Stephanie Ham is the Director of Library Services at Metro Nashville Public Schools, overseeing district school library programs, performing evaluations, planning teams for school library redesign projects and partnering with the Nashville Public Library. Under Ham’s leadership, the Limitless Libraries program – a partnership between the Nashville Public Library and local public schools – exploded from 16 to 128 schools and enrolled 25,000 elementary, middle and high school students in two years. Book circulation through Limitless Libraries increased by 100% in her first year, and another 50% the next year.

Q: As 21st-century library programs go, yours is considered a leader. How did you develop this leadership?

A: I like to tell everyone that I survived one year of teaching kindergarten! Actually, I loved it and taught in Illinois, but then when I moved to Nashville, I took a job as a middle school teacher. I loved middle school and teaching, but was really into technology and literature, so moving to the library made sense. I went on to be a high school librarian and then went to be the Coordinator of Limitless Libraries at Nashville Public Library. It allowed me to build relationships with all the librarians in Nashville (both school and public libraries), grow a program, try different outreach opportunities – some that failed and some that were successful – which made me realize I needed to return to school to get my Educational Leadership degree. I earned my Ed. S. and transitioned back to MNPS as the Director of Library Services. My journey as a leader was just a natural progression, but really took shape when I was with Limitless. It allowed me to network and build relationships and be willing to take risks. I am so fortunate that I have been able to serve on committees, focus groups and was a Lilead Fellow, which supported me through my leadership growth.

Developing a Large Library Program by Starting Small

Stephanie Ham is a Lilead Fellow and was named a Library Journal Mover and Shaker Innovator in 2014. Her goal is to ensure the success of the Nashville Public School library program and foster the professional development of the district’s more than 130 librarians.
Q: In your opinion, what sets a traditional librarian apart from a 21st-century leader?
A: I think the 21st-century leader is willing to take risks. They are in a constant improvement cycle – what went well, what needs to be improved, how it can be made more engaging. If librarians become comfortable, that is where there is a difference. Leaders advocate for their program, want to make changes and are willing to try something new. I tell librarians, even if it is just one thing, do one thing you didn’t do last year. You must start somewhere and that is what 21st-century leaders do.

Q: Is there a moment when you knew you became a leader? What was the “aha” moment?
A: I had leadership opportunities when I was school-based, but I think the “aha” moment was when I started working at the public library. I was the “school librarian” and could build programs. People were asking for feedback. They wanted my opinion. I also started talking to other librarians across the country and realized that Nashville was doing something great. We just needed to be willing to share it.

Q: What factors enabled your library program to transform into what it is today?
A: Four years ago, MNPS libraries were at a crossroads. Where did we want to go? Also, our district was transitioning to a place where principals had the flexibility in their budgets to determine the needs of their library. There was a lot of anxiety of where we were going to go. First, I had a very supportive team at MNPS with Dr. Kecia Ray and Doug Renfro who really supported the work we were about to take on and believed in libraries. Having that support was so important. However, the expectations were very high to build a cohort of future-ready librarians in Nashville. We updated a job description that was in line with a 21st-century librarian, which was based less on operational aspects of the library and focused more on instructional aspects. This transition could only be done through professional development. The first three years we concentrated on professional development, from basic technology to implementing Makerspaces. Librarians were very aware of the expectations of their new role because we were transparent. I think by articulating the expectations and providing high-quality feedback, we have been able to move forward and arrive at the dynamic library program we have today.

Q: What lessons have you learned from the journey? What’s been the most difficult part?
A: Oh gosh, I have learned a lot. I think the main thing I have learned is that it’s never going to be easy. We as librarians have to continue to prove our worth – show what makes us stand out and why we are beneficial for a community as a whole. I truly felt that after five years, I wouldn’t need to have discussions on the role of the librarian with administrators, but I still am. You have to be OK with continuing to advocate, because that is never going to stop.

Q: Words of encouragement for a struggling librarian who wants to transform his/her program? What ideas can you share?
A: You can do it! But seriously, start small. Maybe it is a lunch club or after-school maker club, if you are in a rotation model. Make the most with what you have, and you can do it! Talk to other librarians and build a network. I have three really close library friends I reach out to weekly, and they truly save me. You are not alone. And most importantly, if it doesn’t work the first time, tweak it and try again.