

Christopher Barnickel, Director of Libraries
Working toward “Customer Friendly” libraries in SLO County
By Deborah Cash

There’s a new chapter in the book of The San Luis Obispo County Library since Chris Barnickel, Director of Libraries, was hired in January to fill the position vacated by retiring director Brian Reynolds. Chris, a Missouri native, relocated to the Central Coast with his wife Catherine and daughter Eloise in 2013 to serve as assistant director and also realize a dream to live in the area he and Catherine had visited a decade before. Both were smitten with the atmosphere and feel of the small university town that was close enough to larger markets to fulfill their cosmopolitan longings and decided to make it their new home.

Chris makes no bones about being thrilled to have succeeded Reynolds and said he knew when he came on board as assistant that there would be an opportunity to advance fairly soon. “I knew Brian would be retiring,” Chris said, “I basically told him I wanted his job. It all worked out.” It’s easy to see why Chris would have been an easy choice during the process. He is at once casual but sophisticated, low key but highly motivated, work-driven yet well balanced and obviously liked by his staff while being unassumingly take-charge. As well, he’s highly educated and experienced with global ideas and local aspirations, and sincerely dedicated to his family and wholesome lifestyle. Describing himself, Chris says, “I take my job very seriously, but not myself.”

“Blame it on my wife,” Chris said when asked why he chose a career path in library science. Catherine, a professional ballerina, showed him what it was like to do something you love and be able to do it anywhere in the world. “I knew I wanted to interact with the public in a special way, to provide a human touch and to mentor kids,” he said. “Being a librarian gives me those outlets and provides a venue for people to better themselves. And I can do it anywhere.”

Chris attended a Jesuit High School and later, college in southeast Kansas where he initially thought he would become an automotive engineer. “I left in my junior year and then went back to school at age 25; I was trying to decide what to do. With a liberal arts degree in hand, he tried out a few corporate jobs that he says he “didn’t like at all” and at age 30 found himself working at the prestigious Linda Hall Library of Science, Engineering and Technology in Kansas City, Missouri. Advancing in the busy location to circulation supervisor, he saw a need for volunteerism and became coordinator of the effort. He obtained his MLS from the University of Missouri, Columbia and later, to work in his degree field, took a position in Kansas City, Kansas as a Business Librarian, where the focus was on stocks, research and a “Wall Street Journal approach” for getting into business. But, he said, it was soon clear to him that the library’s clients—mostly underprivileged from a tough urban core—needed help in career development and personal advancement. Chris shifted the focus of the library’s program to address their needs. “When your daily issues involve food stamps or gun violence, what the stock market is doing is not important,” he said. “There was a lot of unemployment; these

people were able to take classes on how a resumé works and hear local business people speak. It was very well received.”

Chris said he'd like to look at ways to better serve SLO library patrons, too. “The library is really a ‘third place’ after home and work. It’s where people can come and gather, have a cultural experience.” To that end, one of his goals is to actually figure out for each community which hours of operation would best serve the users’ needs. He’d also like to eliminate the “Hold Fee” for books and develop more programs that encourage family friendly environments in the 15-library system (which by the way, he notes, is a large area whose combined footprint is about two-thirds the size of the state of Connecticut.)

Chris applauds the dozen “Friends of the Library” groups that support their own community’s library through fundraising, volunteerism and advocacy. These groups provide huge relief considering Chris supervises six staffers in administration and 70 ½ FTE (full time equivalents), circulation of more than 2.4 million items, program attendance of 36,000 and 901,000 annual visits on a budget of about 8.5 million dollars. This type of community effort is essential and appreciated, he said. “They really put their money where their mouths are.” In addition, he’s a hands-on type of manager who paints and power washes when called on but also realizes the library needs to be run like a business. “I have to make decisions on a limited budget so, for example, I want to look at maybe not adding more hours but smarter hours so we’re open when people want to come in.”

Ultimately, Chris says he hopes to help clear up some misconceptions of libraries and what those who work there do. “Across the nation, you’re seeing libraries as awesome platforms for public forums and not just books on shelves.” Chris noted locally there are Internet and access capabilities including Zinio where people can download monthly magazines for their personal devices (this is a free app with 140 titles) as well as eBooks, audible books, computers, database and reference services. “These are places where people can access all types of media and enjoy specialty programs for teens and children,” he said.

Children are especially on Chris’ mind these days; daughter Eloise is now 5 and baby Amelia joined the family on April 5. Catherine teaches ballet in Grover Beach and has her own massage business in Downtown SLO. Family outings take them—and often their dogs Bo and Talulah, both pit bull rescues—to the beach, hiking, camping and bike riding. Chris, who’s an avid cyclist, has been on dirt and street bikes since he was four years old and he says he hopes to participate in a triathlon this year. Travel also ranks high on their list particularly skiing and road trips, especially the back roads “where you can see so much more,” Chris says. During a family vacation to Italy, Chris recalls walking the cobblestone streets and thinking to himself about all the people who had walked there before him over time, illustrating his ability to appreciate small wonders that make big impressions.

Just like libraries. “We want to welcome everyone. We want to create a space where people can learn, interact and enjoy the community,” Chris said, pointing out a recently installed mural that frames the second floor landing of the library in San Luis. Such projects and Chris’ vision for a renewed appreciation of the library in our community are evidence that the system’s new chapter will be a must-read.