Elissa Malespina is a Teacher Librarian for Somerville Middle School in New Jersey, which was recognized as the Jean E. Harris Progressive School Library Media Program of the year in 2013 by the New Jersey Association of School Librarians. She received a 2014 Bammy Award from the Academy of Education, Arts and Science and the International Society of Technology Educators Make IT Happen award. She was named a 2016 Digital Innovator by PBS Learning Media. Elissa has a passion for infusing new technology into the curriculum and thinking outside the box to pique students’ interest and keep them engaged.

Q: As 21st-century library programs go, yours is considered a leader. How did you get there and become a leader?

A: My journey began through failure. I started off as a high school history teacher, and while I loved working with the students, I was not the best teacher by any means. I had no real mentoring and my classroom-management skills were not very good, but I loved incorporating technology into the classroom and was one of the first teachers in my department to really use Internet sources with students. This was 1998, so there was not much technology in classrooms, but there was some technology in libraries. After not getting rehired, but finding another job, I decided that I needed to find a way to combine my love of students with my love of technology, and the best way to do that was to get my master’s degree and school library certification. During this journey of discovery, I had a series of setbacks and failures along with some good moments, which led to making the decision to leave a library where I was not being allowed to do what I knew was best for students and teachers. It was then, at my lowest point, that I started to learn from my failures and switch my mindset to those being opportunities for me. I had a new school library to myself and a principal who allowed me to do what I wanted. I also had a support system of friends and family members who kept reassuring me of my value. Since I did not have other librarians within my school district to learn from, I sought advice and guidance from librarians I admired, like Shannon McClintock Miller, Joyce Valenza, Gwyneth Jones and Jennifer LaGarde. All of them were so open and freely shared and connected with others, which allowed me to build this amazing personal-learning network through Twitter and learn from incredible librarians. I also started going to conferences and joining organizations like ISTE, where I learned best practices and found my tribe.
Q: In your opinion, what sets a traditional librarian apart from a 21st-century leader?
A: A traditional librarian rarely ever ventures outside the walls of their school. They are stuck in the dangerous mindset of “this is as it has always been done,” and are afraid of change. Because of this fear of failure, they miss out on so many amazing things going on now in libraries, which puts them in danger of having their positions eliminated. I was a library administrator at one point in my career, and I now see just how hard it can be to justify keeping a librarian who is stuck in the past and refuses to change and grow. I tell school boards all the time that a position should never be cut because of a person, but it’s hard to convince people of that when the person is not willing to change. A 21st-century librarian is one who embraces the idea of a growth mindset and understands how the libraries of today must change to meet the needs of today’s learner.

A 21st-century leader needs to be OK with being a facilitator of knowledge instead of the sage on the stage. I believe librarians must be the technology leaders in their building, and while I do not claim to be an expert in all different technologies, I know ways to connect with people who are or who can train me. I say to my students all the time, “I am learning along with you, so let’s learn it together. My goal is for you to hopefully be teaching me new tricks.” Librarians cannot be afraid to fail or of change. They also can’t stay silent any longer. The majority of librarians are doing amazing things in their libraries on a daily basis, so share it with others through whatever medium works for you. I do it through Twitter and Facebook, but others use newsletters and blogs. Take a few minutes every day to share what is happening in your library.

Q: Is there a moment when you knew you became a leader? What was the aha moment?
A: I have been so incredibly honored to be recognized by my peers and colleagues with awards and leadership positions, but I still find it weird to be called a leader. I see myself as the school librarian to 375 wonderful middle schoolers in Somerville, NJ. I guess if I had to come up with my aha moment or two, it was when people started coming up to me at conferences and other places and saying things like, “I follow you on Twitter, and I learn so much from you.” A few years ago I was the one doing that to Shannon, Joyce, Gwyneth and Jennifer, so to have people doing that to me humbles me, and I begin to think, “Wow, maybe I am seen as a leader!”

Q: What factors enabled your library program to transform into what it is today?
A: I am really lucky that when I decided I wanted to leave the world of library administration and go back to being a librarian almost three years ago, I had a visionary superintendent, Timothy Purnell, who encouraged me to come and work for him here in Somerville. He had a desire to transform his library program to make it future-ready, and he believed in my ability to help lead that change. I also have a great principal, Georgette Boulegeris, who asks me all the time “What can I do to support you?” I don’t have a lot of money because we are a Title I School in an economically diverse district, but I do what I can with the money I do have. I have been able to supplement some of what I have done to transform the library through grants.

Q: What lessons did you learn from the journey?
A: I am still learning lessons on a daily basis. I think the biggest lesson is something I believe in so much that I have it framed in my library for all to see: “Failure is the first attempt in learning.” I want my library to be a place where failure is encouraged and embraced. I want to push students to think differently about failure and learn from it like I have. Another lesson is that you have to stand up for what you believe in, especially when you know it is the right thing for students and teachers. I am no longer silent when I see something that I know is not right, especially when it relates to children, teachers and librarians.

Q: Words of encouragement for a struggling librarian who wants to transform his or her program? What ideas can you share?
A: You are not alone! You can transform your practices! Do not let the lack of money, resources or the mindset of “this is always how it has been done” stop you. With every decision, ask yourself this question: “Is this the best thing for the students and teachers?” Build a professional learning network of other librarians you can talk to and learn from. Follow Librarian Leaders on Twitter and then follow the people they are following, because that is who they are learning from. Go to conferences, Edcamps and nErDcamp and connect with your tribe. There are webinars and other free resources from Follett, ISTE Librarians Network, TLChat and others that will help you learn best practices. And last, but certainly not least, reach out to those so-called library leaders like myself and others, as we are more than willing to answer any questions you have or help you in whatever way we can.