

# Library Director Addresses Rotary Club

By Sarah Wetzel For the Plain Talk, May 19, 2023

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Edith B. Siegrist Library Director Daniel Burniston addressed the Vermillion Rotary Club for their April 26 meeting in celebration of National Library Week.

One part of National Library Week highlighted by Burniston was the Right to Read day, April 24.

“The Right to Read day is all about fighting back against censorship and protecting and defending your rights to read,” he said. “About a year ago the Unite Against Book Bans campaign was launched which was an initiative to empower readers everywhere to kind of stand together and fight against censorship.”

According to the American Library Association (ALA), attempted book bans have been on the rise in recent years.

In 2022 the ALA recorded 1,269 attempted bans, the highest number since the ALA began compiling data about censorship more than 20 years ago. This number is also nearly double that of the previous year, 729.

Burniston also pointed out that the actual number of book bans is likely higher since these numbers are only those that are reported to the ALA.



Edith B. Siegrist Library Director Daniel Burniston addresses the Vermillion Rotary Club for their April 26 meeting in celebration of National Library Week. Courtesy Of Vermillion Rotary Club

“The ALA data says that 2571 unique titles were targeted for censorship, a 32% increase over the 2021 year,” he said. “I think school and classroom libraries are bearing the brunt of a lot of these challenges right now with about 58 percent of them but 41 of those challenges were also related to public libraries.”

So why are the numbers so high?

Burniston said most libraries have processes in place to investigate concerns or claims that are brought up in regards to reconsideration of a book in a library's collection, though libraries tend to actively resist efforts to remove or ban books.

The way these claims are brought up is changing, he said, according to the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom.

"We're not seeing cases of individual parents filing what we consider authentic requests that there's a book they checked out and they've discovered something in it that's particularly concerning," Burniston said. "Overwhelmingly a lot of these requests are coming from groups and individuals at public meetings who are submitting long lists of multiple books now sourced from organized censorship groups who are looking to get books on a particular theme, topic subject talk about a particular group or idea completely removed, bans or restricted in libraries."

According to Burniston, 90% of the overall books challenged were part of attempts to censor multiple lists and 40% were a part of a list of over 100 books.

"Often these can sometimes be seen as ways of circumventing those policies and procedures that most libraries already have in place to review those materials and just provide huge lists of books that they just want to be off the shelf and not available to anyone," he said.

Burniston shared several quotes from prominent individuals who have spoken out against this.

"Our democracy is built on access to books and learning from a wide range of writers and perspectives," said Emily Paulsen, president of the American Society of Journalism and Authors. "Banning books from libraries imperils our freedom of speech, freedom of press and attacks on our democracy"

Chief Executive Officer of the Authors Guild and the Author's Guild Foundation Mary Rasenberger also has spoken up.

"Suppressing books because of their message is anti-democratic, harmful and a dangerous step toward autocracy," Rasenberger said. "We urge these challenging books in schools and libraries to consider the first amendment ramifications and slippery slope they are heading down by allowing

any resident to deny others' children access to books they find distasteful."

Fortunately, he said, there are no books removed from the Vermillion Public Library.

"Most book bans happen on a local level and that's where it's really important when community members get up to express concerns that also those public officials hear from the community members on the other side of that story who are appreciative of the books in collection and their access to them," Burniston said. "Often a small group of people will get up at a public meeting and express their concerns and the fact that they want a book removed but often, whether it's just the timing, nerves, availability of the information or knowledge about the meeting, there's no one there to speak on the other side of it."

This is why, he said, it is important for community members to pay attention to topics on the agendas of upcoming public meetings so if something like this comes up they can make their feelings clear.

"Email your legislators, call your legislators because it's valuable for them to hear both sides of the story," Burniston said. "If you check on the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom website, they often have information on upcoming state and federal legislation that's of concern and list ways you can contact your legislators and let them know about your concerns and the importance of things like the freedom to read."

More information about book bans can be found on the American Library Association website including a list of the topmost challenged books of the previous year.

As far as the collection at the Edith B. Siegrist, community members have no shortage of material to choose from, both physical and digital.

The physical collection includes around 54,000 items, 3,600 DVDs, 2,700 audio books and about 109 magazine subscriptions, according to Burniston, all available to be checked out on a whole variety of topics and formats.

"Increasingly, digital collections are becoming popular and I know at times in the past there were a lot of concerns that came up that the library is going to die or go away," he said. "We see these services like Amazon's Kindle and others, are they

going to overtake libraries and make them irrelevant? I would say absolutely not. If anything, I would say they complement the services we provide.”

The digital collection, Burniston said, caters both to those who enjoy having a physical book to read at home in the evening or a traveler looking to lighten their load by reading or listening to books off their phone.

“In addition to those physical items we talked about a library provides access to almost 75,000 ebooks that can be checked out,” he said. “In addition to that around 14,000 audiobooks if you’re traveling, working in the yard, cleaning and you want to listen to something, you can download it onto a phone, tablet or computer and listen to them in the background. On top of this we have digital magazines, comics, graphic novels, primary available through that Overdrive App.”

Burniston said any users who are nervous about using the app can stop by the library for help.

Digital library resources also include things like craft workshops, techniques, painting, crochet, specific projects, or how to learn to do something, and digital archives of our local newspaper.

Digital resources also include music, movie and documentary streaming services, online classes and electronic databases through the state library.

Currently, he said, the Vermillion Library has about 4,045 active library cards including 771 children and about 400 USD students, though the actual number of those using the library is probably substantially higher.

“This number can be quite deceiving in the way that you may need a library card to come into the library, check something out and take it from the building,” Burniston said. “But there’s more community members who come in to participate in programs or after school activity, stop by, read the newspaper, use a book in the library, come in to use a meeting room, or learn about something and you don’t even have to have a library card to do any of those things, you can come and just join in.”

Burniston shared the 2022 annual report statistics and highlights showing library in-person visits at 59,000, a 50% increase over 2021.

Circulation was up by 20% with over 74,000 items checked out by all ages.

The overall collection increased by 18% and the library provided over 8500 in-house computer sessions plus almost 20,500 wireless sessions to patrons with their own devices.

Last year saw almost 8,000 participants in the 514 library programs.

“We were excited to see how quickly the numbers have gone up since we emerged from some of the pandemic restrictions of the previous years,” he said. “We’re excited to see so many people participating in all the things we had to offer.”

Burniston encouraged the community to look forward to future programming including the summer reading program from June 5 to July 28 with registration open now.

“We’re thrilled we have such a supportive community,” he said. “I’m overwhelmed sometimes for how much support our library gets.”

Not only are there many positive comments on the library’s Facebook activity but other groups like the Vermillion Public Library Foundation and Friends of the Public Library have given quite a bit of financial support as well.

Support from these groups has resulted in new shelving, carpet tiles, a technology cabinet, other supplies and permanent story walk parks posts that will be going up in Prentis Park as part of the Prentis Centennial Celebration.

The best way to keep up with what’s going on at the library is through the website at [Vermillionpubliclibrary.org](http://Vermillionpubliclibrary.org) as well as the library’s Facebook page.

The library’s monthly newsletter can also be found online.