

In Step with Library Leaders: NCLA's 2024 Leadership Institute



Image 1: Leadership Institute Site, the Blue Ridge Assembly YMCA campus in Black Mountain, North Carolina

Driving up the steep, winding road of the Blue Ridge Assembly YMCA campus in Black Mountain, North Carolina, for the first time is nothing short of breathtaking and, at the same time, a bit daunting for what lies ahead for the librarian traveler. Every other year, the North Carolina Library Association (NCLA) hosts the Leadership Institute. This unique program includes an intensive four-day retreat that turns into a year-long leadership project at the participant's home library. Although established in the 90s, the Leadership Institute has gone through much change, including a lengthy hiatus, in its thirty-year tenure.

In 2012, Wanda K. Brown, then-President of NCLA, tasked Mike Crumpton, Dean of University Libraries at the University of North Carolina

at Greensboro, to breathe new life into the Leadership Institute by designing a program that would be both modern and sustainable. In an effort to make the Leadership Institute retreat into a unique and positively challenging experience, a home for it was found at the Blue Ridge Assembly YMCA. For many librarians across the state, traveling to Black Mountain is a lengthy trek and the last winding road up the mountain solidifies their purpose—the simple act of coming together with other library folks in the hopes of learning more about what it means to be a true and authentic leader.

The 2024 Leadership Institute retreat, which took place September 10-13, 2024, was the fifth sequential retreat to take place at the Blue Ridge Assembly YMCA. Twenty-four participants, six mentors, nine

Planning Committee members, and six outside library leaders came together to interact, share real life stories, and begin to hone ideas for projects that could make a systemic difference to their community. Everything from difficult conversations, to emotional intelligence, to project management, to informal leadership was discussed. What's more is that the twenty-four participants were all split into small groups and assigned a mentor who will work with them over the course of the next year to complete their project. These relationships that are planted and nurtured at the retreat truly become deep and lasting roots—important life-long relationships—that start on top of a mountain and end with library communities receiving lasting and meaningful service.

As Chair of the Leadership Institute Planning Committee, this was my last retreat to the Blue Ridge Assembly YMCA. Every time that I have gone up the mountain, I have taken the lessons and applied them through the lens of the position I was holding at the time: Library Assistant, Librarian, Library Director, and, currently, Public Records Officer. What has not changed is the hero's journey for all the participants over the course of the four days. When the participants reach their revelation stage and they feel empowered by the knowledge and relationships they have gained, they feel unstoppable—librarian magic, as I call it. For many who come to the mountain, they feel burned out in their positions or by the profession—very reasonably so given the state of our librarianship—but virtually every single participant and mentor leaves rejuvenated and ready to finish their journey and start another. The projects that some participants have completed have won them Library Journal Mover & Shaker Awards, IMLS Awards, and a wide array of local commendations. What is true for everyone, though, is they are given the tools to make a difference for their libraries and in their communities, whether they can see it in the moment or not.

Luckily, a member or two of the current Leadership Institute Planning Committee will be chosen by the President and Vice President of NCLA to chair the next Leadership Institute. The next Planning Committee will be made up of the Chair and the individuals who are currently mentors. This succession

planning was the brilliant idea of Mike Crumpton to allow for continuous development and improvement of the program based on current experience. Just like the hero's journey, we get to see things come full circle and a new generation of leaders step up and take the reins.

In all honesty, this was the most engaged group of leaders I have seen since my involvement with the Leadership Institute started in 2016. They were empathetic, attentive, collaborative, vulnerable, and, most importantly, they put up with my dad jokes for four days without throwing me off the side of the mountain. In all seriousness, the future is bright with these leaders. When so much in the education and library world seems a bit tarnished right now, I have hope based on the passion of these individuals. For four days on top of a mountain, they learned to work together, to trust their individual instincts, and to push the boundaries for what they can accomplish.

On September 27, 2024, just two weeks after we all came down off the mountain and returned to our homes & libraries, the Blue Ridge Assembly YMCA in Black Mountain was catastrophically damaged by Hurricane Helene. Although it is uncertain at this moment in time whether the Blue Ridge Assembly will be ready to host another cadre of library leaders ready to take the next step in their journey, I know this last group of retreat-goers will think back on their experience even more fondly knowing that they narrowly missed the eye of the storm, and, instead, came away with a beautiful moment in time like something fragile encased in amber.

The journey never ends how we envisioned it at the outset. For these folks, they didn't know they would potentially be the last group of librarians to trek up a remote mountain to better themselves and others. Instead, we pay homage to the mountain and to the relationships we made there and the lessons we were given. To quote one of my fellow librarians and dear friends who I met my first journey up the mountain, "Enjoy every sandwich, friends." And I will pose the question—what is stopping you from applying to the Leadership Institute? Applications open in January 2026.



Image 2: Leadership Institute Participants



Image 3: Campfire

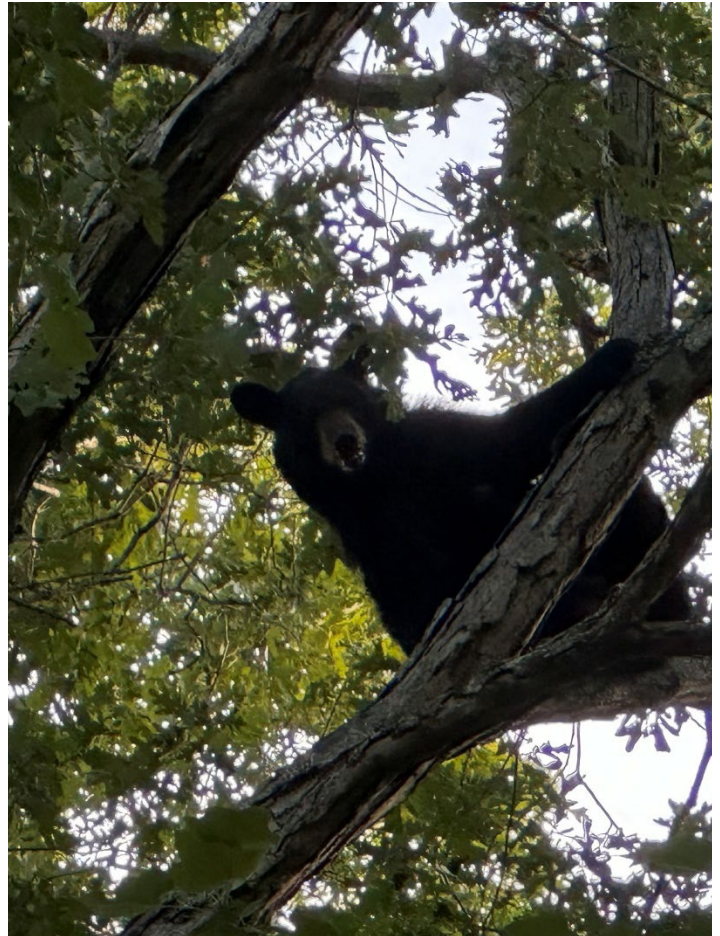


Image 4: Visitor

