

The librarian who couldn't take it anymore

She loved books. And in a time of spreading book bans in public schools, that's why this Florida librarian had to quit.



Tania Galiñanes as she closes in on her last day as librarian at Tohopekaliga High School in Kissimmee, Fla.

By [Ruby Cramer](#)

Photographs by Thomas Simonetti

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KISSIMMEE, Fla. — It was her last Monday morning in the library, and when Tania Galiñanes walked into her office and saw another box, she told herself that this would be the last one.

Inside were books. She didn't know how many, or what they were, only that she would need to review each one by hand for age-appropriate material and sexual content as defined by Florida law, just as she'd been doing for months now with the 11,600 books on the shelves outside her door at Tohopekaliga High School.

Last box, and then after this week, she would no longer be a librarian at all.

She heard the first-period bell ring, 7:15 a.m. She'd wanted to get to the box right away, but now she saw one of the school administrators at her door, asking whether she'd heard about the latest education mandate in Florida.

“What's the name of this thing?” he said. “Freedom Week?”

She exhaled loudly. “Freedom Week.”

“Oh, good,” he said. “You know about this.”

Yes, Tania knew about it. It was one more thing the state had asked of them, a mandatory recitation of parts of the Declaration of Independence “to reaffirm the American ideals of individual liberty,” along with something else she had heard from the district. “They asked us to please not celebrate Banned Books Week,” Tania said.

She was tired. Her husband was always reminding her: Tania, you have no sense of self-preservation. She had thought about pushing back against the district, had imagined putting up posters all over the walls from the American Library Association celebrating “freedom to read,” a final act before her last day on Friday. But even if she did put up the posters, who would be there to see them once she left? The library would be closed after this week, until they found someone to take her place.



Tania writes a goodbye email to her Tohopekaliga High colleagues.



The door to Tania's office at the school library.

Tania had planned to spend the rest of her career in the Osceola County School District. She was 51. She could have stayed for years at Tohopekaliga, a school she loved that had only just opened in 2018. The library was clean and new. The shelves were organized. The chairs had wheels that moved soundlessly across the carpet. The floor plan was open, designed by architects who had promised “the 21st century media center.”

That was before the school board meeting on April 5, 2022, when Tania watched parents read aloud from books they described as a danger to kids. It was before she received a phone call from the district, the day after that, instructing her to remove four books from her shelves. It was before a member of the conservative group Moms for Liberty told her on Facebook, a few days later, that she shouldn't be allowed anywhere near students. It had been 18 months since then. Nine months since she had taken Florida's new training for librarians, a

mandatory hour-long video, and heard the state say that books in the library must not contain sexual content that could be “harmful to minors” and that violating this statute would result in a third-degree felony. “A crime,” the training had said. “Districts should err on the side of caution.” It had been seven months since she began collecting Florida’s laws and statutes in a purple folder on her desk, highlighting the sections that made her mad, and also the ones that could get her fired. Six months since she broke out in hives, since eczema crept up the side of her face, since she started having trouble sleeping and got a prescription for an anti-anxiety medication. Five months since she stood in her house crying and her husband said it wasn’t worth it anymore. He could work two jobs if he had to. “You need to quit,” he’d told her. Six weeks since the start of another school year. Five weeks since she had given her notice.

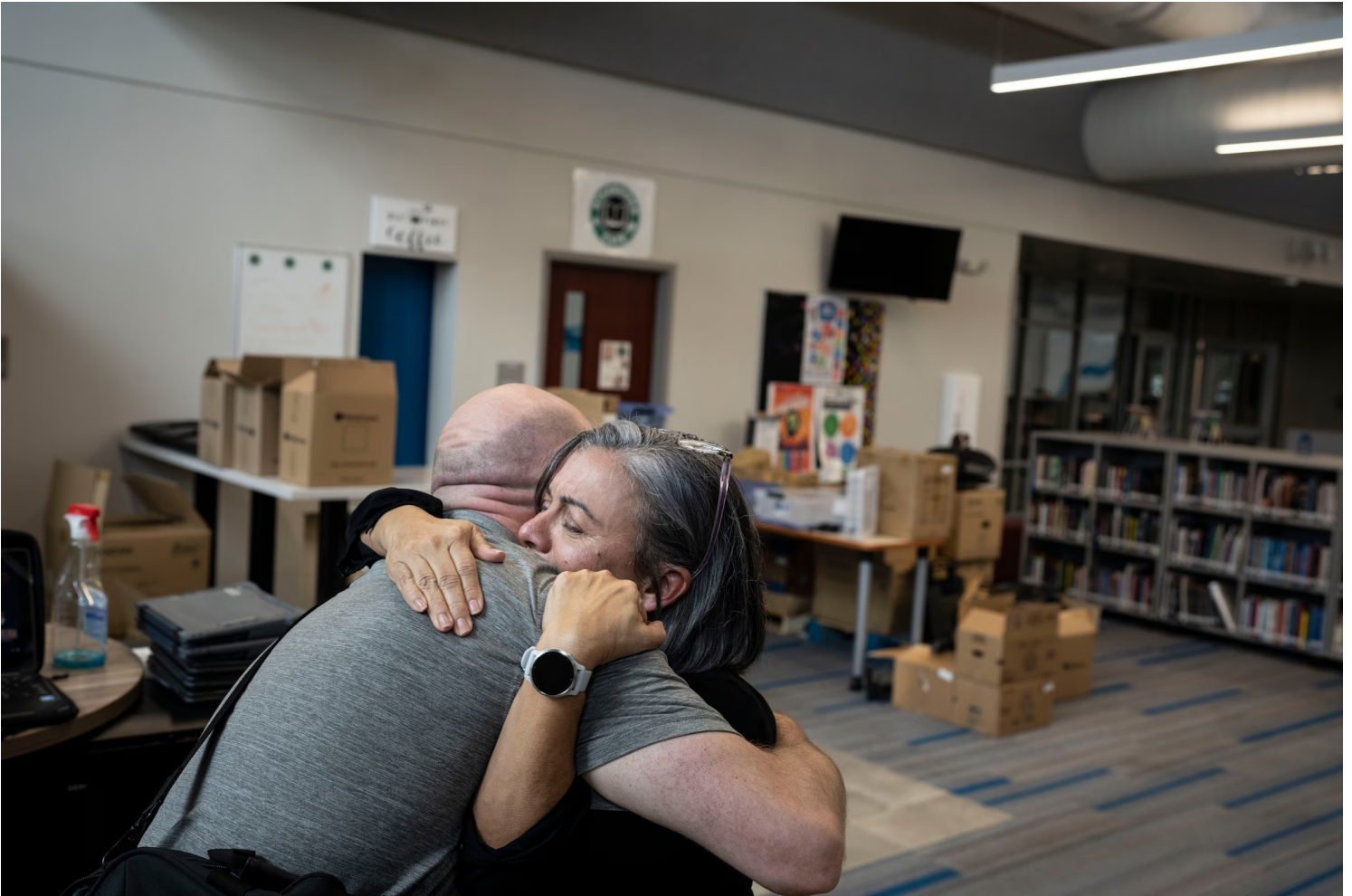
And sometime in the middle of all that, as she showed up every weekday at 7 a.m. and tried to focus on the job she had signed up for, which was, she thought, to help students discover a book to love, Tania could feel something shifting inside her 21st-century media center. The relationships between students and books, and parents and libraries, and teachers and the books they taught, and librarians and the job they did — all of it was changing in a place she thought had been designed to stay the same.

A library was a room with shelves and books. A library was a place to read.

Now the library, or at least this library, was a place where a librarian was about to leave. Tania took the first book out of the box. It had been sent over by a teacher who, like teachers throughout the school, was concerned that the books inside her classroom might be in violation of the law. She looked at the title: “Music for Sight Singing.” She took out another. “30 Songs for Voice and Piano.” She took out another. “Star Wars: A Musical Journey, Easy Piano.”

There was no sexual content to review here. Barely any content at all. She was looking at sheet music.

It should have been absurd, kneeling over a box of music she couldn't read, sent over by a music teacher who wasn't sure what she was allowed to have in her classroom. But now the library was a place where things like this happened.



Tania hugs colleague David Smith on one of her last days at Tohopekaliga.

The books went back in the box. The box went on a cart. Tania asked one of her student assistants to return it to the teacher's classroom, and then she walked to her desk and to the purple folder.

Inside, there were printouts of 79 pages of Florida law and statute that told her how to think about what students should and should not read. One law made it easier for people to challenge books they believed contained sexual conduct or age-inappropriate material. Another defined that term, "sexual conduct," in layer upon layer of clinical specificity.

When she had decided to become a librarian almost 10 years ago, it was for a simple reason: She loved to read. Now she watched as the work she did at a high school in Central Florida became part of a national debate. There were fights going on over democracy and fascism. There were parents and school board members arguing on social media and in meetings. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) wasn't just passing laws but using them to run for president. To Tania, the pure act of reading was becoming more and more political, and as a result, she had to spend much of her time reviewing the books on her shelves — not to suggest one to a student but to ask herself whether the content was too mature for the teenagers at her school. Then she had moved on to the books in each teacher's classroom, because as of this year, the state considered those books to be part of the library, too.

All of this took time. The librarian's job was expanding even as she felt it was shrinking to a series of rote tasks: She would copy a book's ISBN number into a peer-review database. She would decide whether to mark it with the thumb-size red sticker, provided to her by the district, that read "M" for "mature." If a book wasn't listed in a database, she would review it by hand, and then she would start again with the next book. In those hours, the job became a series of keystrokes, and she began to feel more like a censor than a librarian.



Tania shows off her one of her bookish earrings, a gift from a friend.



Tiffany D. Jackson's novel "Grown," marked with an "M" for "mature," in the Tohopekaliga High library.

It wasn't just Tania doing this. It was more than 1,400 librarians in all of Florida's 67 counties, each district interpreting the law in its own way. In the panhandle, Escambia County had instructed its schools to close parts of their libraries entirely until every book on every shelf had been reviewed for sexual content. In Charlotte County, near Fort Myers, schools were told to remove any books with LGBTQ characters from elementary and middle school libraries.

Tania saw the headlines in other states, too: A new law in Iowa to prohibit library materials that include "depictions of a sex act." A new plan in Houston to convert parts of some public school libraries into discipline centers for misbehaving students. Meanwhile, in Tania's county, the public library had just eliminated late fees, as a means of attracting more readers. That was the whole idea, Tania had thought. But in schools, the whole idea was getting lost somewhere. Or at least that's what she wanted to convey in January, when she

wrote an email to the Florida Department of Education. She had just taken its mandatory library training. “Have we forgotten that students should be reading for pleasure?” she wrote.

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It was about a month later that Tania started talking to another librarian, Erin Decker, about leaving the profession. Erin worked at a middle school and had an idea to open an independent bookstore. They didn't know much about running a business. But then a crystal shop in downtown Kissimmee was closing, and they were putting in an application on the lease. And now, slowly, Tania was telling people at school about her decision.

“You're leaving?” one of her favorite students asked her, dropping by between classes.

Tania put her hands on his shoulders. “Listen. Listen, my darling.”

He started to speak again, but Tania stopped him.

“This a good thing, all right?”



A banner outside Tohopekaliga High School in Kissimmee.

The first library Tania ever saw was the one at Academia Menonita, her school in San Juan, Puerto Rico. It wasn't a big library, more of a room on the second floor, above the kindergarten classroom, up a steep set of stairs, where the librarian sat at her desk against the back wall, positioned where she could see everybody, anywhere in the room.

The school was Mennonite, and conservative. There was no dancing. The Mennonite parents didn't drink. But there was never censorship. The library had an aspect of calm, an expanse that opened itself up to Tania every time she entered. She saw books in English and Spanish and shelves of novels. "This is what the world is like," she remembered thinking.

In fourth grade, she discovered Judy Blume. "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret" taught her about menstruation. In sixth grade, she read "Deenie" and learned about masturbation. In seventh grade, she read "Tiger Eyes" and

learned about physical intimacy. In high school, the books became more mature. She read “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” and began to understand mental illness. She read a book about the serial killer Ted Bundy, “The Stranger Beside Me,” and imagined the dangers that might await her once she left home for college. On the cover, a picture of Bundy’s eyes, seeming to glow in the dark, scared her so much that when she finished the book, she threw it away.

Twenty years later, she was married, a mother of two daughters, and decisions about reading became personal in a new way. Her kids were in middle school, reading “Twilight,” and Tania asked them to hold off on the last book in the series, the one with a wedding-night scene, until they got to high school. A few years later, she became a librarian in a middle school, her first library job, and began making decisions about what was appropriate not just for her daughters but also for hundreds of students. She ordered a book for the library called “The Summer of Owen Todd,” a young-adult novel about an 11-year-old boy who is sexually assaulted by an older man, and she started having reservations. Would she want her kids to read it? There had to be a different way of thinking about it. What if there was a student here, right now, who was sexually assaulted by an adult they were told to trust? What if this book could help them? The book went back on the shelf.

“This is what the world is like,” she had thought as a student at Academia Menonita, and sometimes, when she asked herself what a library was, she wondered how she could give her students the feeling that she had been given, climbing the stairs to the second floor.



Tania asks students to hold up their wristbands granting them access to a homecoming pep rally.



Students at the Tohopekaliga pep rally in late September.

Now, 19 10th-graders at Tohopekaliga High School walked through the doors. “Okay, everybody, we’re here because you’re going to learn some very important things about the library,” said their teacher, Carmen Lorente.

Tania pointed to the left side of the room. Classics, dystopian, fantasy, historical fiction, horror, humor. She pointed to the right. Mystery, realistic fiction, romance, sci-fi, sports, supernatural. And over there — far corner of the room — 153 graphic novels. She kept going. Nonfiction, careers. 11,600 books, 6,000 e-books.

A boy yawned. Another slumped in his chair, forehead on his laptop, eyes shut. “I’m gonna let you guys explore now,” Tania said, but no one moved. At a table in the back, a girl held up a compact mirror and applied lip gloss. Slowly, four kids walked to the graphic novels. Alone, a girl walked to the romance shelf. At

Lorente's urging, a group of students walked to the careers section and stood in silence until one of them took a cookbook from the shelf.

"Miss," one of the 10th-grade boys told his teacher, "I can't read."

"You can read."

"It gives me a headache."

"You can read," Lorente said. "It's just the mind-set."

"Any questions on how to find a book?" Tania asked.

"Guys, get up. Walk around," Lorente said. "Look at books. It's not a chitchat session. You need to be up and actively looking at books."

She saw a girl leaning against a table and pointed to the shelf at hip level behind her. "I challenge you to pick up a book," Lorente said. "Any book. And read it and see what happens."

"Oh, I can pick up a book," the girl replied. She walked to the realistic fiction section, put her index finger on the spine of a novel, pulled it halfway from the shelf, then released it back into place. "See? I picked up a book."

"No, pick it up and read it," Lorente said. "What kind of things do you like? Fantasy? Historical fiction?"

"Nothing. I like nothing."

The bell rang. The conversation about reading was over.

"They're good kids," Lorente told Tania, but Tania didn't need to be told. She thought of the other students who were already past the tour she had just given: The girl who had read and returned three books already this week. The boy who

had pointed to the cover of “Dear Martin,” a young-adult book about police profiling, and had said to Tania, “This kid looks like me.”



Tania flips through a book in the library's storage area. Much of her time on the job was spent reviewing books to make sure the school was adhering to new state content laws.

Now the library was quiet again. Somewhere else in the school, interviews were going on for her replacement. Three candidates were coming in. The principal had asked Tania to send him interview questions. She emailed her district supervisor for ideas and received a document in her inbox, the list of questions they kept on file.

“What do you see as the role of the librarian in the school setting?”

“What kind of library attracts students, staff and parents?”

Nothing about the laws, nothing about reviewing books, nothing about book bans at all. Tania scrolled through the questions and added one more. “What is

your stance on Censorship?” she wrote, though she had no way of knowing whether it would be asked, or how the next librarian might answer.

She returned to her desk and called Erin, whose last day was also on Friday.

“I was just thinking about you,” Erin said. She told Tania what her day had been like — sick teachers, being called on to supervise sixth-grade lunch. “And sixth-graders, oh my God. I’m just gonna put this out there: It was corn dog and banana day. Sixth-grade boys. But I was thinking, I’m going to miss these kids, even though I hate lunch duty.”

Tania laughed.

“And I was like, ‘I wonder if Tania is feeling all the emotions like I am this week?’” Erin said.

“Actually, yes,” Tania said, “I am.”



Tania shares another goodbye.

“Hey, sweetie,” she said as the students walked past her.
It was her last day.

“Hi, guys. Remember — no electronics.”

“Hi, guys. Remember — no food, no open containers, no cellphones.”

They nodded. They smiled. They walked past her.

Did they know she was leaving?

Now the room was full, and Tania said, loud enough for everyone to hear,
“Today’s my last day, so check out everything you need.”

“If you’re going to check out a book, do it today and do it in the next five minutes,” she said again.

“Do you want to check out more than one book?” she asked a student carrying a graphic novel to the circulation desk. “This is my last day, and my replacement won’t start for a while.” He turned around and came back with five more.

“Are you really leaving?” another boy asked.

“Yes,” Tania said.

“Why?”

She tried to think of a simple answer.

“I’m opening a bookstore,” she said.



Tania at her soon-to-be bookstore, White Rose Books and More, in downtown Kissimmee.



Tania chats with two women asking about the new shop.

So they knew she was leaving, but did they know why? Did they know what was happening in Florida? Some of the students may have, because their parents had asked the school to restrict their access to the library. There were three students at Tohopekaliga who had no library access at all. Last year, there were 45 students with restricted access. They weren't allowed to check out any of the books Tania had labeled "M" for mature. This year, the number was higher: 84 kids.

Now she recognized one of them walking toward the circulation desk, a girl with a graphic novel tucked under her arm.

She scanned the student's ID. "Limited Access," she saw on the screen. Tania checked the front cover of the book, then the back, then the spine. No "M"

sticker.

“Okay, sweetie,” she said, and the girl walked to a couch and began to read.

It was the last book she checked out. The bell rang. Tania watched as the girl walked out of the library, the book still in her hand, one finger holding her place.

A few hours from now, she would have a conversation with Erin about this strange day.

“I didn’t cry until I turned my keys in,” Erin would say.

“They gave me a card and flowers, and that’s when I cried,” Tania would say.

They would tell each other about the gifts people had made for them, the cards, the flowers, the cake, the lemon merengue pie. Last first period, last lunch period. Erin would tell Tania that her assistant principal asked her three times whether she had changed her mind about leaving. Tania would say her assistant principal asked her to say something on the systemwide radio, and what she said was “Mrs. G signing off. Media center closed until further notice.” They would sit in the store they had just leased, the crystal shop in Kissimmee that was becoming a bookstore. There were no books yet on the shelves, but there would be soon. Every book they could afford. Any book at all.

“So, how do you feel?” Tania would ask Erin, because it had been hard to pin down, the feeling that she had as she left Tohopekaliga High School for the last time.

She had wanted to leave on her own terms. But as she walked out, she wasn’t sure that was what she had done.

Lights out. Doors locked.

This 21st-century media center was now closed and would remain so until a new librarian walked in and saw what awaited: 11,600 books on the shelves, and, on

the desk, one purple folder containing 79 pages of Florida laws and a short note from the previous librarian.

“You might find this helpful,” it read.



Tania unloads books at the shop she's opening with another former school librarian.

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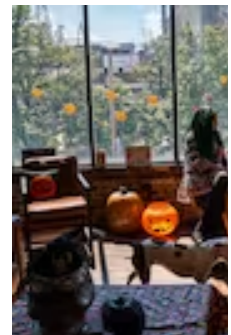
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