

The Common Good

By Hazlett Henderson

Without exaggeration, Emporia State University's commitment to the School of Library and Information Management and, in turn, to providing an affordable, accredited point of entry into a career of democratic principles but low wages has changed the direction of my life. At first blush, such proclamations can resemble overstatement, so let's wind back the clock.

The year is 2001. My mother, employed as a foreign language teacher in a Kansas middle school, is facing the loss of her job. Resourceful and brave, she decides to switch professional lanes and enrolls in Emporia's library science program, which will allow her to stay close to the classroom and even closer to the books, her great love. Here's the beginning of our matrilineal professional tradition: weaving through public school classrooms wallpapered with French phrases, onto the story circle rugs of school libraries, into a chair at the public desk where neighbors come with their questions. The institutions that hold space for the formation of these chains, and that allow personal meaning to develop out of professional ambition, are valuable in more ways than one. And so, Emporia — and SLIM — changed my family's life at first.

Let's jump ahead. As every student, faculty member, and administrator in Emporia knows, the cost of education rises as regularly as the new year arrives. The cost of entry to so many professions that we hold to be unfailingly good becomes prohibitively expensive the further we march into the future, especially if a student can expect to earn only modest wages after graduating. Librarianship is no different. Librarianship is no different, that is, unless a creative cohort of fair-minded administrators and faculty come together to establish a program that holds onto its quality and yet adapts the traditional classroom model in favor of accessible, collaborative virtual spaces. Truly, Emporia is the gold standard here. Not only has the flexibility built into the program allowed SLIM students across the country to weather school in the pandemic with relative ease, it has also hatched an intentional learning space in which diverse perspectives meet in inquiry. It is no small feat.

The year is now 2018. My mother remains in her library, but I am in Egypt — Alexandria, the ancient home of libraries — teaching a classroom of children about language, matter, and the world with less than success. I visit the Alexandria Library, wander through shelves and exhibits, think of my mother. Think of Emporia, even, though I had only been once, and of Kansas. Consider rigidity in teaching and ambiguity in learning, weigh home against the world. Then I return to Kansas. I enroll at Emporia.

The role of Emporia in my life is perhaps not replicable. I wanted to be a librarian; I wanted to be in Kansas. Given those conditions, Emporia fell perfectly into place: the school gave me the chance to reroute my life, away from possible lives involving visas and long flights and towards intentional placemaking, mutual aid, and local knowledge. Emporia might not be able to act in everyone's life the way it acted in mine, but I can imagine how many parallel lives Emporia has affected in equally dramatic fashion: first-generation college students encouraged by the University's steady outreach; newly trained teachers strengthened in resolve by the Memorial

for Fallen Educators; green business students hoping to solve social ills through private enterprise. The truth might be that every institution shapes its members in some way, and so it is the responsibility of the institution to intentionally craft an environment and a culture in which its members can grow. In Emporia's case, the cultural slant is clear: in engaging with the university, our lives are changed for the common good.

As I near the end of my coursework, I consider where my time with Emporia has steered me. My network of classmates, teachers, and mentors stretches across Kansas and into the corners of the country. My solid foundation in librarianship's principles prepares me well for work in libraries of all kinds, archives, museums, and more. I know something of another piece of my state; I stood in William Allen White's home; I mourned the loss of Ellen Plumb's City Bookstore. But I think mostly of my mother, and my mirroring her steps of nearly twenty years ago. Thanks to Emporia, we were both able to pursue new directions — to change our lives. And indeed, through public service, a shared love of equitable access to information, and a family commitment to community, we changed our lives for the common good.