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# Joy, Hope, Value, Meaning, Strength: An Interview with Amber and Kieran from QLL

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# Joy, Hope, Value, Meaning, Strength: An Interview with Amber and Kieran from QLL

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Amber and Kieran, members of the Queer Liberation Library (QLL) steering committee share their perspectives on the creation, growth, and future of this digital library. The QLL supports LGBTQ2IA+ people with information resources that may not be available or safe for them to access at their local libraries. Amber and Kieran emphasize the safety, privacy, and security of patrons, the steering committee, and the QLL in the implementation of the technologies, relying on a collaborative network to achieve their goals. Feedback gathered through social media interactions, surveys, and in person interactions evidences the impact of the QLL on patrons and queer authors.

## **Keywords**

Digital libraries, interview, social justice, social media.

## **Author Bios**

Amber (she/her) is an academic librarian in her day job and leads the Collection Development team at QLL. While not occupied with one library or another, Amber can be found growing plants on her balcony, throwing herself into the air at ice rinks, and listening to music way too loud.

Kieran (he/they) is a queer librarian by day, queer librarian by night. In his spare time, Kieran likes to play music, climb walls, read books, pet cats, and drink coffee. A Virgo, he earned a MLIS from the University of British Columbia.

Sara Schumacher is the Architecture Image Librarian in the Architecture Library at Texas Tech University Libraries.

The Queer Liberation Library or QLL, pronounced “quill,” is a digital library that supports LGBTQ2IA+ people with information that may not be available or safe for them to access at their local libraries. “Queer Liberation Library fights to build a vibrant, flourishing queer future by connecting LGBTQ+ people with literature, information, and resources that celebrate the unique and empowering diversity of our community.”<sup>1</sup> This mission statement encapsulates the ideas and themes discussed by interviewees Amber and Kieran, members of the QLL steering committee: the joy in being able to celebrate the amazing books coming from and enjoyed by the community; the hope of working towards a future where people can access information without fear; the value and meaning that libraries can bring through information professionals employing a code of ethics and social responsibility in collaboration with their patrons; and the strength people can gain from finding supportive resources and engaging with a community.

As visual resources professionals, we are increasingly being constrained from working with or promoting collections that support human rights and social justice. What can we learn from information professionals working outside the bounds of an institution? What can we envision, and what future can we fight for?

**Sara Schumacher (SS): How do people find the QLL and how would someone borrow a book?**

**Kieran & Amber:** You can find us at our website, [queerliberationlibrary.org](http://queerliberationlibrary.org) or on socials @queerliblib. We’re primarily on Instagram, Bluesky, Tumblr, and TikTok. To check out a book, you need to become a member of the library through our website first to then access our collection in Libby.

**SS: What strategies or frameworks does QLL use to build community within a digital-only collection?**

**Kieran:** Social media has thus far been our primary way of reaching out to our community beyond the collection itself. We’ve been able to do some small-scale events, like our March Madness brackets, which got us a bit of attention from our community of patrons, but also our community of queer authors.

**Amber:** We’ve done some fun stuff for summer reading the last two years, like bingo boards for summer reading challenges that give lots of opportunities for interaction with patrons. Readers Advisory has also been a great way for folks to interact with the collection. Not only does it let us highlight really specific items in the collection but when we post our recommendations or curated lists in response, patrons and community members often respond to add more titles or tell us about the ones they love.

**SS: Are there any blind spots you had to overcome in the development of the QLL or any features you wanted to include but have not been able to implement yet?**

**Kieran:** There have been lots of blind spots and questions, primarily in the realms of nonprofits and technology. We’ve been lucky enough to have team members as well as contractors who are really dedicated to QLL’s mission and work who have been able to support us and answer our questions. For example, a big feature we recently introduced was an upgraded authentication process. We knew that between growing very quickly and the political climate, we needed to upgrade our digital security. At first, we didn’t quite know where to start, but we were lucky to get assistance from friends, colleagues, volunteers, and freelancers who could answer those questions. We have been able to overcome those blind spots and understand how to move forward by asking for help from our community, taking help that is offered, and giving back to the people who are able to help us.

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<sup>1</sup> “About,” *Queer Liberation Library*, accessed March 26, 2025, <https://www.queerliberationlibrary.org/mission-history-team>.

**SS: What are some short-term and long-term goals for the QLL?**

**Kieran:** Short term goals are always to expand the collection. More books! Lower wait times! And another big one that we're just starting to take steps towards implementing is adding to our team and bringing on new volunteers. Longer term goals involve expanding beyond just OverDrive as a vendor, adding an OPAC, and scheduling some real honest-to-goodness programming events.

**SS: Are there any plans or aspirations for QLL to pursue partnerships or collaborations?**

**Kieran:** Absolutely. We've been lucky enough so far to have a collaboration with Penguin Press and Ocean Vuong where a percentage of preorder proceeds for Ocean's new book will be donated to QLL. We've also connected with some other queer libraries around the country, like Quatrefoil in Minneapolis and the upcoming QT Library in Boston. We'd love to collaborate with more queer organizations to do programming events in particular, but unfortunately nothing is concretely planned for programming at the moment because of the limits of time and human capacity.

**SS: How does the steering committee find solutions and work through potential security and privacy issues?**

**Kieran:** We're all very much on the same page that the security and safety of our patrons is the first priority of this project. The reason queer literature and information is being censored and hidden is because anti-queer and right-wing fascists find it dangerous and will react aggressively and violently to its inclusion in public space. The priority was to circumvent those kinds of situations and to prioritize getting the information to the patrons and users safely so that anyone in an unsafe situation has us in their pocket to give them hope and strength. We came to all of our security and privacy discussions with that unified perspective which has meant that we've been able to dig into hard discussions about what the best options are for us and our patrons and trust in our team's best interests for everyone involved.

**Amber:** I'd also add that we're trying to be as proactive as possible. From the start we've minimized the amount of data we collect from patrons, and we've set some standards for the digital security practices we expect steering committee members and volunteers to adhere to while doing QLL work. We also have a 'quick exit' button on our website that enables users to navigate quickly away should they suddenly find themselves in an unsafe environment for browsing an obviously queer website. We hope that by taking steps like these we're able to keep our patrons, our library, and ourselves safer.

**SS: How do you balance the potential of social media for connection and outreach and ethical concerns related to the companies that run them?**

**Kieran:** In the sense of 'there's no ethical consumption in late-stage capitalism', we tend to have a sense of when the costs are outweighing the benefits for the organization as a whole. For example, after Elon Musk bought Twitter, our participation on that platform steadily declined as the platform declined, until we realized that not only were we participating in fueling an egomaniac's ecosystem, we (and therefore our community as a whole) weren't even getting anything useful out of it. We left the platform. We're currently dealing with the same issue with TikTok, though we haven't quite abandoned it at this time, though I anticipate it's coming in the future. Eventually there comes a point where it's clear that the work of our volunteers who create materials for those content platforms could be better spent in other places. With a small team of limited resources and capacity, we have to be decisive and intentional about where we put our time and effort, and which platforms we participate in to reach our community building goals.

**SS: In this increasingly politically charged environment, how does the steering committee navigate their work on the QLL with their individual scholarly and professional pursuits?**

**Amber:** In some ways, it's a double-edged sword. While the current political climate lends a certain urgency to the work we're doing and gives an immediate sense of how impactful and meaningful it is to so many, we're also constantly aware of the specter of what the potential ramifications could be. We've taken steps to protect our patrons and our own digital security but at the end of the day we've decided that this is work we're able and willing to do despite the possible risks. On a personal level, I also have certain privileges that I have and will continue to leverage. For example, I'm a tenure track faculty member at an academic library. In a professional landscape rife with precarious and contract work, I have very stable employment that also allows me space to pursue service to the profession and service to the community. I was also recently granted an upcoming sabbatical to pursue further scholarship about my work with QLL. I have been extremely lucky in the support of my colleagues and in the infrastructure available to me which has allowed me to bridge my work with QLL and my scholarly and professional pursuits with very little conflict. At a certain point looking around at the news in this, as you say, 'politically charged environment' if I, in the position that I'm in, am not willing to take on a certain degree of risk, who then could we possibly expect to do so?

**SS: Has working with the QLL changed how you approach your profession and your job?**

**Amber:** Being involved with QLL, I find it impossible to be entirely cynical about library work. Not that I was a huge cynic before, but after working in the field awhile you inevitably come face to face with recurring issues, things that are broken or unfair or messy or seem pointless. QLL is a constant reminder of the joy, value, and meaning libraries bring to the community.

**SS: Is there a particular resource available in the QLL that has really stuck with you, or that you recommend often?**

**Amber:** I'm continuously grateful and excited to be in the position to give folks access to the range of nonfiction that we have and which we continue to grow. From Queer Data, to Transgender Studies, memoirs of folks across identities, LGBTQ+ Health Research, histories of the queer community in relation to politics and art and religion, etc. It's delightful for us, and I imagine many others, to get not just broad surveys of the evolution of queer rights in America, but at the same time to also have deep attention to subjects like queerness and river ecology (Cleo Wolfe Hazard's *Underflows: Queer Trans Ecologies and River Justice*), or the disability politics of queerness (as seen in J. Logan Smilges' book *Queer Silence*), etc.

**Question from the Equitable Action Committee: Can you share any influential or impactful feedback regarding the library and its existence/accessibility/etc., especially coming from areas that may not have support for such resources in local communities?**

**Kieran:** One of the most impactful pieces of feedback for me was when a patron let us know in a survey that we were their primary library service now. They lived in a very rural area, it took a long time to get to their public library, and even when they did go there, the selection of queer materials was not very expansive. Knowing that we are providing resources to people in situations like that is something I keep in my heart every day. According to our last survey, about 17% of our patrons currently are living in a rural environment, which is very slightly above the national numbers, so I'm just thrilled that we're able to help people in those kinds of situations.

**Amber:** We've also had a lot of people comment specifically how grateful they are that a substantial part of our collection is in audiobook format. As someone who doesn't really read audiobooks, I didn't see this piece of feedback coming despite intentionally buying audiobooks for the collection every month!

However, I'm so glad that having committed to a balance of formats from the beginning has made our collection more accessible to many. I also recently met someone in person, who not only knew about QLL before we met, but who told me that they cried with happiness after discovering us and finding books in our collection that they had never been able to find in another library. The individual stories from our patrons, and how the existence of our library has positively impacted them, just about knocks me over every time.