

# Extraordinary Heroes

A tribute to librarians and library workers

by Leslie Burger

**W**ake up and read” was the theme of the first National Library Week in 1958. We recently celebrated the 49th NLW that carried the theme “Come Together @ your library.” Through the years, this annual event has given us an opportunity to send a consistent and powerful message to the world about what librarians and library workers do to support our democracy, enhance education and lifelong learning, and acknowledge the spectacular resources we provide that offer endless hours of entertainment to our customers.

As ALA president, I often speak on your behalf when it comes to issues affecting libraries, frequently answering these among other questions: “Why do we need libraries in the internet age? Why should my community be taxing itself to build a new library? Isn’t it true that students no longer use their school and college libraries?” And while I enjoy the challenge of trying to change a reporter’s mind with my responses, I realize that it is not my words or actions that tell the story but the work that all of you do on a daily basis that is the real library story. The heroes and heroines of the library story are all of you.

Bob Dylan said this about heroes, “I think of a hero as someone who understands the degree of responsibility that comes with his freedom.”

## Contributions that shine

Let me tell you about some of the library heroes I’ve met in the last year:

■ The Connecticut Four—George Christian, Barbara Bailey, Peter Chase, and Janet Nocek—who have taken on the federal government and called them to task for abuses of the USA Patriot Act and infringements on our right to privacy.

■ The Environmental Protection Agency librarians and staff who stood their ground in the wake of library closings and defended the public’s right to know and demanded that the EPA libraries remain open.

■ The Louisiana and Gulf Coast library workers who put their own personal needs on the back burner to get libraries reopened in following of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, ensuring that thousands of people had a safe place to go in the aftermath of the storms.

■ Jo Ann Pinder, former director of the Gwinnett County (Ga.) Library System, who stood up for the right of her constituents to read what they want in the language most comfortable for them.

■ Ted Stark, interim director of the Jackson County (Oreg.) library system, who oversaw the largest library closing in the country while at the same time mounting a campaign for a tax levy to ensure the system’s long-term financial stability.

■ The Challenged Materials committee and Superintendent Elliott Landon, who retained Alice Siebold’s coming-of-age novel *The Lovely Bones* in the

Coleytown Middle School library in Westport, Connecticut, despite objections from a parent that it was not age-appropriate.

■ Author Susan Patron, juvenile-materials collection development manager at Los Angeles Public Library, whose



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eloquent response to objections to the use of the word “scrotum” in her Newbery Award-winning children’s novel *The Higher Power of Lucky* made everyone proud.

■ Director Brenda Branch and the staff of Austin (Tex.) Public Library, where voters approved a new 250,000-square-foot Central Library on Election Day last November.

There are thousands of acts like these that take place in our libraries every day. These are stories that sometimes go unnoticed, but they are heroic acts that change lives and transform the way in which people think about libraries and what we do. Thanks to all of you for understanding the responsibility that comes with freedom. You are my heroes. ■

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