

PLA Conference March 20-24th, 2018

I look forward to attending the OLA Superconference every year in Toronto, so I was thrilled to find out that I would be receiving OPLA's PLA Conference grant to attend the biennial conference in Philadelphia. In the months leading up to the conference I told everyone who would listen about how excited I was to attend.

I arrived on Tuesday night without incident. When I logged on to the Conference's Facebook page I discovered that a number of attendees had their travel either delayed or cancelled. However, once I arrived on Wednesday for registration and the opening session I soon realized that in spite of the unfortunate turn in the weather, there would not be any lack of people. The number I heard was almost 10 000, although I do not know how many actually managed to attend.

Sally Yates spoke during the opening session on Wednesday afternoon. Yates was the (acting) Attorney General of the United States when President Trump issued the Executive Order banning travellers from seven Muslim-majority countries in January 2017. Yates refused to let the Department of Justice defend the order, and was terminated hours later. I identified with her decision: in choosing between resigning and refusing to allow the Department of Justice to defend the order, a choice she knew would most likely lead to her dismissal, she chose to ensure that the integrity of the Department of Justice remained intact. It made me think about the ways in which libraries have defended the public's right to information and privacy, often in the face of pressure from powerful external influences.

Thursday was the most satisfying, as well as the longest, day. It began with the children's author breakfast at 7 a.m. Listening to the authors was worth the early morning trek to the conference centre. The highlights being Greg Pizzoli and Andrea Davis Pinkney, the latter was not able to attend due to the weather, but for whom they played a pre-recorded interview. The next couple of workshops I attended, "Assessing and Aligning Service Philosophy, Service Delivery, and Service Points" and "Push Comes to Shove: Supporting Patrons of Color in Your Institution" were both affirming. They reinforced that there are many librarians with visions of how libraries should operate which are congruent with my own, and when these ideas are turned into action they work.

"Assessing and Aligning Service Philosophy, Service Delivery, and Service Points" was run by the Director and the Assistant Director of the Chapel Hill Public Library in North Carolina. Their library had made a number of changes to bring the practice of serving the public in line with their service pledge that "promises friendly, helpful, responsive, engaged service - whenever, wherever, and whenever it's needed." The hour long presentation touched on many changes they made, and two stuck out to me: 1) Policies and practices that were under the control of the library, for example library cards needing to be renewed annually, were changed in order to create less work for the staff and an easier experience for the patrons. 2) Going forward it was the policy of the library to always believe their patrons. This led to less disagreements between the public and the staff. For example, a patron says they returned an item but it's still showing up on their account. Check it in and believe them! Patron needs to renew their card but doesn't have proof of address with them? Should you make them go home to get a utility bill? No. Ask for their current address and believe them. I asked if they had had any pushback- either from their board, the community, etc., and if they had suffered financially as a result. The answer was a no on both counts. The director who I spoke to told me it was her goal to

eliminate fines.

“Push Comes to Shove: Supporting Patrons of Color in Your Institution” was interactive. I sat at a table with about ten other conference attendees. I was familiar with a lot of the material having attended anti-racism and anti-oppression training in the past. As is often the case, the most valuable insight came from discussion with the people around me. The biggest take away from the workshop was that as librarians we need to be asking those in the communities we serve what sort of programs/resources/books they want, rather than giving them what we think they want. I find it is easy to get carried away with ideas for workshops that I would be good at running, or suggesting materials that I think people would find interesting. This lesson should be obvious, but it was valuable to get a reminder: although you might have a sense of what the community you serve needs, nothing is going to beat asking the community what they want from the library.

Friday's highlight was an event called “Spark Talks,” an event where speakers presented an idea, issue, or project in five minutes or less. After having attended several hour long presentations, this was refreshing. The presentations that stood out for me were “Medical Websites that don't make your patrons Hypochondriacs” which offered several alternatives to WebMD, “Serving Patrons Experiencing Homelessness in your Maker Space,” and “Staff Database Training in Five Minutes or Less.” These talks were fast paced and exciting, and I left feeling energized. It would be advantageous to have Spark Talks mid afternoon when attendees could use a boost, however, that would likely be at odds with the evening's cash bar!

Saturday began with Tim Wu, of Net Neutrality fame. Then I was off to a few more workshops before the closing session with comedian Hasan Minhaj of The Daily Show. Although the link between his talk and libraries was tenuous at best, he stated that librarians had always come down on the “same side” as him on significant political issues, which is encouraging. Shortly after the closing session, I walked over to the Parkway Central Library- the central branch of the Philadelphia Free Library. This wasn't a tour for PLA attendees- they offer free tours to the public everyday. Of course, five of the six tourists were librarians in town for the conference. It was exciting to see how a library system comparable to Toronto's (sixty branches for 1.5 million people) operates. The Central Library is unique in that they have a full commercial kitchen, which they use for cooking classes and food programs. I followed up by researching their food programs online. They range from English Language Learning “Edible Alphabet” to “Meatless Mondays.”

After having a few weeks to think about what I learned at the PLA Conference, I had a realization about the future of libraries and my role. On the one hand it was very affirming to be with so many individuals who had a similar vision for public libraries. It was great to see things like the elimination of fines gaining widespread popularity. It struck me that I need to look further into the future than many of the presentations reached. Unlike myself, many of the librarians in attendance were well into their careers and have had more decision making power. Even though I can advocate for particular viewpoints and and make one-time decisions, I should also be looking into what direction I would like to see the library move towards in ten or fifteen years, when I am securely mid-career. This realization has challenged me in a way that I haven't experienced recently, and is forcing me to think beyond what I learned at the U of T Faculty of Information, or even what I can see happening presently in the library world.

If there is any any doubt, each day at the PLA Conference left me with a lot to think about both in my immediate role as a librarian and in the future. I am already looking at ways that I can return to the conference in 2020.

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