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**American Libraries Association (ALA) 142<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference & Exhibition  
June 22-27, 2023, Chicago, IL  
Trustees Rawlson King and Adam Smith**

## **Trustee Rawlson King**

The 142<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference & Exhibition of the American Libraries Association (ALA) was held June 22 to 27, 2023 at McCormick Place in Chicago, IL. I attended the conference on behalf of the Ottawa Public Library Board from June 23 to June 26.

The ALA is a prestigious organization dedicated to the advancement and promotion of libraries, librarianship, and library services across the United States. Founded in 1876, the ALA is America's largest and most influential library association. The association plays a significant role in shaping library policies and practices. It develops standards and guidelines that promote excellence in library services, collections, and technologies. Through its various divisions, roundtables, and committees, the ALA fosters collaboration, professional development, and the exchange of ideas among librarians, ensuring they stay updated with the latest trends and innovations in the field.

According to the ALA, the conference gathered an audience of more than 9,107 librarians, library workers, and library supporters and 6,375 exhibitors, authors, illustrators, press, and staff from around the world. The five-day event featured an agenda comprising 220 educational programs and over 1,200 workshop sessions and activities that were carefully crafted and curated by library professionals.

These sessions covered a diverse range of critical topics concerning libraries throughout North America, with a particular focus on intellectual freedom, censorship, book bans and threats to libraries and library workers; adult literacy and digital equity; health and wellness; justice-involved services; navigating a deeply politicized landscape; libraries in the age of artificial intelligence; books, authors, and reading; budget planning and finance; and advanced community user experience.

Given the current divisive political climate in the U.S. and the resulting legal challenges related to censorship, as well as political campaigns to defund public libraries that carry materials deemed objectionable or inappropriate by certain individuals and groups, the general opening session and numerous educational workshops centered around the theme of intellectual freedom.

The American Libraries Association (ALA) actively works to safeguard intellectual freedom and combat censorship, therefore making it a prominent theme throughout the conference. The organization emphasizes the right of individuals to access, explore, and express ideas, information, and opinions without censorship or restriction.

I attended the general opening session which provided a standing-room-only audience with words and praise from visionary leaders who offered their support of libraries and librarians, as well as new initiative announcements. The session featured legendary author Judy Blume discussing the contrast and irony of the present state of book banning versus the censorship she endured decades ago. The general opening session also featured Illinois Secretary of State and Illinois State Librarian Alexi Giannoulis, who voiced his support in the fight against book banning and his work to facilitate critical legislation for intellectual freedom, including the historic legislation that bans book bans in the state of Illinois. Local television personalities Matthew Rodrigues and Cortney Hall shared the success of their Chicago Banned Books Club feature on “NBC Chicago Today”, as well as the news that NBC is looking to expand the Banned Books Club to their other television markets throughout the U.S. Chicago Public Library (CPL) Commissioner Chris Brown confirmed during the opening session that the CPL system has declared itself a “sanctuary for endangered stories”, and that 77 distinct neighborhoods and 81 library branches would be designated as “book sanctuaries”, designed to provide opportunities to expand local access to banned or challenged books.

I also attended a session which explicitly delved into the principles of intellectual freedom as protected by the First Amendment, as well as multiple sessions focused on improving equity, diversity, inclusion and the socioeconomic betterment of communities through library programming and facilities.

One education session, entitled "*Books Under Fire: Law and the Right to Read*,"

explored the significant legal challenges to intellectual freedom in the United States, particularly those related to censorship and attempts to restrict access to certain materials or ideas. The session outlined how attempts to ban books and limit access to libraries through new legislation and even local ordinances has accelerated at a pace never seen before in the United States. These are driven by attempts to censor access to books and materials related to sex, reproductive health, gender identity, sexual orientation, and content related to race. The session, led by Theresa Chmara, General Counsel for the Freedom to Read Foundation, provided an understanding of publicly funded libraries responsibilities to protect the right to read and access the library under the First and Fourteenth Amendment in the United States. The session also provided an understanding of proposed laws, ordinances, and administrative rules intended to censor materials or restrict library workers' ability to provide information to their community.

During this session, it was highlighted that multiple states have introduced 150 proposed pieces of "adverse legislation" aimed at regulating materials, enforcing divisive content bans, granting private right of action to file lawsuits against libraries and library workers, and eliminating legal protections for librarians against prosecution under U.S. obscenity statutes. A review of legal precedents and ongoing litigation indicated that recent appellate decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court continue to uphold First Amendment rights, acknowledging that viewpoint discrimination is unconstitutional. The ALA actively lobbies against such "adverse legislation" and supports strategies for effective advocacy to preserve the right to read, including networking with local and statewide groups and supporting legal challenges against censorship through its Unite Against Book Bans initiative.

In addition, I attended several educational workshop sessions focused on equity. The sessions I attended highlighted community-driven programs implemented by large urban library systems in the United States, aimed at building coalitions to promote social impact and enhance economic outcomes for vulnerable individuals and communities through engagement strategies that involve arts and arts education, childcare and the use of workplace development and food security programs as a nexus for community improvement and investment.

Sessions I attended concerning equity included:

*“Reflecting the Diversity of Your Community in Your Collection”*

The session explained how Midwest Tape LLC, a full-service distributor serving the public library sector, undertakes library collection diversity audits. The firm explained that diversity audits assist libraries obtain a holistic view of what library collections offer communities and how the community engages with library contents. Midwest Tape LLC contends that diversity audits allow library staff to determine community needs based upon community demographics and that applying data from collection diversity audits can increase the number of unique library patrons reached.

*“Socioeconomic Mixing: Creating Public Libraries Where Everyone Belongs”*

This session explored new approaches to programs, metrics, outreach strategies, marketing, staffing, collections, partnerships, and physical design with an aim towards creating more welcoming and inclusive library spaces to create spaces where everyone belongs, and that generate opportunities for shared experience among people of all incomes and backgrounds. The session explored case studies from Memphis Public Libraries on concrete ways to create inclusive spaces that foster connection. Working in group settings, participants will then collaborate to develop these concepts into actionable ideas suitable for various public library settings.

*“Culture in My Neighbourhood: Bringing the Arts to Every Community & Every Library”*

This session provided attendees with an outline as to how to design a comprehensive cultural initiative for their library system and understand how to partner with other civic and cultural leaders to bring arts programming to communities. Working with multiple community stakeholders, libraries, are bringing a range of cultural offerings to connect with their community from local dance groups to concerts to the theatre. Library, park, and cultural leaders from the Chicago Public Libraries highlighted how arts are prioritized and infused at the neighborhood level. Attendees also learned how to develop an artist in residence to infuse arts programming into the day-to-day library programming.

*“Learnings from Cities: How the Library Catalyzes a City's Equity-Driven Community Economic Development Agenda”*

Library strategist Margaret Sullivan facilitated a lively dialogue centered around four

case studies by panelists from the Chicago Public Library, Enoch Pratt Free Library, Hartford Public Library, and Wilmington Free Institute. The session how new library facility co-locations, innovative partnerships, and community co-created initiatives are leveraging the power of public libraries throughout the United States to drive neighborhood reinvestment and revitalization. The session examined library systems that are positioning themselves as leaders in social impact development to eradicate systemic neighborhood disinvestment and enable libraries as an engine for social enterprise and place-based programming centering community needs.

It was heartening to attend sessions on equity that featured leaders that are applying place-based community development techniques to spur neighborhood development, foster healthy communities, and catalyze talent. These sessions acknowledged that cities thrive when people from diverse backgrounds come together to form shared experiences. With low barriers to entry, these sessions emphasized that public libraries are uniquely positioned to provide opportunities for interactions between groups of different socioeconomic backgrounds, nurturing greater tolerance and appreciation for diversity.

I attended the “*ALA President Program*” session where Native Hawaiian activist and author Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu spoke about the mind, heart, and spirit of Māhū when she joined ALA President Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada in conversation. Māhūs are third-gender people with additional spiritual and social roles. During her session, she explained the work being undertaken by Kanaka, which means native Hawaiian people, to preserve and pass on Indigenous culture to younger people, as well as the queer community.

The session was an amazing example of the enhanced focus on diversity in publishing at the event, as Wong-Kalu’s children’s book, *Kapaemahu*, was profiled during the session. The award-winning illustrated book is based on the long-hidden history of four healing stones on Waikiki Beach placed there as a tribute to four legendary Māhū who first brought Indigenous healing arts to Hawaii. The book was indicative of the publishing featured in the event’s exposition space.

Indeed, a major component of the event was its exhibition entitled the “Library Marketplace” that featured more than 600 innovative exhibits. I attended the opening of

the exhibition space immediately after the general opening session and explored the exposition multiple times during my conference attendance. The Library Marketplace featured cataloguing technology, book scanning equipment and publication showcases from major popular and academic publishing houses. The exhibition space featured a “Meet the Authors” component that highlighted more than 630 authors available for book signings, selfies, and chats; complimentary advance reading copies of books; and a podcast recording booth where attendees could watch and listen to authors record podcasts. Due to the political climate, many of the books highlighted during the conference focused on equity and diversity themes. Most of the publishers marketed their books through publicizing their titles which had been banned in certain U.S. jurisdictions.

Due to the myriad of interesting and timely sessions and workshops, along with the exciting exposition space, the American Libraries Association (ALA) 142nd Annual Conference & Exhibition provided an excellent opportunities to learn about sector best practices.

As an Ottawa Public Library Board Trustee, I appreciated the opportunity to attend this conference to better understand issues facing other libraries and learn about innovative practices and initiatives, specifically concerning equity, diversity and inclusion and intellectual freedom which can be adopted by the Ottawa Public Library.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to both Julie Tremblay (Library Board Assistant, Board and Strategic Services) and Alexandra Yarrow, (Program Manager, Board and Strategic Services) for their assistance with all the of administrative and logistical supports related to the conference.

## **Trustee Adam Smith**

As a first-time attendee at the American Library Association's annual conference held in Chicago, Illinois, I was happy to be part of the largest library event in the world. The conference, which took place at McCormick Place, brought together thousands of librarians, library staff, authors, publishers, educators, exhibitors, and volunteers from all over the world.

One of the highlights of the conference was the International Lounge, where I had the opportunity to meet and interact with some of the 350 international attendees from over 50 countries. The passion and enthusiasm of the event attendees were palpable, creating an inspiring atmosphere. To add some flair to my conference experience, I adorned my lanyard with a buttons and stickers that read, among other things, "I speak French," which caught the attention of fellow attendees throughout the event.

Each day, I enjoyed the wonderful one-hour walks to the conference venue, which allowed me to soak in the vibrant energy of Chicago and prepare myself for the enriching sessions ahead.

During the conference, I had the pleasure of meeting several remarkable individuals from around the world. Some notable encounters included Shu-Chuan Tsao, the Director of Reader Services at Chaoyang University of Technology in Taiwan, Wen-Jen Ke, an officer at the National Library of Public Information in Taiwan, Dr. Pradnya Ramesh Deore, a librarian at S.P. Pune University in India, Juliana Es Mohn Munawir and Norelmin Sapuan, both librarians from the Selangor Public Library in Malaysia. These conversations provided valuable insights into the diverse challenges and approaches within the library profession globally.

A particularly engaging discussion took place with Jasmine Kershaw, a librarian from England. We delved into the topic of censorship and the differences between library systems in the United States and England. We explored how U.S. libraries sometimes have specialized librarians for various areas, such as children's books and young adult literature, while in England, most public librarians are generalists. This exchange allowed me to gain a broader perspective on the various models and strategies employed in different countries.

Furthermore, I had the opportunity to converse with Victoria Caplan, the Head of Research and Learning Support at The Hong Kong University of Science and

Technology. Our conversation revolved around censorship, particularly the levels and extent of restrictions in different regions. Victoria shared insights into the challenges faced by libraries, including the "cancellation" of certain materials and the subtle curtailment of free media. It was eye-opening to learn about the ongoing efforts to preserve censored materials, often hidden deep within collections.

Throughout the conference, the exhibition hall buzzed with over 500 exhibitors showcasing their latest books and resources. It was a captivating sight to witness publishers promoting their works and authors engaging in discussions on various stages. One exhibitor that stood out to me was Lauren Chilvers, an MLIS and CFRE from The Fundraising Librarian LLC. Lauren's expertise in fundraising, including feasibility studies, event strategies, and donor relations, caught my attention, as it aligns with the Ottawa Public Library's ongoing initiatives.

The atmosphere in the exhibit hall was vibrant, with conversations revolving around banned books and censorship, reflecting the growing concerns within the library community. I also noticed a significant presence of individuals passionate about manga, comics, graphic novels, and gaming, underscoring the evolving landscape of library resources and engagement.

Among the numerous sessions, a few stood out as particularly noteworthy. The panel discussion titled "Thinking Big: How Systemwide Planning and Design Optimize Service and Maximize Engagement" provided valuable insights into capital project fundraising, collaboration with consultants, and the efficient utilization of library spaces. The panelists, representing libraries in Kentucky, shared their experiences in building three new libraries. The session resonated with me as Ottawa faces similar challenges regarding retrofits, new locations, and legacy facilities. The key message of expecting plans to change was a valuable takeaway. I was able to ask the panelists questions about their ongoing facility building projects, and I plan to share their answers with the Ad Hoc Committee on Fundraising.

Another significant session was "Addressing the Spread of Misinformation and Disinformation: The Library's Role." It emphasized the importance of integrating media literacy principles into programs, conversations, and communications to create a better-informed public. The session highlighted the role libraries can play in fostering media literacy skills and combating the challenges posed by misinformation.



Lastly, the panel discussion titled "Be Fierce: How to Harness Your Power for Your Libraries" featured first-person accounts from trustees, library staff, and foundation members. The speakers shared their experiences in advocacy, countering book challenges, and developing strategic relationships to counter censorship attempts. The session empowered attendees to advocate confidently and establish connections within the library community.

In conclusion, my first library conference experience at the American Library Association's annual event in Chicago was immensely informative and inspiring. The diverse range of attendees, engaging discussions, and thought-provoking sessions enriched my understanding of the library profession on a global scale. I am grateful for the opportunity to connect with professionals from different countries, gain insights into fundraising strategies, and explore pertinent topics such as censorship and media literacy. The knowledge and connections I acquired at the conference will undoubtedly contribute to my role as a Board of Trustees member for the Ottawa Public Library.