

Connie Jones and Jessica Ford  
StoryCorps interview at Mid Continent Public Library

Connie Jones: The public library was, gosh, maybe nine or ten blocks away but I always loved to read. My mother was a reader, and I found myself going to the library on my own. I guess I had to be about 10 years old, finding out where it was and then being able to walk there. I can remember being in awe that there were so many books. So, I was just in heaven going to the library.

Jessica Ford: So do you think that the library was important in, you know, you going on to have further education than just high school or just college?

CJ: It was. Even though in my family there was this emphasis on reading and this love of reading, my mother didn't finish high school. And in our family, because we were a poor family, the goal was to get a good job. And so, I wanted to work at the post office because at that time we thought that working at the post office was the highest paying job you could probably get.

But after you know, reading, and interacting with my high school counselor, when I got to that age, I decided, "Hmm, maybe I should try for college." So my mother had done day work as a domestic for white women in the suburbs of Chicago. And the women had a habit of giving the domestics leftover whatever. She brought home shopping bags full of clothes and shoes and books and in one shopping bag there happened to be a catalogue for Northern Illinois University, and it was an old catalogue. In the back of the catalogue there was a coupon that you could fill out to get information. And I filled it out, sent it in, and a new catalogue came and I decided I'd go to college.

So the inspiration I got from books helped to shape my ambition to leave behind the goal of working at the post office and deciding that there was something better out there.

JF: When I first met you it was when I got to go back to my elementary school Boone. I was representing our Red Bridge branch and getting to talk about the summer reading program. And you sang a song to get their attention.

CJ: I did. Because when I'm in the library I'm putting on a show for the kids. Because I want to grab them, I want their attention, but more than that I want them to get thrilled about books. I want them to think, "Wow, I remember when Ms. Jones read *Chicken Soup With Rice* and we ate chicken soup with rice." Because I'll do that, I'll feed my kids in the library.

I tell all of my classes when they come to the library, I say, "This is an opportunity for you to get smarter."

For those little ones I am telling them, “You can get smarter just by listening. How easy is that! You’re going to walk out these doors smarter than when you walked in. Because you might learn a new word, you might think up a new thought, you might think of something you’d like to invent, or you might go to a place you haven’t been to in real life. But if you don’t listen, you’re going to miss out.”

Now for the older kids, I like to tell them that, “From a book, you’re going to get smarter, something is going to transfer that book. You may learn about a person’s life from a biography that might inspire you to do something similar with your life. Or you may travel to a new place.”

It’s trying to get the students to believe and to understand that in the book there are just so many opportunities. I love to see their faces light up. I love to hear them laugh I love to hear them go “Ooh” “Aah” or ask questions about what they’ve read. So that just fills my heart with joy and gives my life purpose and meaning.