Expect the Unexpected
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“Just be ready for the unexpected.” That’s the advice I give those assuming leadership positions in organizations. I learned that adage from observation while serving as a Region II Director-elect and Director on the AASL Board. So, I knew it would be equally true as I began my year as AASL President in June 2007.

Each president brings his or her own values, passions, and experiences to the position; mine were—and still are—advocacy (in the broad definition that matches AASL’s), diversity, and intellectual freedom. Every presidential term continues the work of the association to meet member needs, appointing committees and task forces, addressing the concerns and questions from the AASL Affiliate Assembly and the Board, and responding to the surprises. Looking back on the fastest and most intense year of my professional career included all of the above—and more.

However, the biggest reward is seeing most of the work continue, be expanded upon, and refined eight years later as AASL continues to make a difference for school librarians and school libraries.

Standards Released in Reno
One of the most joyous events of my presidential term was being at the microphone in Reno, Nevada, at the 2007 AASL National Conference when the brochures of AASL’s Standards for the 21st-Century Learner were passed out to attendees at the general session. The standards marked the beginning of a focus on school libraries turning outward. Developed through the work of the brilliant minds of the standards writing work group, the standards could not be achieved in a library with closed doors. “Think, create, share, and grow” soon became the mantra for our work with students; now the standards are being revisited and revised.

Celebrating the Value of School Libraries
Promotion and marketing the value of the school library has long been a focus of my work in library organizations; I appreciate how hard it is for a building-level school librarian to fit promotion and marketing into all the other activities required to run a good library program. Working in New York state, home of Dr. Lucille Cole Thomas, former New York Library Association School Library Media Section President, NYLA President and chairperson for the first AASL School Library Month celebration, I embraced the opportunities for promoting my library through AASL’s School Library Month (SLM) in April, as well as New York’s School Library Day (April 30). Both were spearheaded by Dr. Thomas. AASL’s celebration of School Library Month had become quiet over the years, but, with the Board’s approval, a task force was formed to begin revitalizing the event in 2007. As April 2008 approached, the task force launched new materials for school librarians to celebrate their programs, including an updated proclamation template that could be used by administrators or school boards to proudly proclaim their school library’s value.

School Library Month has continued to bloom over the last eight years. SLM16 had a hashtag, a way to customize your Facebook profile picture, Megan
McDonald of Judy Moody fame as spokesperson, a snapshot infographic letting you plug in your own data for a picture of how your school library makes an impact, free graphics, and the theme “School Libraries Transform Learning.” Such riches!

Making the Case for School Libraries

During my presidential year (2007–2008), school library position cuts were beginning to escalate as the economy faltered. That meant that AASL needed to step up its already intensive work to better assist members to make the case for the value of their school libraries in students’ educations. The Affiliate Assembly asked for increased resources and renewed energy from the board. This resulted in the Advocacy Committee, led by Deb Logan, launching two toolkits: “The Crisis Toolkit” and the “Health and Wellness Toolkit.”

The “Crisis Toolkit” continues to assist those facing position or program cuts, a time when it is hard to know what to do first. Materials have been added regularly since it was posted, and I know it has been very helpful to a lot of panicked school librarians. The “Health and Wellness Toolkit” provided prevention strategies to increase the visibility of school library programs before a crisis. Both toolkits are currently being updated.

Since the initial release of the toolkits, AASL has produced increasingly sophisticated promotion and marketing materials, including infographics and the excellent 2015 “Toolkit for Promoting School Library Programs.”

In the “Crisis Toolkit,” school librarians are encouraged to not tackle the problem alone but to reach out to their advocates (parents, teachers, students, and community members, even authors) and to contact state and national library leaders, AASL and ALA to provide assistance. We all know that all politics are local and the person facing the problem is the expert on how to contact their school administrators and school boards. As other presidents did before me, I had a letter ready to go that was personalized and revised to meet the needs of the particular crisis. In addition to the many letters I sent, I also experienced being on a talk radio show to speak in favor of retaining school library positions and had a meaningful e-mail exchange with a school administrator in Texas who expressed his appreciation for strong school libraries but also his distress at cutting some of them in order to meet the restrictions of the district’s available funds. Not all administrators who make cuts are indifferent to the effects of their decisions.

The Unexpected: Working with the Spokane Moms

The unexpected (but not unfortunate) event of my presidential year was working with the Spokane Moms, three amazing women who were outraged by their children’s elementary librarians being cut from full-time to part-time positions. Though they knew each other only slightly, Lisa Layera Brunkan, Denette Hill, and Susan McBurney banded together to argue with the school administration to restore the librarians’ full-time positions. They were told that there just wasn’t money to do so, and if they wanted to make it happen, they should go to Washington’s legislature in Olympia and get more money for school libraries. They did. They formed a grassroots organization, Fund Our Future Washington, and began lining up allies. One such group was the Washington Library Media Association, which sprang into action to support the moms. These alliances have grown into one of the most successful state advocacy programs in the country. The Spokane Moms also found a sympathetic ear from the Washington Senate’s Majority Leader Lisa J. Brown who gave them lessons on how to get a bill through the legislature. In 2011, former Washington state Governor Christine Gregoire signed into law a bill that added information technology literacy to the state’s basic education goals, opening the door for better funding for the state’s school libraries.

How did ALA and AASL end up at an Olympia legislative summit led by the moms along with such partners as the state librarian, academic and public librarians, school administrators, author/administrator Gary Hartzell, and library educator Dr. Mike Eisenberg? That is my part of the AASL President’s tale. Previous to this, every time I met ALA Executive Director Keith Michael Fiels at a meeting
or function, I would ask him when ALA would be on the front lines for school library cuts as they were for public and academic libraries. His response was always that ALA worked best with groups ready to lead the fight locally, a position that I understood. Then my Google news feed showed up one day with a Los Angeles Times article about the Spokane Moms and their fight in Washington. I promptly sent it to Keith with a note, “Here’s a group!” It didn’t take long before a team consisting of ALA President Lorraine Roy, Public Information Office’s Macey Morales, Advocacy Office’s Marci Merola, AASL Executive Director Julie Walker, and me were in snowy Olympia on the steps of the capitol with other demonstrators with umbrellas and signs that read “Fund Our Future Washington! Support School Libraries.” I was provided the opportunity to give testimony on the importance of school libraries, all while shivering in a wet wool coat with the ALA President holding an umbrella.

I learned much from the Spokane Moms about advocacy and partnerships. They shared the advice that we should not talk about school libraries but instead talk about good education for our students, leading potential partners to conclude that strong school libraries were a necessity. I ended my AASL presidential year by awarding the AASL Presidential Crystal Award to the Spokane Moms.

Today, ALA is working alongside AASL to make a difference locally when school library programs are threatened, as well as nationally on the legislative and advocacy fronts. Last year ALA President Sari Feldman worked side by side with AASL President Leslie Preddy and ALA and AASL staff to send letters and make phone calls when school libraries were threatened. Some of those positions were restored! It’s a strong partnership for school libraries under siege.

Odds and Ends
I can’t end without mentioning that one of the best things I did when making over 400 appointments to AASL committees was to persuade Helen Adams to chair a floundering Intellectual Freedom Committee. Intellectual freedom is important to me, and she is the most expert school library person I know on the subject. Recently she was awarded the 2016 Freedom to Read Foundation (FTRF) Roll of Honor Award at the ALA Annual Conference in Orlando, and I couldn’t help remember my relief when she said yes to my request/pleading during her awards presentation. I also very much appreciated Dr. Pauletta Bracy’s agreeing to chair the Diversity in the Profession task force and the board’s willingness to fund an AASL Spectrum Scholar.

The contributions of AASL members and staff are incredible and much appreciated by all AASL presidents. Walking into an AASL All-Committee Meeting at ALA Annual and Midwinter conferences and seeing all the people you appointed to committees working so hard takes your breath away. The commitment, values, expertise, and experience in that room personifies all that happens as “School Libraries Transform Learning.”

Sara Kelly Johns, AASL President 2007–2008, is the founder of Sara Kelly Johns Consulting in Saranac Lake, NY. She teaches as an online instructor for Syracuse University’s iSchool. She is a member of AASL and currently serves on the AASL Standards Implementation Task Force. She’s also a member of ALA President Julie Todaro’s Presidential Initiative Taskforce, the ALA/ALISE Accreditation Taskforce, ALA Council, and ALA Council Orientation Committee. She also serves as the NYLA/SSL Educational Leadership Co-chair and is a member of the ESSA Think Tank school library NYLA/SSL Team. She wrote the chapter “Flipping the Switch for School Library Advocacy” in Creative Library Marketing and Publicity: Best Practices (Rowan and Littlefield 2015). She curates advocacy resources at <http://frugalschoollibrarian.wikispaces.com>.