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Keep Library Workers Safe

My wife was killed at the library where she worked. We can take measures to prevent acts of violence in our libraries

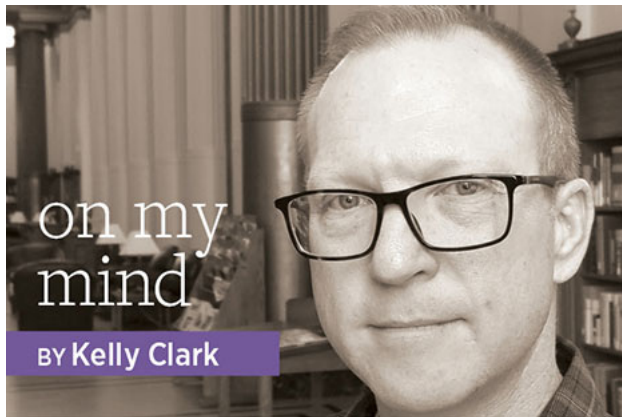
By [Kelly Clark](https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/authors/kelly-clark/) | April 23, 2019

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On the evening of December 11, 2018, my wife, Amber Fawn Clark, supervisor of the North Natomas branch of

Sacramento (Calif.) Public Library (SPL), was fatally shot multiple times in the head while sitting in her car getting ready to drive home. Her alleged killer: [a man she had banned from the library two months earlier](https://sacramento.cbslocal.com/2018/12/14/ronald-seay-appears-court/) for behaving aggressively toward staff and customers.

In the wake of Amber's murder, I have come to seriously reassess my own role as a public library employee. This month's release of Emilio Estevez's film *The Public* has led me to share my story—and Amber's—with others in the profession.

Amber was a fierce advocate for literacy and the underserved. Her entire professional life, she gave of herself for the betterment of her community—first as a teacher, then as a librarian. She had two bachelor's degrees and two master's degrees, demonstrative of her love for lifelong learning. In less than three years at SPL, she rose from teen librarian to branch supervisor. She spearheaded the AccessABILITY program, which works to add inclusive, dedicated services for people with disabilities at the library.

Knowing that I wanted a job where I could help my community in a meaningful way, Amber encouraged me to pursue an MLIS after I finished a lengthy career in the US Air Force. While getting that degree, I worked at a public library, where I found it especially rewarding to help library customers who were negatively affected by the digital divide—those without home access

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1h The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library at Ohio State University has acquired a rare collection of Oliver "Ollie" Harrington (1912–1995). Arriving from Germany, Harrington's collection includes original published cartoons, along with roughs, sketchbooks, and other archival materials. Inspired by and later involved with the Harlem Renaissance, Harrington published cartoons in a number of Black and leftist newspapers, including the *Amsterdam News* and the *Chicago Defender*. Best known for his series *Bootsie*, Harrington continued with his work after leaving the US due to the scrutiny he was under by the House Un-American Activities Committee in the early 1950s.

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to broadband internet and those without the skills needed in a digital society. During that time I observed firsthand the information needs of many patrons, including Afghan refugees, low-income patrons, and people experiencing homelessness.

Before my wife's death, I had eagerly anticipated seeing *The Public*. The film appears to exemplify a tenet the library profession holds dear: that libraries are one of the few remaining places where underserved and marginalized populations are welcome.

The Public features a group of people experiencing homelessness who barricade themselves inside a library to seek refuge from a severe winter storm. Beginning as a nonviolent sit-in, the event transforms into a standoff with riot police. The trailer suggests that the film advocates for these individuals experiencing homelessness and highlights the lack of appropriate services available to them.

While I support the provision of library services to all, including the marginalized and unsheltered, the reality is that some public library patrons grapple with mental health issues, behavioral issues, and substance-abuse problems that at times can result in threats to the well-being of staff and other patrons.

Amber and I observed this phenomenon firsthand. We encountered customers who shouted at the top of their lungs, making violent threats to other patrons and employees before being escorted from the library by unarmed, minimally trained security staff. I've had to confront an inebriated patron who had been drinking on library property. I've also had to ask my supervisors to prevent an 18-year-old volunteer from being inappropriately physical with young girls.

“Many public library staffers are reluctant to speak openly about their fears. If they do, their concerns may be dismissed as intolerant, exaggerated, or cost-prohibitive to address.”

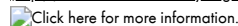
For her part, my wife once had to confront a patron who was masturbating to pornography. On another occasion, she interrupted a couple having sex in a library restroom in what appeared to be an exchange for narcotics. Just a month before she was killed, she was accosted by a group of teens who had been asked to control their loud and vulgar language; one of them verbally threatened her with physical harm.

Librarians at branches across the country have confided similar experiences and fears to me. Unfortunately, many public library staffers are reluctant to speak openly about their fears. If they do, their concerns may be dismissed as intolerant, exaggerated, or cost-prohibitive to address.

My wife's murder is far from the only recent violent incident at a public library:

- [A teen was convicted of murdering two librarians](https://www.krqe.com/news/new-mexico/sentencing-hearing-to-begin-for-teen-in-clovis-library-shooting/1772666633) (<https://www.krqe.com/news/new-mexico/sentencing-hearing-to-begin-for-teen-in-clovis-library-shooting/1772666633>) and injuring four others at a library in Clovis, New Mexico, on August 28, 2017.
- A man diagnosed with schizophrenia [stabbed another library customer to death](https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/04/11/alleged-killer-woman-inside-winchester-library-diagnosed-with-schizophrenia-lawyer-says/kbXkoWX5LSZtca25Fm7U3H/story.html) (<https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/04/11/alleged-killer-woman-inside-winchester-library-diagnosed-with-schizophrenia-lawyer-says/kbXkoWX5LSZtca25Fm7U3H/story.html>) at a public library in Winchester, Massachusetts, on February 24, 2018.
- A library [customer made hostile threats](https://wtkr.com/2018/08/03/armed-security-guard-placed-at-pretlow-library-after-threat/) (<https://wtkr.com/2018/08/03/armed-security-guard-placed-at-pretlow-library-after-threat/>) at a library in Norfolk, Virginia, in July 2018, prompting an investigation and the addition of armed security.

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- In Phoenix earlier this year, a fight occurred between security guards and an [armed man in the public library's elevator](https://www.abc15.com/news/crime/pd-armed-man-fights-with-security-at-phoenix-library) (<https://www.abc15.com/news/crime/pd-armed-man-fights-with-security-at-phoenix-library>).
- And on January 20, 2019, the [director of the Fort Myers Beach \(Fla.\) Library](https://www.nbc-2.com/story/39821525/director-of-fort-myers-beach-public-library-stabbed-to-death) (<https://www.nbc-2.com/story/39821525/director-of-fort-myers-beach-public-library-stabbed-to-death>) was stabbed to death.

That's six incidents or threats of violence—including five murders—in 17 months.

This type of dangerous behavior can no longer be tolerated in libraries. This issue requires serious data collection, investigation, and statistical analysis by law enforcement, as well as professional organizations like the American Library Association (ALA). It requires recommendations that go beyond what ALA's [Resolution on Gun Violence Affecting Libraries, Library Workers, and Library Patrons](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/statementspols/ifresolutions/gunviolence) (<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/statementspols/ifresolutions/gunviolence>) states, in which librarians are asked to engage their communities to “defuse and deescalate a culture of violence based on hatred, discrimination, and bigotry.” My hope is that such new findings can guide more pragmatic recommendations to curb violent occurrences.

Library directors must take a more serious look at security measures and consult experts in current workplace violence—prevention methodologies. Experts in this field often recommend noting specific behavioral clues and elevating them to authorities for risk assessment. While I don't think any of us wants our libraries to become heavily defended, foreboding places, as regrettable as it sounds, we must ask whether it is time to add metal detectors, X-ray machines, monitored video feeds, or armed guards. Our safety should not hinge on how a library staff member under duress [phrases a reply or request to a library patron](https://www.statelibraryofiowa.org/ld/c-d/continuing-ed/conted-ials/archives-webinar/serving-mentally-ill) (<https://www.statelibraryofiowa.org/ld/c-d/continuing-ed/conted-ials/archives-webinar/serving-mentally-ill>), who is causing a disturbance.

Library employees can take action as well. The California Nurses Association union, for instance, has noted similar threats and [lobbied for legislation](https://medium.com/@NNUBonnie/on-april-1-california-healthcare-employers-with-no-workplace-violence-prevention-plan-will-be-270555cac742) (<https://medium.com/@NNUBonnie/on-april-1-california-healthcare-employers-with-no-workplace-violence-prevention-plan-will-be-270555cac742>) that would require their employers to meet more stringent security measures in [health care workplaces](https://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/workplace-violence-prevention-in-healthcare.html) (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/workplace-violence-prevention-in-healthcare.html>). Perhaps such legislation should expand to library professionals and other public sector employees.

Amber's interactions with aggressive customers had led her to doubt how effective she was at carrying out her mission: promoting literacy in public libraries. By constantly having to respond to disruptive outbursts and potentially violent visitors, she had begun to feel that that mission had become secondary.

Two weeks before she was killed, Amber had expressed to me her fear of being assaulted or shot at work. I urged her to quit and seek employment at an academic library, in a nonpublic-facing library management role, or something different. But she was reluctant to quit her position or the profession she loved without lining up other employment.

The man charged in Amber's murder was a former student at the University of Missouri—St. Louis, where he took part in a student work program. According to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, his erratic and aggressive behavior [apparently led to his firing from the program](https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/man-charged-with-killing-librarian-in-california-was-fired-from/article_d4e6dd4a-bc28-5823-b1c6-04981aeed24d.html) (https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/man-charged-with-killing-librarian-in-california-was-fired-from/article_d4e6dd4a-bc28-5823-b1c6-04981aeed24d.html), and he was eventually escorted from campus by police officers following complaints. The *Post-Dispatch* reports that he later [threatened library workers at Ferguson \(Mo.\) Municipal Public Library and Brentwood \(Mo.\) Public Library](https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/suspect-in-california-librarian-s-murder-had-frightened-library-workers/article_89e6582e-51a3-5fa0-9a41-2d5d7f92e26d.html) (https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/suspect-in-california-librarian-s-murder-had-frightened-library-workers/article_89e6582e-51a3-5fa0-9a41-2d5d7f92e26d.html) just months before he allegedly shot Amber.

I have lost the person most dear to me. No library staff members should have to fear for their lives or leave the profession to protect their safety. If you are a member of the LIS community and your experiences have led you to question your safety, make your voices heard. Tell the union that represents you. If you're not represented, demand that your leadership increase security and dedicate social services staff to your library. Do this in spite of those who would dismiss your concerns—and ensure that Amber and other victims did not die in vain. ■

KELLY CLARK is a library technical assistant with the California State Library's Technical Services Section. For those who would like to [donate to Amber Clark's legacy](http://www.sacregcf.org/wooton-clark) (<http://www.sacregcf.org/wooton-clark>), a scholarship fund has been established through the Sacramento Region Community Foundation.

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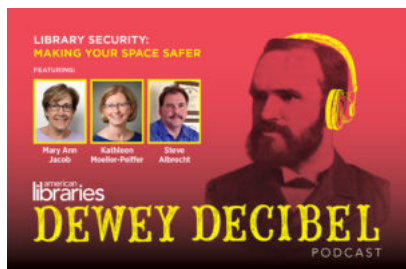


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Episode Two features Mary Ann Jacob, Kathleen Moeller-Peiffer, and Steve

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Michael P. Bartolic • a month ago

Dear Kelly,

Thank you so much for writing this op-ed. It's cogent, thoughtful, and honest. Considering the intensity of the emotional circumstances, it was also a brave act to express yourself by exposing your personal loss to a broad audience, even if the audience members are your peers.

I'm surprised your op-ed piece has so far generated no comments. I hope that changes soon, because the topic demands to be discussed widely and deeply by the LIS community. I won't attempt to say why others have not yet responded, nor will I hazard speculation as to what others may say. For myself, nearly 50 years of library service, a lifetime of library use, my obligation to the mentorship of the faculty at Cal I was gifted while earning an MLIS, and my filial duty to honor the similar professional path of both my mother and my mother-in-law, compel me to comment.

I've said you speak the truth, and some of the truth you speak is hard to hear. For example, just as teachers learn all children are not little angels, and public defenders discover not all accused of crime are innocent, those on the front lines

[see more](#)

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Kelly Clark → Michael P. Bartolic • 21 days ago

Mike,

You are very welcome, and I appreciate your support regarding this crucial stance. As a member of this community, I am acutely aware that speaking up might have the effect of rendering me persona non grata. However, that is a risk I am willing to take in light of the most emotionally challenging life experience I have ever faced.

I too am somewhat surprised that this piece has not generated more open discussion on this topic. However, as I alluded, I am fully aware that the LIS profession's culture may prevent those with real concerns from making their voices heard, at least publicly. Judging by the shares and likes for this piece on social media, I suspect conversations related to this piece are occurring offline in un-recorded environments, and that's okay, as long as the discussion is taking place.

Amber had a disdain for absolutist thinking as do I, for absolutist positions are inflexible and can lead to stalls in progress despite their best intentions FOR making progress. Real progress is often slow and made in small strides vs. giant leaps rooted in a desire for "Utopia Now!" I support an "all of the above" approach to the issue of library safety and security that involves advocating for tackling mental healthcare for the undiagnosed, untreated and unsupported. I support gun control measures that can take a pragmatic approach to keeping guns out of the hands of the violently mentally ill. But I also feel that libraries as an institution have greater flexibility over active self-determination regarding safety and security vs. passively hollering for social change via legislation. Real solutions indeed.

I concur, the reality of the inherent problems public libraries face cannot be denied. It is a dereliction of duty to continue that denial and is the reason for my listing the other tragic violence that has taken place in libraries very recently. My hope is that getting this discussion out in the open will prompt library staff and the public to demand better.

Thank you once again for taking the time to weigh in on this very important issue; it means the world to me and honors my wife.

Sincerely,

Kelly Clark

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



John Frank · a month ago

As Senior Librarian of the Will & Ariel Durant Branch of the Los Angeles Public Library I have been at ground zero for most of the security issues the op-ed discusses. As information professionals our greatest contribution may be sharing knowledge with our colleagues. In my 6 years at this branch I have found that a proactive approach works better than a reactive one. The solution is better training of staff and better allocation of security related resources. Front line library workers are in a new and more challenging reality. If we are to maintain a compassionate and sustainable institution we must pool our ideas and stand together as a profession.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



agirl · a month ago

My heart breaks for this man and his family, and for others who have needlessly been victims of violence at libraries or are family members of victims. I have also witnessed and been a victim of violence at my library. Library administrations know exactly what they are doing when they neglect security and safety and put their staff in danger. It is horrific and unforgivable.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



tpjil · a month ago

In addition to the remedies suggested by Mr. Clark, hopefully Ronald Seay, the murderer of Amber Fawn Clark is found guilty and quickly given a harsh sentence including the possibility of a death sentence. Let his sentence serve as an example of deterrence to others who may think violence in libraries is acceptable .

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Esther Whatley · a month ago

Kelly, my heart breaks for you and the pain of your loss. I work at the Ft. Myers Beach library, where our beloved Director was murdered on January 20 this year, as mentioned in your post. The killer was immediately apprehended thanks to a group of people driving by who saw him leave the library with the bloody knife and led the police directly to him. The killer was known to all of us as he was one of the homeless who spend most of their day, everyday, at our library. We've had minor issues with some of them, resulting in them being trespassed for varying periods of time. Since Dr. H's murder we look at everyone who enters our facility with a critical eye. We no longer feel safe. One staffer resigned. Another has reduced her hours so her young daughter won't have to attend the after school program at the library. We're working with our local law enforcement to upgrade our security and increase awareness. Thank you for your post that will also increase awareness of the dangers everyone faces in any public place. All the best to you as you heal. May you find peace and comfort.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Kelly Clark → Esther Whatley · a month ago

Esther, I was crushed when I read of your beloved Director's murder. Not only was it during a raw time for me relative to my wife's murder, but he was murdered on the very day we held a Celebration of Life for Amber at the Central Branch of Sacramento Public Library. I knew I had wanted to write an op-ed shortly after Amber's murder, but Dr. H's murder really gave me the added focus needed to demonstrate that the threats, the very real threats to library staff are not isolated incidents and cannot be remedied by compassion and passive aggressive deescalation techniques alone. I strongly believe that until the fallout of 50 years of de-institutionalization can be adequately solved, libraries must take active measures to protect staff and customers rather than passively waiting for the glacial pace of legislative change.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



opalglow → Kelly Clark • 24 days ago

I strongly believe that until the fallout of 50 years of de-institutionalization can be adequately solved, libraries must take active measures to protect staff and customers rather than passively waiting for the glacial pace of legislative change.

We have problems not easily solved. As a library advocate I hear every day of people who won't take their families to certain libraries because they are fearful. Too often library boards brush off legitimate staff concerns about safety.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Stephanie • a month ago

Kelly, I'm so sorry for your loss. I started at that library system at the same time as Amber and I have nothing but positive memories of her. She really stood out as a deeply caring person. I also had similar experiences to what you describe working at libraries in that system, and have since worked at a few different public libraries in other cities and, although none were quite as consistently violent and traumatic as the libraries in Sacramento, where my library called the police at least twice a week, there is still a disconnect between creating a safe work environment for staff and providing fair access to library services for all. I'm not sure if city officials and administrators understand that having public employees enforce policies to people who are traumatized and unstable can put those library workers in danger, because despite all of our de-escalation trainings, you can never control exactly how someone else will react to a simple request like lowering the volume on a computer or wearing shoes inside the library. I'm not sure where the answers lie, but I'm grateful to you for using your voice to get this conversation out in the open and call attention to a problem that I think will only escalate without action. If no action is taken, I can only see qualified, passionate staff moving on to different professions and then I don't know where the future of the public libraries that we care so much about will lie.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Kelly Clark → Stephanie • 24 days ago

Stephanie, I'm so glad you had the chance to meet Amber; she was an amazing human being and we have all lost so much through this tragedy. I appreciate your courage to participate in the discussion and share your thoughts and experiences here. I concur that attempting to use techniques designed for rational people on the irrational is a recipe for disaster. This is certainly a difficult conundrum, but to deny there is anything wrong or that nothing can be done is immoral and derelict. There are multiple avenues of failure in these tragedies, but we cannot allow ourselves to believe that there is only one cause or solution; it involves a multi-pronged, holistic approach. For example, continuing to advocate for effective gun control, care for the mentally ill AND active measures in libraries in other public spaces to fortify security. I realize those are broad and not easy to remedy, but I truly feel that libraries have greater control over their own safety than trying to wait on societal change external to the walls of the library.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Niamh • 20 days ago

Thank you for writing this brave article. Amber's death was a tragedy and my heart hurts for you.

Watching the way this discussion didn't play out at School Library Journal was a perfect example of the way the library community is failing to grapple with this issue. Shortly after Amber's murder, a post was made on SLJ's Teen Librarian Toolbox blog, saying, in short, that this was a horrible thing to have happen, but that now was not the time to discuss dangerous patrons in libraries. Several readers commented saying that, no, now was exactly the time to have that discussion. Their comments were quickly deleted by the site moderators, and shortly afterwards, the entire post was removed.

Leading voices in the library community clearly either don't want to address this issue, or are afraid to address it. But it's vital that we take steps to protect our staff and our patrons. Thank G-d, no one in my library has ever been killed. But just a few months ago, one of our staff members had his nose broken when he was punched in the face by a patron after asking her to pack up her things because the library was closing in a few minutes. He was calm and polite and did nothing to provoke her, but that wasn't enough to keep him from being injured. The fact is that there are library users who are violent, unstable, and a genuine threat to people's safety.

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I don't know what the best solutions are, but I hope library workers around the world can begin an open and honest discussion.

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