



“Let Our Legacy Be Justice”

Tracie Hall, Executive Director, American Library Association

ALA Virtual Opening Session Remarks, June 24, 2020

Please allow me to greet each and every one of you and to thank you so much for your presence.

As part of ALA’s Virtual Event I have been asked to reflect on my first four months, first 120 days as Executive Director of this august body and to share a bit of my vision, which I hope will become a shared vision, for the association, for not just its sustainability, but its thrivance in the years ahead.

Before I turn to that, I want to acknowledge the extraordinary times we are living in, a time when the coronavirus pandemic has required that we distance from one another and a time when the stand against racism and racial violence requires that we come together.

I hope that you are keeping as well as you can during these times. Our resistance in both of these fights requires our resilience.

Because we are library and information workers we are called to be as vigilant against racism as we are against the spread of disease.

Just as there was an outcry across the profession and within this association to keep our staffs and communities safe and protected in the face of this pandemic, so too are we obligated to cry out against racism.

Because it is clear that the work of dismantling racism is overdue in our society and in library and information services.

Racism, bigotry, and bias threaten the reach and impact of our field and the full promise and potential of an equitably informed public.

It cannot abide.

The profession’s future, ALA’s future, rests on the building of institutions, staffs and leadership, and policies and procedures that promote racial equity, confront racism, and that fully recognize that the future of our nation and the work we do rests in the fundamental truth that the lives, the Black Lives of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Botham Jean, Charleena Lyles, Tamir Rice, Philando Castile --matter.

So, for me this program is aptly titled, “Community Through Connection.” “Connection” is the heart of the American Library Association.

There is extraordinary power inherent in our coming together as a membership body across multiple library types, areas of specialization, community contexts and geographies, service populations, individual backgrounds and layers of identity—in our coming together in debate as well as disagreement as we each in our own way push this profession forward.

In 2026 ALA will turn 150 years old and I have been centering that birthday as a new milestone in the evolution of our institutional legacy.

It is crystal clear to me that the sum of that legacy of our 150 years accumulated and our 150 years to come, must amount to justice, a concept often described as a concern for peace, a demonstration of respect, an equitableness.

So, I say here: Let our legacy be justice.

I say this because there is something about justice---also defined as the “maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims” OR “use of power as appointed by law, honor or standards to support fair treatment and due reward”—that demands that we take sides.

That we make intentional decisions about whether we will work at the side of justice or opposite it.

When I say Let our Legacy be Justice, I am inviting us to explore the construct of the library as both the vehicle and driver of justice, both a means to justice and an arbiter.

What is our responsibility for justice to those in communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 contagion and deaths, especially when public health experts identify inequitable information and digital literacy and access as a key factor in the ability to develop a personal health advocacy strategy – or not.

What is our responsibility to justice when we consider that literacy and educational attainment are two of the key contributors to economic self-sufficiency and that their absence contributes to the school to prison pipeline, high unemployment, and cyclical poverty?

I want to back up for a moment lay some ground for my argument on the pivotal role that libraries play in the meeting of justice.

Founded nearly 144 years ago in 1876--a year when 1 in 5 adults was still not functionally literate—yet a year of infrastructural and social innovation which included leaps forward in foundational telephone and electricity technology, railroad expansion, the drafting of the “Declaration of Rights of the Women of the United States” by US suffragists, and in which Edward Alexander Bouchet earned a Ph.D. from Yale University becoming the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from an American

university and only the sixth American to earn a Ph.D. in physics--the American Library Association's inheritance is to reflect that spirit of dogged tenacity and that obligation towards radical shift and evolution.

Progress and change are the birthrights of this organization, with its mission: "To provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all".

Lead, develop, promote, improve are not passive verbs but rather suggest that inherent in ALA's DNA is the proclivity to be uncomfortable with stasis, dissatisfied with just leaving things where they are.

I think this antipathy towards inertia could also be a fitting descriptor for the quintessential ALA member. Because it is the members that make the body in their collective image.

I want to dwell here for a moment. And share a bit of what drew me to the association.

I came to libraries after working in homeless shelters. All too often, low literacy and low educational attainment were at the heart of the desperate, cyclical poverty my clients experienced.

The inability to read and comply with directions would cause incarceration, parole violations or missed court appointments, or interruptions in housing or social services.

Learning that our local library offered literacy and adult basic education courses and assisted with job searches made it a mandatory first stop for a new resident.

I would take the shelter van and drive everyone down to check out the library and get a library card. It felt like the first step towards true self-sufficiency.

I cannot tell you how many times shelter residents visiting the library for the first time as an adult would tell me "I cannot believe this is free." The words "this is free" hit home then and now.

There is something in those words that speak to enfranchisement, to belonging. If you have ever been or worked with people who are homeless, or poor, or formerly incarcerated, or othered or marginalized in any way, you know how rare it is to have the right and the access to resources can be.

Whether we work in a small school library, a rural public library, an urban community college or a university library working to support first generation college students, this feeling of belonging is what we must be striving to create.

I came to work in libraries right after working with the homeless, bringing with me the conviction that the library operates as a critical kind of social infrastructure in the same way that housing does.

Though I wouldn't become a librarian until a few years after landing in libraries, even as then a program coordinator focused in youth and community outreach and with reference duties, I drifted towards the American Library Association because I observed that the most active librarians in my organization the ones concerned were members and deeply involved in progressing the profession.

I can remember going to my first ALA Annual Conference, and leaving with my meeting program filled with session notes and the email addresses of likeminded new contacts, bags filled with books, my head filled with ideas I couldn't wait to try.

In those early days of my career where I was trying out adding librarian to my identity as an artist and activist, it was watching the work of the Social Responsibilities Roundtable, Ethnic and Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table, what is now the Rainbow Roundtable, the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, alongside the American Indian Library Association, the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association, the Chinese-American Librarians Association, and REFORMA, that helped inform my practice as a librarian and deepen my belief that libraries can be an accelerant of belonging and of justice.

Now I want to return to the notion of justice, its centrality to the relevance and permanence of libraries and its requirement that we be intentional in establishing our priorities.

I want to call out three goals, three urgencies for the sector and ALA as I see them:

Call Number One: Universal Broadband

I have said this before: If, in my estimation, the first great wave of library and information services was in the late 18th through early 20th century to pull the public towards reading literacy, and then in the latter 20th century to help to introduce technological literacy into the populace, then the next and third great wave of library and information science will be to universalize broadband internet access and to tackle the any and all adjacent barriers to this now fundamental platform.

A 2019 Pew survey of offline Americans found that 32% said the internet was "too difficult to use". Another 19% said the cost of owning a computer and getting internet service was a barrier.

Those that work in health services along with librarians and informationists are seeing a correlation between inequitable health outcomes and access to technology.

The United Nations has identified the imperative of universal internet access which it defines as getting 90 percent of the global population online as its central goal. Some experts argue that at this pace we will not reach that milestone for at least another 30 years.

We cannot wait.

Alongside access to food, to social services and supports, to medical care, and to public transportation, all determinants in the overall health of a community population, the American Medical Informatics Association contends that access to broadband internet service should be included as an indicator of public health due to the growing role that internet access plays in connecting patients to the care due to the growing interdependency on the internet to individual health maintenance.

As an extension of the right to read, free internet access must be considered as a human right.

Call Number Two: The rapid diversification of the Library and Information Service Field

According to recent studies only about 6.8 percent of the 300,000 librarians identify as Black; 8.6 percent as Latino; 4.6 percent as Asian-American or Pacific Islander and less than 1% Native American.

The profession's lack of reflection of and alignment with the widely diverse current and potential user base limits its reach and credibility. We must do more.

We must not only expand our funding to efforts like the **Spectrum Scholarship Program** to expand the ranks of librarians of color of which I was in the first cohort of recipients, but we must do more to hire people of color, as well as people engaged in service in our institutions and communities who may not have a degree but that could be part of a library and information services corps that extend library services to people wherever they are much like the Workers Progress Administration's travelling libraries or the library service systems set up to serve communities through *The Civil Works Administration* after the great depression.

As CWA library worker in Kansas insisted, "Distance and roads are no barrier to book deliveries to citizens who want them," we need a diverse professional corps of library professionals and of information workers to ensure the equitable knowledge and digital enfranchisement that we seek for our public.

There is a book, "Library service for the Civilian Conservation Corps" written in 1937 by Jed H. Taylor that demonstrates an early model of what this could look like .

Our Public Library Association division is working with high school students of color to build a pipeline program for library staffing at the earliest levels. What can we learn from them?

If our institutions and profession is to be sustainable, all of us must devote ourselves to the diversification of the next generation workforce.

We do not have time to waste

And Lastly, Call Number Three. We need our local and federal government and a wider array of public and private funders to deepen widescale investment in libraries.

This investment must recognize the capacity of school, public, college and university libraries to reinforce early education and high-school persistence, to provide basic education and employment support for adults, and to prepare the leaders and problem-solvers of tomorrow and to do that equitably.

Libraries are all too often the first stop community resource but rarely does the funding our sector receives doesn't mirror that primacy.

For this reason, ALA has now formed the **Philanthropy Advisory Group** to help cultivate a culture of philanthropy within the Association as we strive to grow our scale and impact to the field.

It is critical that whether on a college campus, in a K-12 setting or in a large metropolis or a small town that libraries are recognized not only for the information access and services they provide, but also for their ability to amplify the impact of nearly every other adjacent area of support. Just as ALA's Public Policy and Advocacy Office along with ALA members have successfully mobilized to ask our government leaders to increase support for IMLS and LSTA, and to ensure that libraries were factored into the CARES Act, so must we continue to highlight the often unparalleled work we do in education, employment and small business support, in high school and college completion, and in community development and wellbeing overall.

Embedded within each of these three calls for action is the consistent and overarching call for Justice.

Let that ideal be our legacy as librarians and information service providers.

Because all of this is empty—the quest for wider digital access, for a representative and fully deployed workforce, and expanded support for library services —unless it is fueled by justice -- the desire for peace, and equity, and universal wellbeing, and mutual respect.

If you have any questions or want to get more deeply engaged with organizing for Universal Broadband; or want to support the Spectrum Scholarship Program or diversity recruitment efforts in general, or want to get involved with the Philanthropy Advisory Group to ensure that the work of libraries is supported and sustained, email me directly at thall@ala.org I look forward to continuing this conversation.

So where is ALA headed? Towards Justice.

That is the star on the roadmap.

Let Justice be our legacy.

And let us get there together.