



Humanitarian Award Winner

Championing Literacy – Opening Up the World of Books

As a publisher at Elsevier, Heather Luciano works with editors, authors, and researchers around the world to bring the latest developments of cardiology and ophthalmology to light. Outside of work, she extends her outreach to the wider world of literacy, motivating publishing professionals to volunteer for programs that help children in low-income school districts get excited about reading and writing. “A lot of times, the kids in those schools can’t find themselves in the stories they read,” Heather explained. “They read a book and they’re like, ‘That’s not my commu-



Heather volunteers in an NYC public school elementary special ed class, where she helps an author bring her book to life through the Behind the Book program.

nity – these stories don’t look like me. How can I ever relate to this story of this kid who goes away on vacation or goes to summer camp?” With the right books and creative activities, however, children’s experiences can be very different. For the very first time, because of the efforts of Heather and those like her doing similar volunteer work, these kids are seeing themselves inside stories, and they can connect to them. A lot of them realize, “Wow, I really enjoy reading,” or “I never knew I enjoyed writing before,” and they start to see a whole different world open up to them.

HONORABLE ACCOLADES

Recently, Heather’s literacy activities caught the attention of industry leaders, and she was named one of 50 Publishers Weekly Star Watch honorees for 2019. From the U.S. and Canada, they were selected “for their trailblazing spirit, innovative problem-solving, and leadership qualities” by a jury of editors and managers from Publishers Weekly, Frankfurt Buchmesse, and the American Booksellers Association.

Heather’s profile in Publishers Weekly highlights her experience in publishing and beyond:

Heather has worked in the publishing industry since 2008 in various editorial, marketing, and sales roles... While this broad publishing experience with progressive responsibility is impressive, what makes Heather stand out is her consistent and growing involvement in literacy-related efforts more broadly both within the industry and within her community. Heather was chosen for her many activities supporting literacy in New York City and mobilizing volunteers in the industry; for taking on leadership roles in various publishing industry groups; and for supporting Elsevier’s corporate social responsibility efforts as an RE Cares Champion. An RE Cares Champion is a dedicated local advocate for that particular Elsevier office’s community service, philanthropy, and giving efforts outside of work and in their local community. They oversee, plan, and execute many community service and volunteer events for their offices to get involved in throughout the year.

FAR-REACHING LITERACY EFFORTS AROUND THE GLOBE

Since 2014, Heather has been involved with the Association of American Publishers (AAP), first as a Philanthropy Chair for the Young to Publishing Group (YPG) and Chair of YPG Cares. Last year, Heather took part in the Recognizing Those Who Care Awards trip to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where she worked with colleagues at



Heather works with her manager, Vice President Linda Gruner, in Elsevier’s New York office. (Photo by Alison Bert)

VOICE Cambodia, a nonprofit supported by RELX – the parent company of Elsevier – that empowers people experiencing marginalization and socioeconomic disadvantage in Cambodia. While there, they organized a Celebration of Education Day for the hundreds of children who attend this center, culminating in backpack and school-supply distribution to their communities. Heather said it gave them “a



HEATHER LUCIANO

firsthand, eye-opening view into the many systemic issues that plague these communities.” In September/October, Heather traveled to Nairobi, Kenya, as part of the Elsevier Foundation’s Research Without Borders program, where she worked in an African surgery journal’s editorial office to help bolster African research.

“When Heather joined Elsevier in 2016, we knew that her editorial, sales, strategy, and relationship management experience would be beneficial to her new role,” said her manager, Linda Gruner, Vice President, Health and Medical Sciences, in the STM (Science, Technology, Medical) Journals group. “Since then, Heather has been dedicated to continued development and learning in her role while generously contributing time to improve the lives of others.” Linda continues, “Heather’s dedication and energy are inspirational. We’re proud that she’s a member of our STMJ team.”

BOOSTING BOOKS IN THE BRONX AND BEYOND

One recent activity took Heather, her fellow volunteers – and a book author – to a second-grade classroom in the Bronx. There, as the author read her book about insects, the children acted out their different features, including their antennas. “Getting the kids up on their feet and doing something active can help focus their attention on learning,” Heather said. It was part of the Behind the Book program, which brings authors and illustrators into the classroom to bring their stories to life in new and creative ways. It gets the students involved in telling their own version of a story that’s inspired by (the author’s) story – or using that story as a launch pad into something in their own lives they can connect to.

BUILDING NEW SKILLS THROUGH VOLUNTEERING

As co-chairperson of Behind the Book’s board for two years, Heather oversaw fundraising while also motivating 30+ volunteers to visit classrooms and organize book-reading activities. Keeping track of contributions and activities “felt like a second job,” Heather admitted but it gave her experience that she didn’t yet have in her professional role. “These activities have given me a chance to develop my

leadership skills because, in my day job, I’m not a people manager,” she said. “So it’s given me a set of skills for my 9-to-5 that I wouldn’t have had yet. Now when people ask, ‘Do you have experience managing people?’ I can always point to these experiences.” Another skill Heather has honed is time management – a necessity for any role at Elsevier.

“In my publisher job, there are so many things going on at once that if you just focus on one, you can get easily overwhelmed,” she said. “Unless you learn how to manage your tasks and time appropriately, you can easily fall behind. So I think always having a little bit extra on my plate has taught me how to prioritize and to make time for things that need to get done.”



Heather is pictured third from the right, top row, with fellow colleagues and staff at VOICE Cambodia during her Recognizing Those Who Care Awards trip to Phnom Penh in 2018.

FINDING YOUR VOLUNTEER NICHE

So it’s a given that we’re all busy at Elsevier and throughout our industry. We asked Heather how can we prioritize when it comes to choosing volunteer work? What’s the best path for each of us as individuals? Heather has a suggestion, and it’s probably not what you would expect. “I think my advice actually would be not to go with your favorite thing or what you’re comfortable with,” she said. “I would urge people to push themselves outside of their comfort zones a little bit. For example, if you’re not comfortable working with kids or you’re not comfortable working with the elderly, I would sort of interrogate your own belief systems and ask yourself, ‘Why am I uncomfortable with that?’ Because you might find that opening yourself up to those new experiences is way more rewarding and can teach you so much more than just staying within your niche.

“Do the things that might scare you a little bit,” Heather concluded, “because probably those are the ways that you’ll grow.”

Heather Luciano is a Publisher at Elsevier, 230 Park Avenue, Suite 800, New York, NY 10169, USA. She can be reached at: 347-443-4496 or h.luciano@elsevier.com.

This article was written by Alison Bert, Executive Editor, Global Communications at Elsevier.