

Bob Dignan: Hello and welcome to the Illinois Professional. A campaign created by Illinois Human Resources to showcase the diverse ways that employees carry out and support the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign mission. I probably don't need to inform you that our Library here at Illinois is world-renowned; typically heralded for its expert faculty and staff and the vast and diverse collections. But, there's another vital component to the library system: the facilities to house all those people and all of those materials.

I'm Bob Dignan and in this episode, we'll get to know someone who knows a lot about library facilities, as we speak with Lesli Lundquist, the Facilities Operations Coordinator at Library Facilities. Lesli was awarded the 2020 Chancellor's Distinguished Staff Award. The award is designed to annually recognize civil service staff employees for their exceptional accomplishments and service to the university. Through this program, outstanding performance is encouraged in all civil service staff employees as they strive to win this prestigious award. Lesli is responsible for managing over 800,000 square feet of assignable space through campus libraries. So I hope you enjoy a few minutes learning about.

Bob: Lesli, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast.

Lesli Lundquist: Hi Bob. Thanks a lot for inviting me.

Bob: Yeah, so this episode all about you were doing the little virtual round of applause here for getting the award. How does that feel?

Lesli: Oh, that's wonderful. Thank you.

Bob: Yeah. So you're an award winner and one of the things that we're asking people is: could you paint a little picture for what was it like when you found out?

Lesli: Sure. Yeah. I was home one afternoon because I'm currently working from home due to the COVID restrictions. And Athalia Hunt, gave me a call and gave me the wonderful news that I was one of the recipients for the 2020 Chancellor's Distinguished Staff Award. It was really welcome news that day.

Bob: I mean, omit a pandemic. You know, it's kind of nice to hear something nice and good going on. So we want to kind of talk to people about what it is they do because there's lots of nooks and crannies and different things going on in this big, wide campus. So rather than me try to summarize all the things that you do and the roles that you play. Could you maybe describe some of those things and also, how long have you been at the university?

Lesli: Sure. I joined the university seven years ago and I am the Facilities Operation coordinator for the libraries. The library is kind of unique. We have more than 25 departmental libraries spread out over 16 buildings. So I get lots of experience doing lots of different types of things. One day I could be on the roof talking about a chiller repair. The next day I could be in the vault trying to save priceless collection material from humidification failure. I get to see so many cool things. I've gotten to see Shakespeare's First Folio, John Phillips Sousa's banjo. I get to work with all types of members of the community, getting donations, setting up events for our students.

Bob: Were you around for the Oak Street facility, was that already kind of up and going by the time you were here?

Lesli: The Oak Street high-density storage facility was already complete when I joined the university, but I did get to participate. In addition, the 40-foot shelving and the fourth and final vault. So that was quite an undertaking and incredible to see the way they brought those pieces in and put them together. It's 40 feet tall, a mobile shelving that we hold over 14 million volumes in the university collection. And a large portion of that is housed at Oak Street. So it was really cool to be part of that project.

Bob: The library in general is just super impressive. So anything you're talking about doing is like it has this added notch off. Like whoa, there's some serious stuff going on there.

Lesli: Yeah. And it's very humbling and rewarding to play a part in these projects that are going to serve the Illinois community for decades to come. We recently created a room for a player piano in our Music and Performing Arts Library. We created an art gallery inside our Rare Book and Manuscript Library, which is housed inside the Main Library. We've created cutting edge collaborative spaces such as the Idea Lab and the Granger Engineering Library Information Center. So as well as more cosmetic things, I oversaw the new flooring going down in the Main Library. We recently are working on renovating Room 200, which is our reading room, returning its historic paint colors, I'm currently putting in a new floor. So it's really cool to be part of these projects that I know are going to be around long after I am. Oh that's morbid!

Bob: There's that 2020 sinking, sinking and –

Lesli: We're all going to die.

Bob: But there's a new floor. There's a new floor that will outlast all of us. That's really interesting. Did you say earlier that there's a piano room now?

Lesli: Oh, yes.

Bob: I'm learning piano as a like new skill, hobby, things that mean I can go in and play the piano or what does that mean?

Lesli: You cannot, it is actually a player piano. It has the scrolls of music, so you can go see it in operation once they are open to the public again.

Bob: So some of the volumes you have are player piano scrolls.

Lesli: Yes, those were all housed in the press basement when I started. And so we built cabinet for those. And they're housed next to the piano itself now. So that was really cool because a piano wasn't even in the building before. So we created the whole space, brought the piano over. So yeah, it's really neat to be part of stuff like that to watch the space transform.

Bob: Yes, speaking of transformations as you were talking about all the things that your groups are working on, it made me think about like the Digital Age and how it maybe changes the trajectory of library spaces into that. You know, if you flash back 50 years ago, they weren't maybe thinking library

spaces are going to become this. But now you're probably having to grapple with like, what is a library space when people are interacting with materials digitally.

Lesli: The library building is almost a hundred years old, so it brings a lot of unique challenges just in the infrastructure itself. We've added a lot of technology to the spaces, lots of computers for public touch screens. We have innovative spaces in Undergrad for recording videos. We have full video studios, we have audio studios. So we're changing and growing and adapting to what the community needs. And I'm proud to be part of an institution that is one of the premier higher education institutions in the world. It's a great feeling.

Bob: Yeah, that's awesome. Why did you end up deciding to work at the university?

Lesli: I really just kind of fell into the job. And to tell you the truth, I got promoted up and it was awesome. But I don't want to say that, that's not a good answer! I'll never leave the job. It's fantastic. It's one of the best thing that ever happened.

Bob: Do you mean you started in a department, not the library associated with library. And then you got moved?

Lesli: Yes, I started as a maid at the Illini Union. And I just kept testing for everything and I was on the register for like 35 different jobs from police officer to restaurant administrator, anything I was qualified for it just because I wanted to get my foot in the door. Because the university is just a place you can be proud to work. It offers much more opportunities than just a paycheck. It's changed me and my family's lives, the education and the opportunities, the people that we've met.

Bob: That's great. So it's like a great draw. But it's more than a draw - it has staying power with you is what you're saying.

Lesli: Yeah. It's, you know, it's something that you associate with Champaign-Urbana. [the U of I and Champaign-Urbana] are almost one. So to get to be part of that is something I didn't really think about in my younger years. I wish I joined the University earlier, but I'm really glad that I decided to start trying. And once I got my foot in the door, I quickly moved over from the Illini Union to the library. A few years later, my boss had left and because I was doing all that testing I was already on the register for the job. I was able to fit in very well. And I think the job and I are a good fit for each other. It's been very interesting, the last six years in this department. And every day is still new. Different kinds of problems, opportunities, projects. Because we do a lot more than just construction. We do day-to-day stuff, so we're picking up books and moving them from building to building. We're letting people into their locked offices.

Bob: Yeah, I was gonna say as an undergrad, that was a wonderful service to have access to the library underneath the dorms in the Six Pack, to be able to chip books from other library spaces on campus, like right below my feet. That was awesome. Lesli: Yeah, it's been a great. I've definitely taken advantage of the library as a user since I've started working there. And it's been fantastic to have all of this material at my fingertips.

Bob: Yeah! You're part of the community too!

Lesli: Yeah, absolutely.

Bob: Well, there's another question that I don't know if we fully answered. Can you tell us a day where you felt most proud to be an Illinois professional? Do you have any that stick out to you or is it maybe a recurring thing that you're involved in?

Lesli: Working in an environment that values equality, humanity and compassionate service gives me a sense of pride. I am so extremely proud to be an Illinois professional every single day.

Bob: You use that answer! You say "every day is a day..."

Lesli: Is that too cheesy?

Bob: No that's not too cheesy! That's great. I think that lines up with being nominated and working in such a prestigious group like the Library and everything you have going on.

Lesli: And that really is true. I mean, I'm number one on the emergency responder list. My cell phone is on 24-7. Vacations aren't really vacations. I'm really tied into the library and what our users need and want our, our staff needs and what our facilities need. And it's so rewarding to be able to help people every single day. Like that's all I do is solve problems and help people improve things. So it's super rewarding.

Bob: That's great, that's awesome. And I bet you and all of your colleagues are looking forward to a day when the foot traffic in library spaces can get back to something that you're used to.

Lesli: Yes, we definitely miss seeing our patrons, we miss seeing each other. And we are definitely looking forward to getting back to seeing each other every day.

Bob: Lesli I really appreciate you taking some time to talk us through what you do at the Library and all the great things you have going on over there.

Lesli: It's been my pleasure, Bob. Thank you very much.

Bob: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Illinois Professional. If interested in nominating someone for a campus staff award: there's a link in the description with more information. And be sure to follow @IllinoisHR on Twitter for informational and inspirational posts.