

Katie: Hey there, it's Katie. If you haven't met me yet, I am a youth services librarian at Skokie Public Library. As promised, "Your Family, Your library" is back for a new season. Last season, we focused more on the nuclear family. And this season we're broadening our definition of family. You'll get to hear from other voices in the library about topics that affect the whole family: kids, adults, and everyone in between. This is "Your Family, Your Library." In today's episode, we're chatting with Marni Balint. Marni is the experiential learning supervisor at the library, and she's going to chat with us all about STEAM. I love Marni and I know you will to you, and I'm really excited to have you on today. So, Marni, who are you?

Marni: I'm the experiential learning supervisor here at Skokie Public Library.

Katie: And so what does that mean?

Marni: It means that I oversee a lot of our experiential learning that happens here. So that includes the Studio, which is the library's makerspace, the BOOMbox, which is our youth STEAM lab and our youth computer lab as well. And I oversee the people that run those spaces. So this means I make sure all spaces are open and running. I troubleshoot any problems with our machines or activities. I support the staff in there to help with facilitation, and I help create programs for the Skokie community to engage, make and play.

Katie: That's a lot.

Marni: It is a lot. You are correct.

Katie: When you like when you like, spell it out. That's an amazing amount of stuff.

Marni: I really like it.

Katie: Just for getting ready for this conversation, like talking to you about and learning myself more about the experiential learning spaces here, even though I've worked here for five years and I know what they are. When you really hear about everything that goes on, it's really amazing. Yeah.

Marni: Yeah. I think it's been really great for me too, because I worked at Skokie for a very short time in 2017, and then I left for six years and came back, and I think it's been a really nice, full circle moment for me to be able to come back and do something that I feel like is really important for community to building opportunities for kids, teens, adults alike, be able to focus on play and like fun as well as like every time I talk to somebody, I'm like, yeah, I work in a library. I work in a makerspace they're like, my library doesn't

have a makerspace. And I'm like, are you sure when was the last time you were at a library? Yeah. And then people look it up and they're like, there is a makerspace in my library. I'm like, yeah, go make something for fun.

Katie: It's amazing. I feel like sometimes it's hard. Like people feel like they need permission to do things like that. Like, I know that I feel like that sometimes, like you have, like, all these things that need to happen and like, this can be one of those things, like just exploring what's out there and seeing what might interest you, like things you didn't know about yourself. They might you might be drawn to. I think the fact that we have a space like that, or spaces where people can go and find those things out for themselves, is really amazing.

Marni: I totally agree, and I think one of the joys about working here and specifically in these like experiential spaces, is that it is as accessible as we can make it for our community, for everybody. So it's like we have free activities, free resources, free limited materials like free access to the machines. And I think that is really important because there are a lot of really great makerspaces and like studios and workshop spaces out at least I know of in the greater Chicago area. But like sometimes you have to pay a membership or you have to pay for an hourly time or you have to pay for the class. So this is a way to get people in the door interested in what they're doing, as well as like opening up the horizons of like what is possible all the way from like kids to adults. So I think that's really important too is that the accessibility that it's creating is something to be able to explore, to see if it's something that you are passionate about.

Katie: Yeah. And it's like low stakes.

Marni: Low stakes. It doesn't matter. I always say use our materials first. They're there to be messed up on. Yeah. So like, try something new, you know, like use our materials. That's what they're there for. And then when you feel comfortable bringing your own stuff, make something bigger. So low stakes for our stuff because it's specifically there to experiment on.

Katie: Yeah. Just don't break it.

Marni: Yeah. Please.

Katie: No, that's awesome because I feel like eliminating that barrier for people is so important and I, I love that we're having you on today because I just, I hope that more people learn about what is here for them or if you know, this is not your library, I mean if you live somewhere else...

Marni: Ask your library.

Katie: Go and explore your own library or maybe a different library in your area and seeing what they have.

Marni: Totally agree.

Katie: So we're talking about STEAM today, which first started out as STEM: science, technology, engineering and math. So how do these spaces incorporate that into those opportunities that you're just talking about?

Marni: Totally. I think the biggest thing is that our BOOMbox is our youth STEAM lab. And so STEAM used to be STEM, which is science, technology, engineering, math. And it became STEAM to include science, technology, engineering, art, and math. And I think that's a really important point of inclusion, specifically when you're thinking about learning for young people. STEM is really important, I think. I am not very much a science person. I want to fully say that out there. I am an art person, but there are aspects of science, technology, engineering and math that I had to learn for the things that I've done in my life as well. I've done my master's degree is in set design and costume design, so I have done a lot of like architecture, AutoCAD, unfortunately, math and measuring things and building things. My brain doesn't really work in a math way, but if I had included the "A" into that, accessibility wise, I feel like the art part of me would be like, oh, that would have been an easier way to connect all of these ideas that are more structured in a way that my brain would have thought about them. So specifically, when I was talking about STEM versus STEAM, like our BOOMbox, we have a quarterly theme that we do in the BOOMbox, as well as weekly activities. And so those activities are really supposed to just draw young people in to be able to experiment, play, and learn with different STEM ideas. So maybe one week it'll be more of like engineering things. So for building or engineering buildings out of popsicle sticks will then have like an earthquake table and see what is a more strong structure and practice with that. Or maybe one week will be focused on the art part of it if we're talking about biomimicry, right? So there's patterns in nature that we use to create and draw things. So how can we connect those things? So it's introducing same ideas in a way that's like low stakes to be able to become more accessible. That is also translated a little bit into our adult makerspace as well. About like architecture and building things and math and learning new machines and things like that too. But it's definitely mostly focused in our STEAM lab: The BOOMbox. It's also really interesting too, because STEM became STEAM, sort of like in the '90s where like STEM jobs were like growing and to encourage like the U.S. wanting to encourage that growth, especially in like science and technology and like they increased 79% since specifically 1990. So it's like they included the addition of art to allow, like educators to expand their curriculums and opportunities for young people to be successful as well. So when you're thinking

about that, it really did continue to grow. And now, especially with technology expanding as quickly as it is, we are seeing how that connects to everything as well.

Katie: That's awesome. Yeah, I like you am not a STEM person. So like growing up in the '80s in my elementary school, I also felt like this is not for me. I don't find myself good at sciencen technology stuff. I don't understand the math, forget it.

Marni: I understand that.

Katie: Yeah. So it's like I never felt like I was part of that. I feel like if the "A" had been there, if art had been included in that, even though I don't think I necessarily thought of myself as an artist. But I do have a very creative mind, and I would have felt like it's more for me, and it's just like, it's exciting to me that these possibilities have opened up for so many kids who identify in the same way. And like through that, you realize, like how all these things are connected and you kind of find like the pathways are so similar in a lot of ways.

Marni: Yeah, I definitely agree. And I feel like people with siblings can connect to this too, that like my sibling, she is a science person. She is a biotech safety consultant. She very focused on science and things like that. And me, I went to school for theater and design and things like that. So it's like very two different sides of the spectrum. But she is also an amazing artist and I've seen her paintings and drawings and she does an amazing job. And I have also done like architecture and design and engineering and things like that too. So there's a little bit integrated, but the majority of our brain wants to think of even like the scientific logical way or this creative sort of way. And I thought a lot about this too, because I used to be a performing arts teacher. I lived in Shanghai, China for six years, and I was the head of performing arts at an international high school. So all of our students were native Chinese speakers. But all of their classes were in English. Convincing parents that art was valid in the classroom, inschools, in a curriculum was always the hardest part of my job. I specifically taught drama, music, and art, and before I was hired, the school that I worked at didn't have any sort of drama, music, or arts program. So I created it from scratch, which was something that I'm very proud of. But I think the most important things is like there is a much stronger emphasis on education and schoolwork and classes in China versus America. And it was very challenging to convince students and parents that what they were learning in my fun classes, quotation marks, was valid. And I think the biggest way for me to be able to sort of convince parents that's a valid part of a curriculum and an education for young people, is that it's really hard to teach soft skills in a science classroom and sort of what I mean by soft skills is like when you think about problem solving, creativity, empathy, relationship building, the

skills that are really hard to build from reading a book or looking at a science experiment or doing a math problem. So I would always argue that these soft skills are arguably just as valid as hard skills of learning how to do arithmetic or calculus or something like that, specifically because it does make better scientists and mathematicians and doctors and things like that, because then you're able to work with people that you don't like. When you have a group project, everyone remembers a group project in school where you had a group where half of them were not doing the work and you were doing all the work. I would always have my students come up to me and be like, Ms. Balint, we don't wanna work with this person. They're not doing work. And I was like, well, this is part of the project is learning how to work with people that you don't like to work with. You're going to have a job one day, and you're going to have to work with people that you don't like. How are you going to manage that?

Katie: Yeah.

Marni: That's what we're going to learn. Yeah. And so it would always be a process that it would be rough the first time. But then they're able to learn how do I communicate with this person. How do I explain what we've done versus what they've done afterwards. How do I bring the whole group together? How do I encourage them or inspire them? So it's also about relationship building or empathy. Maybe this person is unable to work in this project because they're having a hard time at home. Maybe they don't understand the concept and they're embarrassed about it. So how do you continue to work with people and build those relationships to encourage them? And a lot of the time it would be a few people a year would be like, I wouldn't be able to speak in front of a classroom at the beginning of the year. And now my teachers are giving me glowing grades for every time I have a presentation. Or I would have one student who would be very, very shy, have no friends, and then all of a sudden they have like a big group that they're excited to graduate with. So there is one student I specifically remember that I had her for her first year and my first year, and then I left the year that she graduated as well, and she actually went to school in Boston. So I was able to keep in touch with her, which was really nice. Because my family lives in New England. But I specifically remember at the graduation, her mom came up to me and was like, we would have never wanted her to go to school for theater or the arts. And seeing how much she's grown and become like a more confident version of herself and able to creatively think, problem solve, do all the work that she wanted to get into these schools, build these relationships. We wanted to support that because it wasn't something that we saw passion for before. So I think for me, it was so important to teach, like, you can have an amazing scientist, but then they can't convince anyone that their their briefs or hypotheses are valid, or you can have a brilliant mathematician and they can't describe to somebody what how to learn the proof that they just wrote. Or you could have an amazing engineer or an architect and

they could build something really quickly, but they can't explain to somebody else how else to build it. So I think the skills that you need to be able to communicate with people, work on a team, build relationships, find that empathy is so important to be able to become a better scientist, engineer, mathematician.

Katie: And human-being.

Marni: And human-being.

Katie: Yeah.

Marni: So I think for me, it was always so important because I felt like even if my class was like, the fun class, where they're running around making each other laugh, that hour and a half break where they're not thinking about any of their, their classes, all of their other tests, all of their other projects. That break also gives them the relief to be able to think better, to learn better, to have more time. Because if you're constantly at breaking point, you're never going to be able to continue to grow and learn and try new things. So if nothing else, I would be like, they need the space to be able to grow in other areas.

Katie: Yeah.

Marni: And it was really important to me because I saw how helpful it was for me and for a lot of my friends who were artsy theater folk, that it was really important and they were able to grow or they're able to use these skills. And a lot of my friends don't use their theater degrees now, which is totally fine. But like their theater skills have gotten them better jobs, better relationships, better communication for the rest of their life as well. Because they're able to work under pressure, they're able to work under a deadline. They're able to work with people that they don't like. So I think it really helps. This space for play is so important, and that space for community is so important. And I think specifically working at a library, it feels like such a revolutionary idea to be able to offer these spaces for people to come create community, create play, create space for themselves. They don't get in a lot of other areas in their life. STEM and STEAM so important. And I think the STEAM is more important because you need the art to see the beauty in the science.

Katie: Yeah.

Paul Knutson: You're listening to "Your Family, Your Library," this is a meditation moment.

Katie: I mean, I love that story of the student specifically that you saw that growth in. And their family saw it, too. And I think it just points to like, no matter where you are in this world, there's a place

for this. And it's also like you're giving these kids a place to be young and to feel young, and you know, so many kids these days are like pushed to be adults too soon and they lose that.

Marni: I think a place to be young and also a place to mess up, because I feel like even now there's so much pressure on getting it right. I would have rubrics, I would have guidelines of how I would grade people and they're like, well, how are you grade me compared to everyone else? I'm like, I'm not grading you based off everyone else. I'm grading you from when you first came into my classroom versus when you're leaving my classroom. And I'm grading you and your growth. Which is why it doesn't say this specifically is what I'm looking for. It's more like growth, where it's like they were able to do this at the end. Are they able to do that at the end? And the reason that is so important is because there's so little room for failure nowadays, especially in education settings, that I feel like I see a lot of young people that can't take constructive criticism. I see a lot of young people that when they're told no, they just completely give up and they don't try again. I see a lot of young people that take rejection and are like, okay, well then I will never be good at this as opposed to, that rejection can make you better at something, you failed. Fantastic. What did you learn from that as opposed to you failed? Great. Don't ever do it again. So I think the space to have that ability to fail, to mess up, to practice, to try something new is sort of novelty at this point, because we don't have a lot of spaces for that.

Katie: Yeah.

Marni: So that's why I think at least here in the library, the BOOMbox, the Studio, and the Youth Lab are so important because there are spaces to try, something new to explore or something to, you know, learn a new material or a new machine or new activity or new experiment or new video game. Like based off what you said, Katie, that like, if the BOOMbox or space like that existed when I was a kid, things might have been very different for me. Like math and science didn't feel achievable. And I know that we have both talked about this outside of here, outside of this podcast, but the hope is that with everything expanding and the accessibility that the library specifically provides and other libraries provide, we are hoping that things feel more accessible to people in different ways. Like the library also has STEM kits and STEAM kits that you can borrow and bring home. We have our Library of Things which are green screens or cameras or equipment that you can borrow from the library, and I know a lot of other libraries are doing this as well too. So the thing that I always tell people, or whenever they're like, oh, my library would never have that. I'm like, are you sure?

Katie: Just check.

Marnie: And also, have you asked?

Katie: Yeah.

Marnie: They want to put the resources towards things that people want. So the more that you ask, the more accessible it will be for everybody as well, which is really wonderful.

Katie: Yeah, totally I agree. When I first started in 2008, I like never ever would have thought that I would be doing like science-y type programs never, ever, ever. So the fact that I kind of gravitate towards that stuff a little bit is really cool for me. And for example, like last year, in 2024, I did a climate change series. I had six different Saturday programs where we talked about different topics. The first one was on ocean pollution and ocean spills, and we did an experiment with putting oil, kind of like in a little bath that kids could play with and like using all these different implements to see how hard it is to clean water that has oil in it. I did a program on Zaha Hadid, who was an architect, and her last project was a tower that was built in Miami. And the way that she did it, her way of architecture is so full of art and beauty and based off, like, natural. It's kind of almost like biomimicry in a way, but with architecture and I find like when I am excited about something, like the more excited I am about to bring something to people and to be like, this is so cool. You feel that when you see people doing the program with you. And for my programs, especially like an architecture thing, like I'll just put out a lot of found items or, you know, recycled items. Stuff like that.

Marnie: I love watching kids who have not been told what to use, use something in a way that you never expected. And it's so cool to see. And we do that too. We always have a bunch of recycled old material in the BOOMbox. Every couple of weeks we'll do a recycled sort of upcycled activity.

Katie: Yes.

Marnie: And it's so great because you're like, this is a cardboard box. And they're like, no, it's a spaceship. It's a time machine. It's the, the Singapore Towers that those two towers that are connected by the swimming pool. I don't know, it's something really cool. And I always love the ability to be like this is not what I was seeing. And I'm so glad that no one has squashed that out of you yet. And we can foster that as opposed to hinder it.

Katie: Yeah. And also tell you like the way you think about things is valid. It's not about the way I think about things. Like inevitably we all think about things differently, but it's letting you explore where your mind is taking you with the information that is given or shown or talked about, and it always just fills me up to talk about how alike



we all feel about what we do for our patrons, and it just makes me happy.

Marni: Yeah. Agreed. And I think especially to because of our service model that's specific on facilitation as opposed to teaching. And I and I try to talk to people about this too. They're like, what's the difference between facilitation versus teaching? And I'm like, I want you to try and learn something for yourselves. This is a space to mess up. This is a space to ask questions. This is a space to experiment in all three of our experiential learning spaces. But I think the biggest thing is that we want you to learn something new. We want you to experiment. We want you to try to do something, whether it be in the Studio with learning a new machine and a new skill, or the BOOMbox, learning a new activity or experiment. The spaces are there for you to learn something new. And I think that is so different versus like I see a lot of other people are like, okay, just sit with me and just do it for me. And I'm like, I would love to, but I think it would be more worthwhile if you try it yourself first, and there is always a little bit of pushback. People get really nervous too, like, what if I mess up? What if I do this? And that is sort of built into us, right? But when you have younger kids who don't know that that's bad yet. They're like, okay, I'm going to go mess up. And I'm like, that's great. Thanks, buddy.

Katie: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's like we're talking about kids in a lot of ways, but I feel like it's sometimes even more important for adults to hear that.

Marni: Totally. I want you to mess up on our materials because I want you to learn something. Yeah. And there's a lot to be said about learning more from failure than learning more from success. And I feel like that is something that is taken is such a negative thing, like failure is so negative. But growing up, my dad always said to me that he's like, you know what one, what would you do if I wasn't here? And two, great, you failed. What did you learn from it? That's so cool. And he would always put it like in a more positive way. And I think that really stuck with me because it's like, cool. It is okay to fail. What's not okay is to give up about it. And I think the space that we have created here too, specifically in the Studio, I'm thinking of like we're trying to make it as accessible as possible. We have videos with captions and they're on YouTube so they can be in different languages if needed. We have guides with videos and written word. We always have somebody in the space that if you have questions or design questions or troubleshooting questions like they're always there to help figure it out. And if we don't know, we'll tell you, but we'll say, I'm so sorry, I'm going to go figure it out. I'll let you know when I know more. Like it's not a bad thing if we don't know something. It's like, cool. I get an opportunity to learn something today too. I love that. And I think if we can impart that onto 5% of our community, that's great, because that's more people than we're

experimenting, playing, failing than before.

Katie: Yeah.

Paul Knutson: This is "Your Family, Your Library," and it's time for a Skokie fact.

Jessica Goodman: Did you know? Less than a decade after its invention, in 1876, Skokie's first telephone was installed. For more Skokie history, visit the library's local history page.

Katie: So the Studio is not just for adults?

Marni: So it's for teens and adults. Anyone 14 and up is welcome to come in there. If you're 13 and younger, you just need an adult over 18 with you. And we only do that for safety reasons because we've got needles and machines and knives and things like that. So we just want to make sure that anyone 13 and under has an adult with them over 18 to for safety reasons.

Katie: Do you see a lot of families?

Marni: We do see a lot of families. We also see a lot of families too, with older adults and younger kids. So either grandparents or caretakers that are just like, oh, well, they know all about technology. And I'm like, my good friend. You also get to learn today and I'm so excited for you.

Katie: Yeah.

Marni: So I think there's always that like push back of, well, they're going to do it. They know about technology. I'm like, you get to learn to like we have it set up that when you turn the page there's a picture that says "click this button." And then you turn the page that says, now you're going to go to this button and you're going to click it. I test it out all these guidebooks to make sure that they were clear and attainable. And I think they are. I just think sometimes because of technology and the internet and things like that, we want things to happen super quickly. And this is one of those things that creativity normally takes a little bit of time.

Katie: Yeah.

Marni: And so slowing down in this day and age not a bad thing.

Katie: Oh boy.

Marni: Oh boy.

Katie: I say that to my kids all the time. It's like patience will

take you a very long way.

Marni: And I will be the first to admit patience is not my strong suit. But I do love to create things.

Katie: I don't think it's easy for anybody, honestly.

Marni: Yeah, but I think especially, like with family, it's like you're coming in here to do something together. Like, that's so cool to, like, take the time, talk to each other, go through it, choose a design together. We love that. And we always have like sort of seasonal displays, too to like you have it. We have a design on the wall. Tell one of our specialists they'll help you find it, help you make it.

Katie: So do you all, like, have a list of, like, go-to projects and stuff.

Marni: So each rotation we have something called the rotation doc and it'll say the season on it. So right now we're on the winter rotation doc and it's time. And basically is that like every specialist who works in the BOOMbox, they pick a week and they add activities to it that are based off the theme. So right now it's "time." And when I send out the rotation doc for the first time, I give like a bunch of examples of what projects can be. So it's like for time I was like, we can do fast, we can do slow, we can do speed, we can do clocks, we can do time zones, we can do timepieces or things like that. And so then they can build off of that. So basically, as long as it falls under the STEAM category of science, technology, engineering, art or math, it can be any sort of activity. Right now we're doing "Time for a Lunar New Year Week," which is basically like we're doing Chinese inventions. So one of them is like earthquake detectors. One of them is build your own lantern, and one of them is time machines to go visit Lunar New Year hundreds of years ago if you want, so.

Katie: That's awesome.

Marni: It's just a little bit of everything, but, it's a doc that's shared with all of the specialists in the space and they just add to it. And then when it's that week, I'm basically like, okay, whose week is it? Great, I need X,Y,Z. And they give it to me.

Katie: That's awesome.

Marnie: Which is really cool because I want them to be, They're the ones that are down there the most, I want them to be...

Katie: Like, feel ownership.

Marni: Yeah.

Katie: Yeah, well, only, you know, kind of what we were just talking about. It's like when you're able to feel that, the experience that you give the patrons is going to be a lot different than, you know, if you're just like, a robot.

Marni: Totally. They also know, like, who their regulars are, what they're interested in. Occasionally they'll be like, hey, somebody mentioned X, Y, Z. Is this something that we can get for the BOOMbox? We have like a bunch of reusable activities and things like, you know, like Legos or stacking stones or KEVA Planks or things like that that we can pull out and connect with something as well, which are really great. Sometimes I don't know why, but everybody loves just red solo cups right now and seeing how tall they can stack them. I'm not kidding.

Katie: Oh that's funny.

Marni: It's been so popular and like, if they're not out on the weekends, people were like, do you have the cups back there? And it's just a it's just a little bin full of red solo cups. And they stack them to see how tall they can do. It's wild, but it's like their favorite thing right now. Also, if you're interested in doing some of our BOOMbox at Home activities, one of our activities for time is DIY timepieces. So a timepiece is a device used to measure, keep track of, or display time. We see them every day and analog or digital clocks. These can include phones, watches, smartwatches, computers, your microwave, anything. But for this activity, you can design and construct your own mock timepiece. So basically what you need for this activity is clean or cleaned reusable coffee cups like the paper ones. Markers to decorate, scissors, a hole punch, tape or glue, and brass fasteners. The instructions on our website also tell you how to cut and make it and design your own timepiece. But then basically you have a mock timepiece that you can wear on your hand and share with everybody. It's a really fun activity to do at home. I highly recommend checking it out. There's also a bunch of other different BOOMbox at Home activities that you can see on our website and on our blog posts, but basically each season we'll try and get some other BOOMbox at Home activity posts out so you can try and do something at home.

Katie: Awesome. And the link to this activity will be in the show notes. But just so people hear it. Where on our website can you find these?

Marni: If you go to the Skokie Public Library website, it's Skokie library dot info under resources and then BOOMbox, and then you can see a bunch of different activities. So there's one called "Explore Galaxies." There's one called "Lose Yourself in Nature." There's a couple under "Tell Time." So just check them out. There's a bunch of

activities there under the BOOMbox.

Katie: Awesome. I haven't looked at it for a while, so I'm going to do that this afternoon.

Marni: You said it's really great.

Katie: Love it. Well, I hope this conversation sparks people to want to come in and try one of these spaces, if they haven't already or if you have, you know, maybe try something different.

Marni: Or ask your library for a makerspace or a STEAM lab or something like that if you think it's something that you don't have in your community, go look for it. They might have it or they might surprise you and get one.

Katie: Yep. That's it for us this month. Remember to keep in touch with us. We'd love to hear from you. Email us at podcast at Skokie Library dot info.

Marni: And don't forget if you've enjoyed this episode or previous episodes, rate and review us on your favorite pod catcher.

Katie: This has been Katie and Marni with "Your Family, Your Library," produced by Amber Hayes and sound engineered by Paul Knutson.

Both: Byeee!