility is this ultimately? The branch manager? Security personnel? Reference librarians? Pages?

Lots of details are left out of the scenario to answer these questions with any certainty, but they are good to ask regardless. I do feel confident in answering the last question. It is the responsibility of ALL staff members to understand and initiate a trauma-informed, compassionate approach to patrons, whether we see those encounters as related to a mental health crisis or not. Librarians are called to be “gatekeepers,” in the most productive sense of the term—to keep the gates open to all consumers who they are called to serve.