

LIBRARIES THRIVING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Address by ALA President Molly Raphael
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Good morning. Thank you for the invitation me to be here with you.

One of the great privileges ALA presidents have is to speak not just all across the country but also around the world. During this year as ALA president, I have traveled widely, speaking at state library association conferences and other events in more than half of the states, plus several other countries including New Zealand, Brazil, Mexico, and Canada. I also have had the honor of speaking at conferences of ALA affiliates such as Association of Jewish Libraries and REFORMA. And the opportunities will not end after I hand over the gavel to Maureen Sullivan next week as I will be presenting at the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color in September and, I expect, a visit with multiple stop to

China in November. These speaking invitations usually allow me some additional time at the conferences to learn more about the members and interests of the state chapters, affiliates, and sister associations. That has been true here with you as I have been able to spend some time at some of your events.

I also do lots of media interviews, which help me understand what is in the news all around the country (Topics include: why do we need libraries? Focus on library funding issues? How have libraries changed especially with focus on technology? What are the issues that are compelling in our library communities today, like the cutbacks in budgets, the loss of school librarian positions, the unavailability of ebooks from some publishers to libraries, just to name a few that have been the subject of multiple interviews over the past year.)

I titled my talk "Libraries Thriving in the 21st Century" because of my deep believe in the value of libraries of all types and the essential and transformative role that libraries can and will continue to play in the lives of individuals and communities in the 21st Century.

We are living in extraordinary times. Throughout the library world, reductions in our financial resources threaten our survival. At the same time, many libraries are experiencing large increases in demand and use. In academic, public, school, and special libraries, these challenges call for innovative thinking and forward-looking solutions.

In the 1990's, when the Internet really took off, many pundits, who really did not understand the core of what a library is, suggested that libraries were going to fade away. Libraries, they believed, were simply storehouses of books

and other resources that would be made obsolete by the Internet. But instead of just fading away, we embraced the Internet. Libraries demonstrated once again how adaptable we could be in meeting the needs of the communities we served. Now, we find ourselves in an environment where if we don't change, if we like the way we are and just decide to stay there, we will find ourselves sitting by the road side as the world passes us by.

I believed in the 1990's, and am even more convinced today, that the best way for us to ensure the future of all types of libraries is to demonstrate unequivocally that libraries are as essential as any of the services that we hear described that way by decision-makers and elected officials.

As a public librarian for 40 years, I grew somewhat weary of hearing certain local services, like police and fire, described as "essential" while libraries were described as

“discretionary”. When I talk with my colleagues serving in K-12 school libraries, they tell me that the word used by their administrators is “ancillary”. No matter what the name, the meaning is clear: we just aren’t as important as some other parts. I strongly disagree with this assessment, no matter what the library, but I do agree that we haven’t been as effective in making our case, as we need to be. In order not just to survive but to *thrive*, we must not only transform our libraries but we must also transform how people see us. How can we shift the thinking so that rather than being seen as “nice to have”, we are viewed as “essential”?

First, I think we who lead and work in libraries need to engage with and really listen to the people in our communities. Our services must reflect what our communities value and how we can contribute to their advancement. We need to engage with our communities in ways that help us understand their aspirations, and how we

can contribute to making our communities even better. We need to be willing to take bold steps, make difficult choices about what we can and cannot do. Second, I think we need to build on the studies and research that demonstrate the value of libraries, all types of libraries. Third, we need to rally our communities, our library users, to tell our story—the story of the transformational power of libraries.

So first, how do we keep our libraries moving forward? The rapidly changing world in which we live challenges us to keep up, not to stay where we are comfortable and safe but to look for opportunities to deliver services in new ways. By and large, I think libraries are doing remarkably well in this area. When I visit the website of a library or actually visit in person, I am excited by what I see. No doubt we are struggling to keep up – but if you think about your own work environment, think about how you are paying attention to

what you are seeing and hearing about how your communities are using their libraries – what are their expectations that push us forward?

This is a very exciting time to be working in libraries as we try to balance the demand for traditional services with the increasing demand for digital services. By paying attention and listening to our diverse communities, we can make decisions that bring in new patrons as well as continue to serve those who have valued and supported us.

A recent policy brief from ALA's Office of Information Technology Policy entitled *Confronting the Future: Strategic Visions for the 21st Century Public Library*, authored by OITP Fellow Roger E. Levien, lays out the dimensions of the decisions libraries face. Think about these on a continuum—so the first continuum is:

1. The physical versus the virtual library (illustrate with examples)
2. Focusing on the user, then we have the individual user versus the community (illustrate with examples)
3. Collection versus creative library (illustrate with examples)
4. Portal versus archival library (illustrate with examples)

So the second area that I indicated I think we need to pay attention to is research on the value of libraries. Some examples of studies in recent years help us see the possibilities.

1. The Knight Commission's [*Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*](#): which articulates a vision of community information needs and the critical steps necessary to meet them; the report

- offers very clear places where libraries can contribute to the vision of “informed communities”;
2. OCLC’s Report [*From Awareness to Funding*](#), which looks at what actually affects voters willingness to support public library funding initiatives. Key findings include:
 - Library funding support is only marginally related to library visitation
 - Perceptions of librarians are an important predictor of library funding support
 - Voters who see the library as a 'transformational' force as opposed to an 'informational' source are more likely to increase taxes in its support
 3. In academic and research libraries, a very important review of research was published by ALA’s Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) last year entitled *The Value of Academic Libraries: a*

Comprehensive Research Review and Report. This report actually reviews research about academic libraries and looks at how they are measuring their value. ACRL also has a toolkit to go with this publication and now has a grant from IMLS to do some follow up work.

4. In school libraries, an example of this type of research is the work of Keith Curry Lance from Colorado has been doing on the impact of school libraries and librarians on student performance.

What much of this research is doing is actually looking at **outcomes** for libraries. For many years in the library world we looked at inputs—e.g., how many books did we have per capita. Then we spent many years collecting outputs—e.g., how many books did we circulate. Now, we are finally paying attention to what people really care

about—what’s the impact of what we do? How do we really transform lives? What’s the effect of a summer reading program on children’s reading levels in a community? How does an academic library actually contribute to student learning or attracting research funding? What is the impact of the information literacy instruction in school libraries on student achievement? Outcome data are much more difficult to collect, but they have a much greater impact on decision-makers.

As practitioners, I think we can be more effective in our advocacy work if we can use these research results when we make the case for the value of libraries.

When we couple this research with the economic threats to libraries and the way that people have fought back all across the country, it becomes clear that we have a golden opportunity to demonstrate the critical roles libraries play in learning and throughout our lives.

I'd like to now to my third point, which is the area of focus for my ALA Presidential Advocacy Initiative: who can be most effective in telling the library story.

When we who work in libraries tell our story—what is really the library story—there is almost always a perceived element of self-interest. People who think libraries are not important can simply say that we are just trying to protect our jobs. We know that is not really the motivation, but there is that perception by some.

When members of our communities tell the story of the transformational power of libraries, that self-interest issue disappears.

As a public librarian, I frequently witnessed the power of people from our community telling our story. I often met with elected officials and other community leaders to talk about our programs and their value. In tough economic

times, I knew they struggled with how to make the best decisions they could, including the officials whom I knew valued library services. What I saw time and time again was the profound impact that a parent, or a teacher, or a business leader, or a community activist could have in making the case for us.

For example, the father of a third grader who tells the story of how his son, who had been a reluctant reader and had fallen behind in grade level, talked about how the summer reading program turned his son around—he now loved to read and was doing well in school. The power of others telling our story has been known to us for a while, particularly in the public library world.

The OCLC report *From Awareness to Funding* noted that when libraries were seen as a “transformational” force rather than an “informational” source that they received much stronger support. As librarians, we can help people find the

words that describe that transformational experience, the outcomes that make a difference in people's lives.

I have been heartened to see similar situations in other types of libraries. In school libraries, the most widely reported example of community members speaking out, rather than school librarians advocating for their own libraries, was in Spokane, Washington. There three mothers who became known as the "Spokane Moms" spoke out and made a real difference. Even when they lost an important vote at the local school district level, they decided to go fight for legislation at the state level. They thought it was important for students all across the state to have equal access. Their persistence was pretty amazing and in the end it paid off at the state level in providing support for school libraries. Keith Curry Lance summed up the impact: "Five minutes of parent advocacy for school libraries can have more effect than five years of what might appear as self-serving advocacy."

The recent report on the value of academic libraries that I mentioned provides many ideas of ways to talk about the contributions of academic libraries. A story caught my eye last year when I read about the sit-in at the UC-Berkeley, where several hundred students took over the anthropology library for 24 hours to protest cuts in hours. As one who came of age in the 1960's and participated in nonviolent protests, I remembered how powerful mass demonstrations can be. The students were saying to the funders that libraries do matter.

My challenge to you today is think about how our communities can speak in powerful ways for libraries. How can we find ways to direct this kind of "advocacy", if you will, by library users to say that libraries make a difference to the people who were actually cutting the budgets?

As a profession, I think we have another important consideration we need to confront about how we advocate for

our libraries. We seem to advocate only when budgets are being cut and times are tough. We need to find ways to have our communities talk about the value of libraries year in and year out, not just in tough economic times. This is not saying that our communities should always be talking about budgets and money. But it is saying that we need to have people talk about libraries and student achievement; or about summer reading programs and the way that they result in children and youth maintaining their reading levels over that long summer break; or how student success in higher education as an outcome has a direct link to academic libraries.

If we move into that “essential service” category like police and fire, then we start from a different place in tough times. We still have to work hard then, but we are standing in a different and better place.

So how do we connect the important research that is being done on the value of libraries and their transformational

power with a community of advocates who can speak more powerfully and effectively about our libraries than we can? Frankly, I do not think we have all the answers. But I think we are asking the right questions. Librarians are smart, committed professionals. We are a generous profession that really believes in sharing and replicating successes—we see this in the way libraries replicate successful, new services of other libraries. We have many library supporters already who are passionate about the value of libraries. So I think we can figure this out if we work at it. And I also think that the American Library Association can play a very important role in making this happen.

We need to find ways for more collaboration among those doing the research and the practitioners who can benefit from their results. This is a two-way street—neither the scholar/researcher nor the practitioner is to blame here. How can we build a bridge so that important research results

actually get used in ways that have an impact on our libraries? And then how can we share those results in easily absorbable ways that members of our community can articulate? Former ALA President Camila Aire's frontline advocacy initiative, to get library staff playing key roles in advocating for libraries is a key step I making this happen, because the frontline library workers are the ones who often have regular contact with community members and leaders. And then how do we make this happen year in and year out?

These are core issues for our profession and the future of libraries and librarians. My advocacy initiative—*Empowering Voices: Transforming Communities*—is seeking to build on the work of past ALA Presidents. ALA now has available on its website a wealth of resources supporting advocacy efforts. Our initiative is

- developing approaches and tools for how to engage with our communities, including assisting with how to

engage with the diverse elements of communities, and how to really listen for what are communities assets and strengths.

- Ensuring that we embrace the value of engaging with the diverse elements of our communities – not just those who may already be using libraries. We have been working on how to be more inclusive and specifically on programs that will increase the diversity in our workforce and future leaders. As ALA Past President Betty Turock wrote recently, “If libraries are not ready to support Emerging Majorities, how can we expect Emerging Majorities to be ready to support libraries?” My second area of focus as ALA president, entitled “Empowering Diverse Voices,” has been on making sure that we are developing future library leaders from diverse backgrounds.

- Then, together with our diverse communities, we want to define clear and unified messages about the value of the library to that community, using research results where we can. So if what really matters to a community is that young children enter school ready to read, we have studies that provide data about how libraries have a significant impact of literacy development for very young children. The research results may be important in how we craft our messages.
- Next, we want to develop tools for helping libraries find the most influential people in the community to help deliver those messages. Especially powerful when the messages come from unexpected allies who are library advocates. E.g. LA police chief. By truly engaging, we can identify who are the groups or individuals who have the greatest potential to influence decision-makers?

- We are continuing to gather together key parts of this initiative so please stay tuned. ALA's resources, such as its "Advocacy University"—are openly available. All you need to do is go to www.ala.org

I am inspired all the time by stories from libraries of all types, by the enormous dedication and creative of all of you and our colleagues. We really do make a transformational difference in people's lives. We really do belong in that "essential" category of services, now more than ever. We really do have a bright future, even though it may be hard to see that now.

I will close with two favorite quotations. The first is from anthropologist Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." The second quotation is from Mahatma Gandhi: "Be the change you want

to see in the world.” Both of these quotations inspire me everyday. They remind us that change does not come from watching but from doing. Change comes because people want to make the world or their community different, and, we hope, better. Our libraries can thrive in the 21st century if...

- we place high priority on continuously engaging with our changing communities – who they are – and what their aspirations and priorities;
- we pay attention to what people in our communities care about and value; that means that we must operate in an environment where we turn outward not inward;
- we are inclusive in our services, recognizing the diverse elements that make up our communities; and
- we continue to embrace changes that help us advance the way we offer services..

During this past year, I have been impressed by library school students' commitment to their new profession and their eagerness to make a contribution to advancing our work together. Their education and the way they will be serving their communities are very different from what I, and some of you, did decades ago. But what I find inspiring and encouraging is that the core values as espoused in documents like the Freedom to Read Statement and the Library Bill of Rights, are very much the foundation for how we continue to provide services.

Thank you so much for your attention today.