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**Urban Libraries Council 2023 Annual Forum
October 24-27, 2023, Seattle, Washington
Trustee Alison Crawford**

October 25

People: Strong relationships and effective leadership

These sessions were for library and library foundation CEOs. At the end of their day of programming, all delegates gathered in the foyer of the hotel for a welcome reception where we heard remarks from one of the event sponsors, Aman Kochar of library services provider Baker & Taylor. He delivered remarks about how libraries are places of belonging.

Afterwards, I spoke to several library directors who were pleasantly surprised to meet a trustee at the event. When asked why Trustee Slack and I were attending, I explained that I personally wanted to learn more about the challenges of leading a library and how else trustees can support and advocate on behalf of the Ottawa Public Library. Reaction was mixed. Some directors told me that our CEO was inspired in her thinking and that they would consider doing the same at future conferences.

In speaking to various directors with a focus on how libraries are meeting the needs of the community's most vulnerable, I learned a lot. Some libraries hired social workers to assist library staff in their dealings with clients experiencing a wide variety of housing, mental health and addictions challenges. Others had bookmobiles for members in rural areas and inner cities with resources such as sewing machines, pots and pans and free Wi-Fi for several hours.

Directors also told me that the Urban Libraries Council (ULC) is the best library conference they attend every year because it provides more time for CEOs and other senior leadership to make meaningful connections and exchange ideas.

October 26

Place: Inclusion, connection, and the future

The breakfast networking session was a delight. I had the pleasure of meeting Darcell Graham, Deputy Director of Public Services for the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. In short, she oversees far too much for one individual, yet is an inspirational force of nature.

Ms. Graham told me about the library's extensive bookmobile service to a wide variety of areas and places such as tall apartment buildings, seniors' and community centres. It also has Mobile Job Centre services. Both offer free community wi-fi. The job centre has 12 computer workstations and staff help members create resumes and cover letters, print out documents, search career databases and prepare for an interview. It also refers some people to Adult Basic Education and GED classes.

Enoch Pratt also partners with Maryland Legal Aid lawyers for its "Lawyer in the Library" program and has more than one social worker working out of six locations to help people access food benefits, referrals to mental health resources, etc.

The Mayor's Office of Homeless Services provide "Housing Navigators" at five branches and every day of the week, to help resolve housing problems.

The University of Maryland School of Nursing brings students and registered nurses to four branches to provide free drop-in health assessments and health education. Specifically for mental health issues, the Maryland Peer Advisory Council sends "peer recovery specialists" to branches. These individuals provide guidance and help to those who are recovering from substance abuse, mental or behavioural health "challenges and recovery."

When I asked how it feels to oversee so much programming that is largely not in the mandate of a public library, she admitted that it was a lot of responsibility.

After breakfast, the ULC convened a panel of leaders from the public libraries in Los Angeles County, Brooklyn and Portland. They spoke about tailoring their programming and collections to the communities they serve. For instance, in L.A., select branches tailor their services to help support people in the film production industry, as most of them have been suffering in recent times with ongoing strikes. They also employ hyper-local marketing, such as at specific schools and laundromats. Library Director Skye

Patrick talked about how in truly serving your community, the country has eliminated story time programming at some branches because it doesn't serve those who need the library most. She spoke frankly about how those with more resources bring their kids to libraries for story time.

The Brooklyn Public Library director spoke mostly about its successful initiative with Jay-Z, which featured four new designs for library cards featuring the famous artist. It led to 30,000 new users. You can read more about the project here:

<https://www.bklynlibrary.org/exhibitions/book-hov>.

Portland public library director spoke about a huge transformation that continues right now. Covid, racial social justice issues in 2021 and climate emergencies have all contributed to a difficult reckoning. They started by asking, "What would happen if the library wasn't here?" Building out from that question, they shared the sentiment that story times don't always make a long-term difference to the community at large. She talked about building climate "resiliency hubs" for people during extremely hot and cold days, during smoky wildfires, flooding, etc. Her library also realized that its land acknowledgments had become performative instead of meaningful.

The keynote speaker was Dr. Jeremy Nobel, author of "Project Unlonely". He said loneliness is crisis that causes suffering that can only be alleviated by strengthening social bonds. Surprisingly to me, he told delegates that people aged 18-24 are the loneliest in society. This, he said, is where libraries have an opportunity to connect with clients. Dr. Nobel said libraries are the front lines of community engagement as they are committed to equity and social justice, "they are trusted and respected as sacred spaces".

At lunch I chatted with more delegates about what they agreed were largely performative land acknowledgements. I then learned about "labour acknowledgements", which recognize the how much of the development and economic success of an area is due to the unpaid work and servitude of Black slaves. There was also a lively debate at my table about how far libraries should go, in terms of providing social services to clients.

What followed was a presentation called "Emerging Disruptors in the Future of Libraries".

At the end of the day, we all walked to the stunning glass Seattle Public Library for a warm reception. The building is impressive from the outside but inside it seems to have limited sightlines and lots of blind spots. I also kept wondering about their bills for cleaning windows. A woman from a smaller town in Iowa also told me about how the most popular borrowed item (not book) are sous vide machines.

October 27

Power: Standing tall and rising to the occasion

At the networking session over breakfast, I chatted to Monique Moore Pryer, executive director of the [Free Library of Philadelphia Foundation](#) and Stacy Lieberman, president and CEO of the [Library Foundation of Los Angeles](#). Ms. Lieberman was at the tail end of preparations for the year's premiere fundraiser called Literary Feasts. She said it aimed to raise more than \$1.4 million. I will bring the booklet to the next board meeting but to give you an idea of the scope and planning for this event.

The only session I attended that day (due to my travel schedule) was a presentation by ULC President and CEO Brooks Rainwater and ULC Board Chair/Director of the Austin Public Library Roosevelt Weeks.

Mr. Brooks presented survey results from ULC members. I found the most interesting result to be the answers to the following question:

What are the top trends or challenges that will have the greatest impact on the urban library community in the next 3-5 years?

69% - threats to intellectual freedom

58% - social issues

34 % - Funding/budget

27% - Safety of staff/patrons

23% - recruiting/retaining employees

18% - staff burnout

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Trustee Harvey A. Slack

The 2023 Urban Library Council (ULC) was the first conference I attended as a trustee of the Ottawa Public Library Board. With Sonia Bebbington, Chief Librarian and Chief Executive Officer, Anna Basile, Division Manager, Corporate Services, and Trustee Alison Crawford as fellow participants, it was a privilege to be part of the delegation.

It was an inspiring and wonderful opportunity to meet, learn, and exchange information with other library officials from North America. I had the pleasure to meet ULC Board of Directors, counterparts from foundations, and librarians from Canada (Calgary, Toronto, and Vancouver) and the United States. This was an amazing experience for me to hear from others on issues and matters relating to their organisations.

During my time at the conference, I attended the most informative sessions about people, power, and place. It was a wonderful opportunity to network and to hear the views of the panelists about challenges, cutbacks, the effects that Covid had and the after-effects including establishing new ways of doing business. One session dealt with the subject of anxiety, loneliness, and how libraries can play a role in addressing how Covid affected a large volume of library users. Dealing with loneliness is important post-pandemic. We learnt that everyone is a caregiver...we are all in it together! To learn and share is one way to become unlonely...this is where libraries can help us. Sharing and caring are important ways for us to participate in helping others.

Items that were emphasised at the Conference were the following:

- Libraries as we know are in the business of serving communities;
- Re-engaging with the public;
- Vision of libraries for the future;
- Intellectual freedom; and,
- Safety of staff.

The two take away expression for me are “We won’t lose because we won’t quit.” And, “I’m not smartest person at work but I am surrounded with the smartest people I know.” One word that I enjoyed hearing was about architects who design libraries being “starchitects.”

The Seattle Library in the downtown is amazing. It is an iconic building of ten floors with a stupendous roof that juts in all directions. The sun gleams off the roof. We had a reception in the building with an in-depth view of the interior. It was a wonderful chance via the tour to see their facility. This was a wonderful opportunity for me to represent the Ottawa Public Library Board as a trustee, which I am truly humbled to be associated with. Thank you to the phenomenal professional staff at the Ottawa Public Library.