

The American Library Association Conference

San Francisco



Virginia Walsh

Executive director

Around 20 000 delegates descended on San Francisco for the American Library Association Annual Conference at the end of June. The biggest gathering of the library community in the world, the event was spectacular in its size and diversity. Thousands of exhibits, ranging from the latest in on-line technology to dealers in badges, brooches and books sprawled through two cavernous halls. Delegates had the challenge of selecting from 3500 professional meetings over five days. Added attractions included library tours and receptions celebrating a host of achievements.

The neophyte quickly discovers the importance of developing a program from the choices available to ensure that the maximum personal and professional benefit is extracted. Not surprisingly, this requires a concentrated evaluation of the options on offer. Thankfully the process is streamlined (as much as is possible) reflecting ALA's experience of hosting many of these functions over the years.

At events such as these it is possible to compare the issues of interest to our colleagues in the United States with those we are facing here in Australia. The coincidence of these concerns is not surprising, given the influence of new technology on libraries throughout the world. There remain, as expected, matters of significance which relate to the management of traditional library resources but, overwhelmingly, the focus was on the impact of new communication and information technologies. What follows is a pot-pourri of information about the ALA, its leaders and the San Francisco Conference which may interest our readers.

Kids can't wait

Outgoing president, Mary Somerville, reflected on her achievements over the last year. Her theme, 'Kids can't wait', was the vehicle for promoting the impact of libraries on children's lives. Ms Somerville was also active in securing legislative reform — particularly the challenges to intellectual freedom contained in the *Communications Decency Act*.

Global reach — local touch

Incoming president Barbara J Ford, whose term commenced on 1 July, is pursuing a broad agenda with an emphasis on access

to information around the world. Ms Ford addressed her theme a number of times during the conference and these words summarise her focus 'Ours is a smaller world. As librarians, we have a responsibility to provide the collections and services that will help Americans understand our increasingly diverse society and prosper in the new world economy.'

We must also unite with colleagues around the world in advocating funding, information equity, copyright and other issues that will shape the global information infrastructure.' Ms Ford's experience as a member of the Peace Corps, and her subsequent involvement in the development of the Virtual Library of Virginia and other technology-related initiatives have contributed to the global focus for her presidential year.

Champion of school libraries

The presidential succession in ALA is similar to our own. The successful candidate for president-elect, whose term commences in July 1998, was introduced to delegates. Ann Symons is the first school librarian to be elected to the ALA presidency in its long history. From Alaska, Ann will be using the next twelve months to define her presidential goals. Ms Symons is an enthusiastic and impressive librarian who has a broad appreciation of the range of issues confronting the library industry.

Australian Studies Discussion Group

For many years the work of the Australian Studies Discussion Group has been fostered by the expatriate New Zealand husband and wife team of Murray and Noelene Martin who reside in Connecticut. On the occasion of the Group's meeting at the ALA conference the reins were handed over to Faye Christenberry who works at the University of Kansas Regents Center.

The interests of the group are diverse. It appears that there is a general interest in literature from our part of the world and also in the progress of our libraries. A special interest relates to indigenous issues which was the subject of this particular meeting. Aboriginal and Maori librarians (including Alana Garwood from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra and Melissa Jackson from the State Library of New South Wales)

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gave an overview of local developments in the provision of library services to indigenous communities.

International Indigenous Librarians' Forum

The ALA hosted this first forum with the aim of establishing an International Committee, to work on a global Indigenous Information Policy. To facilitate this meeting ALA sponsored the travel and accommodation costs of Melissa and Alana as well as a contingent from New Zealand.

San Francisco Public Library

The notoriety surrounding the building and management of the new main public library in San Francisco's Civic Center provided an incentive for thousands of delegates to make the pilgrimage to this much touted library of the future. A couple of years ago I had visited the old library and inspected the shell of the new, adjacent building. The new library was open for business in April 1996 amid the expectations of city librarian Ken Dowlin that 'the new Main would be a technologically advanced, state-of-the-art library wired for the twenty-first century, a showplace where miles of shelf space devoted to collections would meet cyberspace' (*American Libraries* April 1996). Since then there have been criticisms levelled at the management which ultimately resulted in the departure of Ken Dowlin. Subsequently it has been revealed that some of this criticism was based on inaccurate information but there remain significant tensions around issues such as funding for book stock and overall library budget management. On the day I visited it certainly was a hub of activity especially in the children's section with kids competing for space around the computer terminals. The building is full of natural light which radiates through a central atrium and filters through to the multi-tiered work spaces. Worth a visit if you venture to California.

Search for new executive director

During the conference the ALA Council announced that ALA staffer Mary Ghikas would be acting as executive director following the departure of Elizabeth Martinez in August. An executive search process has been underway for some time but the ALA Council has been unable to conclude contractual negotiations with any of the candi-



At the conference with (l-r) Faye Christenberry (chair, ALA Australian Studies Group), Melissa Jackson (SLNSW), Virginia Walsh, Alana Garwood (IATSIS)

dates who emerged from this process. The search continues.

ALA membership and council meetings

ALA has 57 000 members and requires a quorum of one percent of the membership to formally conduct its meetings. On the two occasions scheduled for meetings during the conference the quorum was not reached, and the ALA president appointed Norman Horrocks to chair the first session of informal discussion. The president chaired the second session. While no business could be transacted at these meetings the members canvassed a broad range of administrative matters asking about the financial position and the progress with particular projects.

During the second of the three ALA council meetings held in San Francisco I spoke briefly to the 175 Councillors noting the many issues of common interest and conveyed greetings from the Australian Library and Information Association.

Celebrations and receptions

The ALA awards reception was the occasion on which the winners of key awards were announced. IFLA president Robert Wedgeworth, colleague and friend to many of us here, received the Melvil Dewey Award for his distinguished service of more than thirty years to the profession of librarianship.

It was also Mary Somerville's farewell performance as ALA president and she courageously presented, karaoke-style, a rendition of My way — with lyrics she composed especially for the occasion. President Somerville received a standing ovation. It was a skilful and entertaining conclusion to a year of very hard work.

The incoming president's Inaugural Banquet followed the Awards presentation and guests were bussed to Chinatown for a multi-course Chinese banquet and multicultural entertainment. A convivial and fitting finalé to a wonderful week. ■

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