

President's Message

Libraries Transform Communities

by Leslie Burger

Someone recently told me that “transformation” is really just a fancy word for change. Perhaps that’s true, but to me it is really a more powerful way to convey the “Libraries Transform Communities” theme of my presidential year.

It’s clear to me, after 30 years in the library business, that when communities of all types—cities and towns, colleges and universities, schools and businesses—invest in libraries by transforming their appearance or the way they do business, our neighborhoods change. The expectations of those we serve soar. They begin to think about libraries in different ways, become passionate and enthusiastic supporters of all that we do, and realize that libraries are central to the quality of life in their communities.

Changes everywhere

In recent years we have seen spectacular examples of transformed library buildings: new facilities in Seattle; Salt Lake City; San Jose, California; the Bronx, New York; Fayetteville, Arkansas; and right here in Princeton, New Jersey (*AL*, Apr. 2006, p. 63–65) to name a few. School libraries in New York City have become centers for imagination and learning thanks to the efforts of the Robin Hood Foundation. Campuses across the country are creating information and social commons in their libraries and in doing so are attracting more students and faculty than ever before.

But transformation takes place in thousands of libraries every day in many subtle and less obvious ways. It could be changing a policy to make it more customer-friendly, investing in a fresh collection, buying books that patrons want to read, offering a friendly greeting, sponsoring a communitywide reading event, offering personal information service to a faculty member or student, or engaging in conversation with someone who is seeking a social experience. The work librarians do, and the way in which we do it, transform our communities each day.

Let me make the case for why transformation is needed and why now. Librarians and libraries have already been through a decade of great change spurred



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by a technological revolution that has altered the way we do business. We are hard at work making over our reference services, catalogs, approaches to customer service, buildings, and collections. Some staff members are burned out on change. We’ve been so busy dealing with these adjustments that we

haven’t always done a good job of communicating them. Now is not the time to stop.

We have changed how we do business. Now we must change how others see us. We have this absolutely unique moment in time to transform the way in which the world perceives us, to build on the things that we do so well, and to set the stage for the next century of library service to communities we serve.

My action plan for my ALA agenda includes: setting a national agenda to guide our work in recreating libraries of all types; holding a transformation summit to provide practical tips for how everyone can revolutionize their libraries, regardless of budget constraints; publishing a transformation toolkit (print and web-based); establishing a “librarians without libraries” volunteer program to match people who have talents and skills with libraries who need assistance; extending our national advocacy effort through a web-based initiative called welovelibraries.org; and creating a pool of emerging leaders who have the tools they need to advance the ALA and transformation agenda (*AL*, June/July, p. 12).

If you think this sounds like a pep talk, it is. I love and believe in all libraries. I can’t think of any other work that provides the stimulation and excitement I find each day. Change isn’t easy, but it is the key to our future. During my year as president, I will work to lead change, to transform our profession, our libraries, and our communities. I know that by working together we can make every library in the country better than it is today. Please join me. ☑

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