

# President's Message

Who Are You and What Do You Do?

by Leslie Burger

Almost every day now I find myself talking to one reporter or another on topics from small-business services to foreign-language materials in libraries. A daylong media pitch tour in New York City with ALA's partner ProMedia Communications sharpened my skills in making the case for why libraries are newsworthy. Our conversations started with tried and true topics, such as our annual observances and awards, things that draw attention to the positive work we do. But as I witnessed the reaction to these "safe" stories, I realized what the

media really want are new, different, and surprising stories about libraries and librarians. It was at that moment that I remembered the words of library-advocate extraordinaire and former ALA president Patricia Glass Schuman, who once told me to "never miss an opportunity to talk about who you are and what you do."

Last month I discussed the ways libraries can transform communities. This month I want to highlight some of the ways in which we can transform the way people perceive libraries and librarians.

## Making positive news

I am still answering media inquiries about why ALA decided to hold its Annual Conference in New Orleans. I hope by now that you've had a chance to look at ALA's online scrapbook of the impressive media coverage ([www.ala.org/ala/pio/mediarelationsa/scrapbook.htm](http://www.ala.org/ala/pio/mediarelationsa/scrapbook.htm)). In addition to the volume of stories, what was equally impressive was the subtle shift in the tone of these pieces—recognition that librarians aren't quite like the prevalent stereotype depicted in our media-driven culture. By the simple act of bringing 17,000 library conventioners to the hurricane-ravaged city, not only to go about their normal convention business but to help rebuild the community and to party, we transformed the way that people see us and sent a powerful message about our profession.

The recent vote and subsequent news reports about the Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA) (*AL*, June/July, p. 10) provided another opportunity to transform public opinion. The measure passed so quickly in the U.S. House of Representatives that there was little time to mobilize opposition. Once again ALA took the lead by issuing a



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statement detailing the issues associated with this legislation and highlighting the problems associated with blocking access to an entire area of content on the Web.

We have become widely recognized as the "go-to" people on issues related to privacy, restrictions on information access, and public policy relating to web content. In fact, I

was recently stopped by a library user while in the parking garage outside my library who thanked me for protecting her privacy and First Amendment rights.

This summer, we saw how one librarian, Michele Reutty, director of the Hasbrouck Heights (N.J.) Free Public Library, had the courage to stand up to her mayor, the local police, and the community to defend the state's patron confidentiality law after being threatened with disciplinary action for refusing to turn over library patron records without a subpoena. Although faced with an impending investigation and the risk of losing her job, Reutty educated the community and the rest of New Jersey about the importance of protecting library confidentiality. She transformed the image of a librarian from meek and compliant to a defender of the law.

I'm sure we will learn more about transformation at the first Joint Conference of Librarians of Color, October 11–15 in Dallas, when librarians from all corners of the country will share their experiences of serving diverse communities (*AL*, Aug., p. 64). This is a not-to-be-missed event that is sure to inspire all of us to transform the way in which we deliver service to our changing communities.

So the next time you sit next to someone on a plane, meet someone new at a party, or pick up your dry cleaning, remember to tell people who you are and what you do. The work we do is important, extraordinary, and worth sharing every chance we get. If you have stories about how your library has transformed the community, send them to me at [transformations@princetonlibrary.org](mailto:transformations@princetonlibrary.org). 

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