

AN INSIDER'S VIEW OF THE ALIA NATIONAL 2016 CONFERENCE

Conference first-timer **MELISSA FRANCIS** dived into the cornucopia of presentations at the ALIA National 2016 Conference.

I joined ALIA after I graduated with my degree in information studies in 2011. I had been working in the sector for quite a while, but I never had the opportunity to go to a conference before. So I jumped at the chance to apply for the ALIA grant that was offered earlier this year.

As I was a newbie, I thought I would zip along to the First-Timers' Breakfast at the start of the conference. It was great to meet the other first-timers, and by 9am I had already made the first of many new contacts. We heard from a panel of experienced conference-goers, and we were given excellent tips by ALIA President, Tricia Genat, and ALIA SA State Manager, Lauren Gobbett, about how to make the most of the days ahead.

Lauren exhorted us to keep our career goals firmly in mind when deciding which sessions to attend. In spite of Lauren's very good advice, I went off in a completely different direction. I went to all the keynote presentations and a wide variety of other sessions. I also attended brilliant satellite events on the days at either end of the conference and a publisher roadshow held by Hachette on Tuesday night, which was great fun.

Each keynote speaker was excellent and truly inspiring. They included Lorcan Dempsey from OCLC, Neil Carrington from Act for Kids, Barbara Schack from Libraries Without Borders (LWB), and Kate Torney, who is the new CEO for State Library Victoria.

I was shocked and dismayed by the statistics revealed by Jane Garner and Bhuva Narayan in their examination of prison libraries. There are 36,000 prisoners in Australia crowded into 111 custodial facilities around the country, incarcerated for an average of 4.7 years. These people are locked alone in their cells from 8 pm to 8 am, they engage in very little daytime activity, they have poor literacy rates, and they have little or no access to even the most basic library resources and services. Thanks to Jane and her newly formed Prison Libraries Group, they are now looking to achieve the same minimum standards in prison libraries as in public libraries, focusing first on juvenile, immigration and women's prisons.

I loved the presentation on the Ideas Box given by Barbara Schack from LWB. After the earthquake hit Haiti in 2010, LWB moved in to distribute books and educational materials to people living in the crisis centre camps. Some of the larger aid organisations queried their presence. It has since been proven that the provision of such support and resources is crucial to the mental wellbeing of displaced people – especially when a few days in a camp turns into several years. In response to this need, LWB developed a mobile library in a box, which can fit neatly into the hold of a plane. It's called the Ideas Box. It looks like a large crate, made up of travelling trunks, and it unfolds to create a self-sufficient library that is 100 square metres and can host up to 70 people at a time.



Melissa Francis received a grant to attend the conference.

The box contains a weatherproof structure, furniture, and all the tech, books, games and craft supplies that might be needed, as well as its own energy source and a local server to provide educational material. Currently in use in countries affected by the Syrian civil war, it's also being used to great effect in remote Indigenous communities in Queensland and WA in partnership with their state libraries. I wondered if it could also be adapted for prisons.

There were many other highlights, but the final one I'll mention was a session titled 'Off the books and on the job: libraries and community centres supporting workers in transition'. Pippa Webb and Simone Wise-Carrig showed how libraries in the City of Salisbury in Adelaide are supporting those workers who face retrenchment when the Holden manufacturing plant closes in 2017. It is estimated that 23,000 people will be affected in that council area, causing major social dislocation. Many of these workers are middle-aged men with an average of 18 years' experience at Holden but with low levels of formal education and insufficient literacy skills. Libraries, seen as the face of councils, are establishing partnerships with schools, local agencies and the business community to help families transition to the new economy. They are providing help with their JobPods and are expanding their literacy programs for adults. And they are meeting with local business to discuss, for example, tapping into the new road infrastructure being built in order to help connect their people with jobs.

Which brings me to Kate Torney's closing keynote session: 'Communities within and without'. Kate opened by noting that libraries are thriving on disruption. Libraries have always been about creating order out of chaos, and she added that despite the technological tsunami we are experiencing, libraries are continually reinventing their role. She added that libraries are about communities; they know their communities, and they are able to partner with the communities to shape the future.

I thank ALIA for honouring me with a grant to attend the conference; I feel deeply privileged. And thanks especially to Margaret Allen, CEO of the State Library of Western Australia, who was the generous donor of the grant. Her kindness will not be forgotten. It was a great conference. ✨

MELISSA FRANCIS

Co-convenor, ALIA Specials SA Committee
delmfran@yahoo.com.au