

PLA 2016: An extraordinary experience

I was the fortunate winner of a grant from OPLA to attend the Public Libraries Association Conference in Denver, Colorado from April 6-9, 2016. The theme of the conference was "Be extraordinary," because "extraordinary libraries create extraordinary communities." So much of it was memorable and striking - the sheer numbers of registrants (8,000), the amazing Colorado Convention Center, excellent and varied speakers, hundreds of booths in the Exhibit Hall, and the beautiful and inviting city of Denver, located close to the Rocky Mountains.

I started my four-day experience with one of my favorite activities - learning about upcoming adult books from four publishers. "Book Buzz: Presented by Booklist" was just like our Dewey Divas sessions, but attended by a huge audience. Needless to say, my reading list for the next several months is full, as was my book bag after attending the exhibits where advance reading copies were plentiful. A librarian's dream come true!

Oakville Public Library is a new client of CollectionHQ, and I was fortunate to attend a user forum hosted by the company for 70 of its clients. Several libraries outlined their experiences with the software. It was so helpful to hear their stories and meet other people in different stages of implementation.

The key note speakers each morning were outstanding. First up was Anderson Cooper. I had no preconceptions about him as I don't watch CNN, but I came away very impressed. When he walked into the theatre, he seemed taken aback by the large audience of 7,000, and asked "Who's in the library right now?" His talk centered on his new book, *The Rainbow Comes and Goes: A Mother and Son on Life, Love, and Loss*, co-authored with his mom, Gloria Vanderbilt. He and his mom spent a year exchanging e-mails about their lives to understand each other as adults. Cooper didn't want things to be left unsaid between him and his 91 year-old mom. He called it the "most important year of his life." He said that "writing a book is the most important accomplishment anyone can achieve... Telling stories is so important... Librarians are the keepers of all these stories."

Next, I entered the exhibit hall of over 300 exhibitors. What a treat to see all the latest technologies, furnishings, publishers, and software vendors. It was a real challenge to be selective in the free material I was offered - the weight limits for my return luggage were in the back of my mind as I picked up ARCs and author-signed copies of books. A true book-lover's paradise! I made several return trips over the four days as I tried to cover the full exhibit hall.

Thursday's key note speaker was Verna Myers, an author and consultant who is on a mission to "help eradicate barriers of race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation." She encouraged librarians to be inclusive, because "when we foster inclusion, we encourage people to come to us... We are anchors to normalcy in so many people's lives." But to be inclusive, we must recognize our own biases - we have to

understand our own cultural lens and embrace our biases. "Be on a mission to embrace your biases," she said. "Embrace your comfort zone: move toward difference. Purposely connect with people who aren't like you. Be actively anti-biased; otherwise the status quo persists." I was truly inspired by these and so many other insightful messages - all so important to staff in public libraries who serve a diverse public.

PLA hosted sessions for attendees called "Make it Extraordinary," led by consultant Kari Chapin. We were taught tips for making the most of the conference and given a notebook that helped us manage our time, track our ideas, and be creative. I love the template we were given to generate ideas and implement them and hope to use it in my work.

Thursday's Film Night was a highlight for me, with the showing of *Love Between the Covers*, a documentary about the global community of romance novel writers and their loyal readers. It gave me immense respect and a new appreciation for the genre. I highly recommend it to all librarians, to learn more about these stories that are "written by, for, and about women."

Friday started with another impressive key note speaker - Sherry Turkle, a psychologist and MIT professor, whose latest book is *Reclaiming Conversation: the Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. She studies conversation and the effect that technology has on human interaction. She said that "face-to-face conversation is where creativity, collaboration, intimacy and empathy come forth. If we don't do this, what happens to our relationships?" In an age where people would rather text than talk, this is an important message. As we add more technology to our libraries, we must remember the importance of face-to-face conversation. And as multi-tasking becomes more prevalent and we read multiple short texts every day, we have to learn the skill of reading longer texts if we think novels are important. Her most important message is that "Technology can make us forget what we know about life," and we must not let that happen.

Saturday's key note speaker was perhaps the most powerful - Anand Giridharadas, a *New York Times* columnist and author of *The True American: Murder and Mercy in Texas*. The book tells the story of Raisuddin Bhuiyan, an immigrant from Bangladesh who was shot by a Texan in revenge for 9/11. Bhuiyan survived but two other victims did not. Somehow, Bhuiyan found a way to forgive the Texan and fought to have him spared from death row. Anand stated that "America is fracturing into two distinct republics - dreams and fear." His book tells the story of how it might be put back together. He believes that America needs to create a conversation about what a true American is. "The most exciting conversations in a city should be occurring in libraries,... and librarians should make it impossible for people not to come in."

I am part of OPL's collections team, so I attended several sessions related to collections issues. Talented and knowledgeable session leaders taught me a great deal about what libraries are doing to:

- Right-size collections, i.e., evaluating and adjusting library collections to give customers what they want and adapt to a changing environment.
- Build digitally-inclusive communities by offering tablets-to-go, and wi-fi hotspots around their communities.
- Lend non-book materials such as record players, musical instruments, science kits, and more.
- Offer personal readers' advisory services through personalized online "Ask a librarian" services.
- Improve weeding processes and measure results.
- Simplify access to eBooks through an app that fully integrates any content the library has bought. The app puts it all in one spot and lets people discover, borrow, and read - three easy steps. I was surprised to learn that surveys have shown that over half of customers who go in to borrow digital materials never end up with a successful download. So we're only serving our most dedicated and hard-core customers, who have the patience to figure out how it all works.

One of the highlights of my trip was the Denver Public Library. The staff welcomed conference attendees with tours and displays and much patience for all our questions. I met a delightful Children's Librarian named Tony who sported a Winnie-the-Pooh tie and told me all about the library. The building is architecturally stunning, with generous spaces for collections, services and abundant technology. Several card catalogs still remain in departments, and one librarian told me there would be a public uproar if they were removed!

At the opening session, Sari Feldman, ALA president, said that libraries "are a lifeline at every key transition in people's lives." Attending the conference made me proud to be a part of that lifeline. I was surrounded by smart, innovative, caring individuals who strive to make their communities extraordinary. It was truly exceptional to be surrounded by such positivity for my profession for four days.

I extend a huge thank you to OPLA for my grant to attend PLA 2016. The conference was a highlight of my professional career. Mark your calendars for PLA 2018 in Philadelphia, and plan to enter OPLA's draw.

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