A Talk with Dr. Deborah Jakubs

In September, I asked Dr. Deborah Jakubs, the Rita DiGiallonardo Holloway University Librarian and Vice Provost for Library Affairs, several questions about her insights, thoughts, and feelings around diversity and inclusion. Dr. Jakubs, who became university librarian in January 2005, leads a system that both serves the Duke community and attracts scholars from around the world. The library system is comprised of six libraries, an extensive offsite high-density repository, and the Center for Instructional Technology.

Under Dr. Jakubs’ leadership Duke University Libraries rank among the nation’s top 10 private research libraries, with nearly seven million volumes, millions of resources in a variety of formats, and 65,000 linear feet of manuscripts and archives.

Dr. Jakubs shared in her interview several items of interest that included: (1) how her background and life experiences influenced her passion for diversity and inclusion, (2) how she felt the recent events of Charlottesville brought about a need to convene and provide a safe space for staff to share reactions, thoughts, and feelings around the incident in our current climate, and (3) her future efforts for the Library around diversity, equity and inclusion.

-Robert T. Crouch, Ed.D, Director, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
Duke University Office for Institutional Equity

Interview Questions:

Q: Can you share how and/or when you developed your current commitment and passion for diversity and inclusion?

I look back to my childhood for the roots of my concern about diversity and equity. My parents were born to Lithuanian immigrants in Chicago. My father was an oral surgeon in the US Navy and we moved fairly often, including several years abroad. I didn't like moving when I was a child; but, I now credit the experience of living in very different places with giving me an awareness of cultural and regional differences and an appreciation for the fundamental similarities among peoples as well as the differences in perspectives and experiences.
Q: Why do you feel a deep appreciation for diversity and inclusion is important in your role as the Rita DiGiallonardo Holloway University Librarian and Vice Provost for Library Affairs?

Libraries are committed deeply to providing free and equal access to information. The Duke community of staff, students, faculty, and administrators is increasingly diverse and our services and collections should reflect the needs, interests, and backgrounds of that community. It is our duty to educate, to provide the resources from as many viewpoints as possible to enable those who use our collections, whether print or digital, to take in a wide variety of perspectives to learn and to engage with those resources. Duke is different from most private universities in that our Libraries are open to the wider community beyond our campus; so that adds a very diverse group of potential users. And finally, the 250 staff of the Libraries forms a distinctive community, and contribute diverse perspectives that we respect and welcome in the workplace. I often think about how much of our waking time we spend with our co-workers, and how important it is to get to know, understand, and appreciate each other.

Q: Why was it important to you to organize the recent open forum on the Charlottesville incident? What did you learn from the forum?

After Charlottesville, there was an almost palpable need among our staff to share reactions, thoughts, and emotions. I myself felt shocked, deeply saddened, angry, fearful, and disgusted by the events in Charlottesville. It was important to offer a safe space in which people could speak honestly and openly and truly hear each other. People are like icebergs – we are complex, formed over time from our own very personal experiences, what we have witnessed, felt, observed, and what we have been taught. And the rest of the world usually only sees a bit of who we are deep down. The forum was a chance for us to share painful perspectives, to look at things through the eyes of others, to commiserate about the difficulties facing our country and our society, and to reaffirm that individuals can truly make a difference in bridging the divides. I was deeply moved by the forum. I could feel our staff growing closer as a community. I could sense the empathy in the room as we shared and listened. I learned that there is a hunger for more such opportunities to share these perspectives; this was just the first of such forums.

Q: Do you have future plans related to diversity and inclusion on the horizon for the library? If so, what are they?

We have created a very active Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Council (DiVE-In) that serves in an advisory capacity to the Libraries’ senior leadership. They have a website where you can find their charge (http://library.duke.edu/about/diversity), and they send regular updates to the staff about readings, trainings, professional development opportunities, webinars, and campus events of interest. Our future plans will also build on the energy that was evident in the post-Charlottesville forum.
Q: Please offer one or two hobbies and/or interests (e.g., traveling, hiking, reading, etc.) outside of your role at Duke University.

I do enjoy reading, mostly but not only fiction. I’ve come to enjoy a number of podcasts as well. Our family has a cabin in the mountains in Marshall, NC, 30 miles north of Asheville, and we enjoy spending time there and hiking with our dogs. We have also created a writers’ retreat up there, called Doe Branch Ink, and I am trying to focus more on developing its programs. I like to travel, particularly to Latin America, where I lived for a time. My husband and I spent a week with friends in the Galápagos Islands in the spring, and I will visit the Falkland Islands in December. I have been fortunate to accompany several Duke Alumni Association trips to Argentina, Chile, and Peru, and will lead the DAA trip to Colombia in January.