

PLG Bulletin - 2023 ALA
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As a first-time ALA attendee, my experience at the 2023 annual ALA conference felt like a whirlwind. Jumping into the ALA world at this moment in time, when the field of librarianship faces book and content challenges targeting BIPOC and members of the LGBTQ community, the energy was electric. Every direction I looked I could see someone holding an “I read banned books” tote bag or wearing a “free people read freely” tee shirt. It was exciting being around this energy of advocacy, connection-making, and let’s be honest, free stuff. Part of me felt like I was surrounded by people I recognized myself in. One aspect of this is that (based on my own anecdotal observations), the conference was by and large a sea of white women who looked more or less like me.

I graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s online MLIS program in May, and I work at a small library in a suburban town in Marin County, California. The majority of the staff at my library is made up of white women, and since I went to school online, this conference was the first visual representation I had of the scale of gender and race disparities within the field, and it helped to make the lack of diversity in the field feel more real. I attended a number of panels about serving diverse communities and working values of diversity, equity, access, inclusion, and justice into library services, programming, and policy. Certainly many of the panels I attended were led by people of color and members of diverse communities, however, it was hard to ignore the volume of white women in the audience. Only one of the panels that I attended mentioned non-white representation in librarianship through hiring, recruiting, and retention (Forging a New Path: Asian American Representation in Publishing, Librarianship, and Media hosted by APALA: the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association) . Throughout the conference, I definitely felt the energy of activism and the hunger to uplift marginalized voices, and I hope that a next step in actually putting actions toward this hunger includes recognizing the importance of advocating for diversity within the field.

Since before beginning my MLIS program, I had ambitions to work at a public library, and though I took diverse classes and learned about other ways to use my new education, I have been filtering mostly everything I’ve learned through the lens of the public library. At ALA, I attended many programs related to public libraries or my own specific work or interests. I work in reference, collection development, and adult public programming, and I am a part of my library’s DEI working group, so many of the panels I attended spoke to one of those things. Though I initially hoped to hear from public librarians who could speak directly to my and my library’s needs, I ended up finding so much more appreciation for the other library workers and experts who presented.

Hearing from non-librarians helped to contextualize the work that libraries do, to help me think about things like privacy, social services, and using data through a broader lens, and to radically question the edges and limits of what librarianship can mean. Some highlights included hearing from Shamichael Hallman from the Harvard Graduate School of Design who spoke about the

benefits of socioeconomic mixing and ways to implement “bridging” programs in public libraries. I also loved hearing from Doug Schenkelberg from the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless who explained how his work serving unhoused Chicagoans and analyzing demographic data helps him work with libraries to ensure his efforts are as impactful as possible. I also heard from academic librarians, publishers, healthcare professionals, and educators who expanded the ways I thought about library programs and services and gave me so many ideas for new things to try in my library (and in my career).

I had the honor of presenting my Braverman Award paper in a small meeting room in the convention center to a crowd of about 25 people on the third day of the conference. This was my first time presenting or public speaking related to librarianship, and I felt some imposter syndrome at “teaching” other librarians who may have been in the field far longer than me. Though I had done my research about issues that public librarians face, I was pleasantly surprised at the diversity of library workers who attended the presentation and spoke about their experiences in the discussion. My paper was about sexual harassment from patrons, and I was inspired to write about it because of my own experiences in my first year working at a small public library. Hearing first hand stories of harassment, rule enforcement, insecurities, and boundaries from people at all stages of their careers felt at the same time validating, inspiring, and sobering. I heard from workers who felt their managers weren’t doing enough, managers who were having trouble retaining younger staff who would not tolerate harassment from patrons, and other library school students like me who wanted to feel empowered and prepared to stand up for themselves and their coworkers. Hopefully my research and suggestions struck a chord for the people in attendance, but even if it didn’t, I felt immensely proud at the openhearted and vulnerable discussion we were able to have together. I was proud to give a small group of librarians time and space to process something difficult and open up an important discussion that isn’t always taken seriously in the field.

Beyond the content of the sessions or the book titles I added to my already huge “to-read” list, the most important things I brought home to California were the new friends and colleagues. For every issue brought forward with the conference, the structure of ALA, or the field in general, there was a person or committee who was willing to do something about it. The most amazing thing about ALA was despite the criticism of an expensive conference trying to serve too many interests at once, the people I met were passionate about making things better and more equitable. At the end of my weekend in Chicago, I came to see ALA as a gathering place and a place to hold each other and our entire field accountable to the progressive values that many of us became librarians to uphold. Back home in the Bay Area, I feel energized to grow in my career, to continue to build connections with people who will challenge and inspire me, and to never stop asking questions and striving to improve my field.