

The Free Miracle We Walk Past Every Day

Why the world underuses its libraries - and why Memphis's librarians deserve the care they give us.

By Kevin Bradshaw - President, Memphis & West Tennessee Central Labor Council · Founder, LaborEducation.org

There is a building in your neighborhood where everything inside is already yours.

The books, obviously. But also the recording studio. The 3D printers. The genealogy room where somebody will help you find your great-grandmother's name in a census ledger. The resume help. The meeting rooms your block club can't afford anywhere else. The summer program that keeps a nine-year-old learning while both parents work. The information line that can find rent help by Friday.

It's all paid for. It's all free at the door. And most of us walk right past it.

This isn't just a Memphis habit - it's a worldwide one. In city after city, country after country, the pattern repeats: citizens fund magnificent public libraries with their taxes and then leave them underused, while paying out of pocket for tutoring, co-working spaces, internet access, job coaching, printing, and children's programming that the library down the street offers for nothing. We have been trained to believe that anything free must be worth what we paid for it. The library is the standing proof that this is a lie. It may be the last place in public life where nobody asks what you can afford before deciding what you deserve.

THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE DESK

Here in Memphis, that miracle runs on roughly 250 people.

They are the workers at eighteen locations - from the Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library on Poplar to the newest branch, opened in 2024 inside historic Melrose High School in Orange Mound, the heart of America's first neighborhood built by and for African Americans. They run the story times at Frayser and Whitehaven. They staff CLOUD901, where a teenager with no studio budget can record an album. They answer LINC 2-1-1 calls from families one bill away from the edge. They teach computer classes in Parkway Village, host Genealogy Tuesdays in Orange Mound, and help somebody in Raleigh finish the job application that changes a family's whole year.

Ask anyone who has ever been rescued by a Memphis librarian - and there are thousands of us - and they will tell you the same thing: these people treat the work like a calling, because it is one.

CIVIL SERVANTS IN EVERYTHING BUT PAPERWORK

Now here is the part most Memphians don't know.

Under a classification written into our charter generations ago, Memphis's library workers are not civil service employees. They are 'appointed' employees - which is a polite way of saying they serve at will, without the standardized hiring, the grievance process, or the protection from political dismissal that other city workers count on.

Think about what that means. The person who taught your child to love reading, who helped your uncle build his first resume at sixty, who spent a Saturday helping a stranger trace her family back through slavery's stolen records - that person can be let go without the basic workplace protections we extend to

nearly everyone else who serves this city.

They are civil servants in every way that matters - in their conduct, their dedication, their daily service to the public good. The only place they aren't civil servants is on paper. And the paper is what's wrong.

Some will say: that's how the law was written. Yes - written by people long gone, for a city that no longer exists, in an era when nobody imagined a library would be running teen tech labs and crisis referral lines. A law being old is not an argument for keeping it. It's usually the argument for fixing it. Memphis's own City Council understood this when it voted 10-1 in February 2026 to put the fix in front of the voters.

CARE FOR THE PEOPLE WHO CARE FOR US

So on November 3, City of Memphis voters get to answer a simple question, tucked on the back of the ballot: should the people who run our libraries have civil service protection?

Everything in labor's history says the same thing: the people who serve should be served. The people who show up for us deserve institutions that show up for them. A city that trusts library workers with its children, its history, and its most vulnerable neighbors can certainly trust them with a grievance process.

And while you're at it - go use your library. Get the card. Take the kids. Book the meeting room. Print the flyers. Sit in the cool air with a book you didn't have to buy. Every visit is a vote of its own: proof that when a community builds something free and beautiful, its people will not walk past it.

The librarians of Memphis have spent their careers caring about people they've never met.

This November, we finally get to return the favor. Flip your ballot. Vote YES.

Find every Memphis library branch, its free programs, and event calendars at laboreducation.org/libraries. Memphis city ballot - November 3, 2026 - flip your ballot over and VOTE YES for library workers.

