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ALIA president

Becoming your President for 1995 was, for me, a little like achieving the impossible when I consider that 10 years ago the only librarian I knew was my friend Margaret.

At that time, many of my friends considered I had bats in my belfry when I tossed in a journalism/public relations career for one of librarianship. And I must confess there were both social and business occasions in those days when I would be reticent to owning up to being 'a librarian'.

Friends told me my career change was a retrograde step and that I was ruining my life. Coincidentally, librarian friends subsequently told me that the pressures of this Presidency will also 'ruin my life'. Please be assured I seem to be having a great time, on both counts!

In this context, I thought it might be appropriate to preface this column with why I wanted to be your President and then outline some of the expectations I have for our Association in the coming year.

The following anecdote best demonstrates why I decided to run for Presidency:

I was not happy with a decision (concerning information access) made by my managing director and was confident that the decision had been made without a full understanding of the situation. Thus when I ran into him in the lift, I did not hesitate to query his decision and respectfully suggest that I felt the wrong decision had been made.

In relating this episode to a friend who is also an influential member of our library profession, the immediate response was, 'Do you really think you should approach the head of your bank like this? After all, you are *just the librarian*.'

And this, I think, is a trap we librarians often fall into, an insecurity to believe in the worthiness of our profession against our business peers. Would my friend have had

the same view if it had been a lawyer querying a decision on a legal matter or an accountant querying a financial decision; rather than the librarian querying a decision on information access?

In the episode related above, I had expertise and knowledge of a situation and I was confident that a wrong decision could put my organisation in an unnecessarily derogatory situation. I think I would have been negligent if I had shrugged my shoulders and said, 'Oh well, what do I know? *I'm just the librarian*.'

I am pleased to report that the decision was gracefully reworked and both my managing director and I finished up being happy with the outcome. These win/win challenges are plentiful in librarianship and are part of what makes the job so challenging and rewarding.

This *just a librarian* syndrome is my motivating factor in wanting to be your President. I have now spent the most rewarding 10 years of my working life, as a librarian, ...and it keeps getting better!

I cannot imagine a better job that simultaneously offers challenge, rewards, what I call 'the thrill of the chase', a sense of 'doing something worthwhile and good', where every day turns up something different, where every day ends with a sense of accomplishment, and where you are at the leading edge... nobody can do what we do, better than we do.

Perhaps it is because I have had another career besides librarianship — that I have a comparable appreciation of what I do and what my career does for me — that I can rebel against the claim of being *just a librarian*.

There is an amazing level of ignorance about librarians and the role of libraries among those whom we assume know us better than they really do. The only way they are going to learn is if we tell them.

The secret of success, is to tell

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them — indeed educate them — in a way that opens minds and generates enthusiasm for our library profession and the many types of libraries it services.

A problem we must overcome is the tendency to subdivide our territory. The only way we are going to win over our public face is by teamwork and respect for the many parts that make up our body corporate. Just as those outside our profession often misunderstand what it is that we do, there is a tendency to compartmentalise and categorise our roles to the point where we lose sight that we are all integral to the whole. We, as a profession, need to be less narcissistic for a while and concentrate on the big picture of why libraries and what we do make them unique, essential and viable.

We also have to stop trifling with the 'political correctness' of the terms we use to describe the diverse functions of our profession. This reached an extreme in South Australia, a few years ago, when a lobby group putting together a library policy paper to distribute to the various political parties was loathe to use the term *librarian* in the text, for fear of upsetting the technicians.

Fortunately, common-sense prevailed and those drafting the document acknowledged that a library policy document that makes no mention of the importance of librarians would be a disservice to our profession.

To my mind, the term *librarian* is our common denominator and, in the eyes of the public, is our universal identifier. We should start capitalising on that existing knowledge-base instead of wanting to diffuse it by insisting on fragmentation into a range of titles and professional areas. For those of you who did studies in natural history, think of *librarian* as the genus, and chart a plethora of species under it, be the cataloguers, technicians, research managers, information managers

- teacher-librarians, or systems-librarians. As our industry grows, the list gets bigger and bigger and their constant common denominator is the genus *librarian*.

### My expectations for 1995

I have two theories I'd like to see proved:

1. *A library staffed by people who love their jobs results in users who can't get along without their library.* ALIA can help here by fostering a culture of switched-on, proactive members. It can be a voice, a sounding board, an initiator... an Association you can take pride in! Past criticisms that ALIA had no relevance to the daily worklife are just that... a thing of the past. ALIA will be providing useful, relevant and timely support in all areas of your working life.
2. *Information is power — but only when it is shared.* We have given lip service to the concept of the 'clever country'. The government has thrown two carrots — *One Nation* and *Creative Nation* — it's time to show the teeth of our composite command of the country's intellectual property, and the

good uses to which we can put that collective power.

My final expectation in the term of my presidency is to encourage an Association that does a better job of inspiring the involvement and reflecting the views of its diverse membership.

I feel quite strongly that the Association is its membership, not the National Office nor the General Council. The General Council and National Office work for the members, *not vice versa*. Your General Council is a representative body that you have elected to lead your Association — the more demands you make on them the better they will lead!

We are already seeing healthy signs of increased member involvement, in that several States this year have actually held elections rather than co-opting people to hold office.

I hope General Council can initiate mechanisms that cater for better methods of canvassing member opinion; that allow active participation by a greater percentage of members, rather than those precious few who are able to attend state Branch Council meetings or are segregated into divisional activity.

I will be contacting all Branch Presidents to discuss some ideas I have and gain input from them on situations that exist within individual States.

For you, the members, I have two hopes over the coming year. One is that you won't be bashful about breaking out and '*strutting your stuff*' for the greater good of our library profession.

My other hope is that when considering your membership notice, the operative question will be whether you afford *not* to renew it! ■

*[Next month: the workings of General Council and how you can make your voice heard.]*

# Cultural Ministers' Council: Focus on libraries

In June 1993, Des Stephens, the State Librarian at the State Library of Queensland presented a proposal to the Australian Cultural Ministers Council (CMC) to establish a national libraries working group. The stated aim of the group was to review current trends in library development, to examine demand for library service, to consider the implications of the rapid advances in information technology, and to advance national strategies for developing a model of library service in tune with current and projected national educational, cultural, social and community goals.

Future development of library services must take place in a context which recognises the major economic, social and cultural power shifts which are occurring as we move towards a post-industrial information-based global economy. In the economy of the future, access to information will be a pre-condition to personal autonomy and peoples' information needs will increase as society becomes increasingly complex.

There will be major equity and social justice implications arising from the above developments and, as a result of the cost of accessing information using new information and communications technology. Leaving aside issues such as training, literacy in general and information literacy in particular, not everyone will be able to afford the basic technology to access the networks as they emerge.

These are the issues that have been so effectively canvassed by ALIA and other groups with the Broadband Services Expert Group, Australian Science and Technology Council, Deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe, and Arts and Communications Minister Michael Lee.



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