

# Backstories: Reflections of the Jean E. Coleman Library Outreach Lecture

2000-2019

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In the spirit of Sandra Rios Balderrama, whom I remember always opens with dedications, I dedicate this presentation to Jean Coleman herself, of course, to my parents, both librarians, Ruthe and AP Marshall, ALA executive directors from Elizabeth Martinez to Mary Ghikas, and to my ALA colleagues, staff and members, all who cleared the way for this Lecture series to continue annually!

Today we're going to talk about backstories. We all have them. They're what get us from our As to Bs, and even Cs, from our early employment pasts to our career presents, from our personnel challenges to determining our resolutions. Think about where your library career focus began and where it's taking you, as most of you are still on your journeys today.

So it is in the outreach of library services to marginalized populations, the un-served, the under-served and under-represented, depending on how their needs are incorporated in programs, resources and facilities for the individuals we serve, or should be serving, to guide them from their backstories, toward their individual ultimates.

So here's my backstory, the library DNA in my past.

Many of you know that both my parents were librarians. My father was introduced to the library in high school, where he spent his lunch hours because he had no money. It was during his first year at Lincoln University, an HBCU in mid-Missouri, that he noticed my mother, Ruthe, a senior at the high school on campus, who required their dates to take place in the library, or in her words, he would not be in her life.

After grad school at the U of Illinois, he attended his first ALA conference in Cincinnati, where the few Black conferees attending were not allowed to stay in the conference hotel, attend meal events or use the hotel elevator. My father rode the elevator anyway, even when verbally accosted by a fellow conferee to get off, as the elevator door closed and he rode to the next floor. He married, remained a member of ALA, and returned to his alma mater as its librarian 11 years later. He utilized many of the resources gleaned through ALA to benefit the students, the university and the local community. He was the first Black president of the Missouri Library Association, and broadened his relationship with ALA, on various committees, as a Councilor and an Executive Board member.

So there, my backstory in the profession had been shaped, as I accepted the position as OLOS director in 1997, where my father had also been a member of the advisory committee years before. And I learned so much about delivery of services to multiple populations throughout the country, from so many library folks I encountered and learned from over the years, many who sit before me today.

Now, the backstory of this event, the Jean E. Coleman Library Outreach Lecture, reveals the dedication of so many OLOS advisory committees, and so many in the OLOS constituency communities. Virginia Mathews, an early proponent of the establishment of the office, began my tutelage about the history of the office, from my first day. You'd have to know Virginia to appreciate my use of the term 'tutelage.'

The scheduling and fine-tuning of the Diversity and Outreach Fair at the 1997 annual conference, and the Coleman Lecture a few years later were orchestrated by a vocal outreach constituency determined to prioritize the need for resources for their communities through OLOS.

So thanks to those advisory committee members, now under OLDLOS, and the other committees and roundtables, affiliate groups, and the members with voices to be heard, who still guide the attention toward the needs of you and others in library outreach, we're here today.

The Jean E. Coleman Library Outreach Lecturers we recognize today verbalized issues of concern for less than favorable information access or resources which they felt were not prioritized to their satisfaction, in the initiatives, policies and practices in their local library communities or in the Association.

One purpose of this lecture series was, and obviously still is, to highlight examples of more "reaching in" by those to whom library services should benefit, most often by lecturers who themselves felt marginalized. Thus, these seventeen lecturers called for the library leadership and deliverers of services, both globally and in ALA, to pay attention. For this, Virginia Mathews and Jean Coleman would be proud!

In 2000, presenting the first Jean E. Coleman Library Outreach Lecture, **Barbara J. Ford** in "Libraries, Literacy and the Digital Divide," outlined an overview of the then Office for Literacy and Outreach Services.

Barbara, ALA President from 1997-1998, had already established herself as an OLOS advocate by funding the office's Diversity and Outreach Fair at the 1997 Annual Conference, an

opportunity for the office's growing constituency to come together and be more visible to each other and ALA membership, and their resources acknowledged and accessible.

Her words, "The librarian in the United States has long held a strong sense of the mission to serve the underserved: witness the work of The Office for Literacy and Outreach Services and Jean Coleman, whom we remember today," was the perfect launch for the Lectures for the coming years. She went on to articulate the mission of the office:

Serves the Association by supporting and promoting literacy and equity of information access initiatives for traditionally underserved populations, including:

- New and non-readers
- People geographically isolated
- People with disabilities
- Rural and urban poor people
- And people generally discriminated against because of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, language and social class

She detailed the office's history:

- As the Coordinating Committee on Library Service to the Disadvantaged – 1968
- Its establishment as the Office for Services to the Disadvantaged – 1970
- Jean Coleman's appointment as its staff liaison – 1973
- The Literacy Training Project, one of its first major initiatives – 1979
- Its name changed to the Office for Library Outreach Services – 1980
- Another name changed to Office for Literacy and Outreach Services - 1995

And named its early constituent groups over the last 30 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

- Minority Concerns and Cultural Diversity Committee
- ALA's Subcommittee on American Indian Library Services
- Literacy Assembly
- Associations of librarians of color
- Intergenerational Subcommittee
- Library Service to Poor and Homeless People Subcommittee, in response the ALA Poor People's Policy
- Council Committee on Rural, Native and Tribal Libraries of all Kinds

Wow! That little office, as it was then and is now, dreamed of by Virginia Mathews 35 years before, had a mighty place in the world of the Association, its members, and was impacting communities across the country.

And that first Jean E. Coleman Library Outreach Lecture served as an alert to welcome new initiatives focusing on underserved populations in library communities, and to those in the profession, called to address their needs personally and professionally, individually, and within their own career groups. And equally importantly, it provided opportunities for, what I call, “frontline staff,” usually paraprofessionals in especially urban and rural public libraries, large and small, to find their way to ALA conferences and membership. Thank you, Barbara Ford, Coleman Lecture Trailblazer!

In 2001, **Gary Strong** was invited by the OLOS Advisory Committee, and presented on literacy, very appropriately as the office was expanding its position in the national adult literacy community. Gary was the executive director of the Queens Public Library and with background as California State Librarian, among other positions, was a major contributor in the adult literacy network across the country.

“I hope everyone here today is a reader, he said. “No, I don’t mean those reports on your desk. A real reader. You know, those books one checks out from the library.” (Remember he was talking to an audience of librarians).

In describing the Queens library experiences, he identified their recent reading initiatives, highlighting the challenges that technology was playing on book reading. He outlined the role of adult learning centers in libraries, with classes, and tutors. Gary gave examples of partnerships in New York, and the collective strategies to eradicate illiteracy in the state. His comments caught the attention of adult literacy professionals nationally and supported the efforts of OLOS’ new Literacy Officer, Dale Lipschultz, in developing adult literacy initiatives in dozens of small and urban libraries at the time.

**Lotsee Patterson** lectured in 2002 on “Indigenous Librarianship: A Global Perspective.” Lotsee, from the Commache tribe, and co-founder (with Virginia Matthews) of the American Indian Library Association, knew Jean Coleman well, was familiar with her on-staff ALA experiences, and counseled me as a new staff member. She described Jean as “a woman with quiet dignity, always gentle, generous of spirit, ever persuasive, and resolute in her goal to ensure all people have access to quality library services.”

Lotsee was a guiding force toward developing opportunities for the ethnic caucuses to be included and motivated in the development of OLOS initiatives. She is still credited with being one of those positioning AILA’s importance as one of the nation’s, if not the world’s, major indigenous changemakers. It was through her encouragement to heed the voices of the librarians of color that OLOS hosted annual dinner meetings with caucus leadership for several years, resulting in the establishment of the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color, now a foremost advocacy organization for librarians of color.

The OLOS Advisory Committee selected Lotsee as the 2002 Jean Coleman Lecturer as the Council Committee on Rural, Native and Tribal Libraries of All Kinds was strengthening its direction for the Association. Lotsee educated us more on the discrimination of indigenous populations globally, then numbered by the World Bank at 400 million, and facing discrimination in terms of their basic rights to property, language, culture and citizenship...and access to basic services. She highlighted the importance of ALA's responsibility toward addressing those issues.

She challenged Lecture attendees to assess the needs of all marginalized populations, "incorporating them into the guidelines, policy statements and protocols in our own institutional settings."

In 2003 **Thelma Tate**, Outreach Coordinator at Rutgers University, stressed empowering people for increased productivity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She provided statistics identifying the need for more technology awareness and challenged libraries to make resources accessible to all populations in local communities. Her lecture highlighted advisories for academia, especially, in its outreach to under-represented folks in campus communities.

**Richard Chabran**, in 2004, addressed telecommunications, strongly advising the Association to become more involved in the nation's attention toward related issues that impacted underserved populations. He articulated acute perspectives re: the FCC's failure to define policies that protect those affected by the "digital divide." He encouraged the library community to become more engaged on behalf of those very communities. I think he would appreciate how the ALA Washington Office has increased its efforts in advocacy on that front today.

In 2005, as founder of the Task Force on Poor and Homeless People of ALA's Social Responsibilities Round Table, **Sandy Berman** reminded conferees that "poverty – not poor people – is the problem," a fact we must continue to remember today. He clearly identified successful and not-so-successful examples of library initiatives focusing on poor and homeless people, and even recited some spoken words from the folks themselves. He closed with ideas for libraries to consider. Sandy's efforts resulted in local projects during some annual conferences with several groups participating.

And in 2006 our own **Carla Hayden**, ALA President 2003-2004, took the lectern at OLOS' 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Our current Librarian of Congress was then the director of the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. Her theme, "Access Agenda for All Libraries," can still be visualized in the direction she's following in her current position. As Carla does so well, she accurately forecast that in 20 years there would be jobs not even thought of then, and how libraries were preparing local folks for those possibilities. She called on her listeners to "sing louder and strongly with a few new stanzas in unison and harmony," to make the dreams of so many their

realities. She walks that walk today, as should we. I hope visiting here in her 'new digs' is on your scheduler this week.

The 2007 Jean Coleman Lecturer was **Anne E. Moore**, who introduced "Lies in the Libraries: Changing the Image of Gay and Lesbian from Abnormal to Acceptance," as her theme. She recognized Barbara Giddings, the founder of ALA's Gay Rights Task Force, now the ALA Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Round Table. Did you know that that initial gay member group has the distinction of being the first gay-affiliated unit in a professional organization in the nation? Anne celebrated "GLBT library professionals as activists on the front lines for social justice," a role still relevant in the Association today.

"Dislocations of Multicultural Librarianship: A Critical Examination for a Liberatory Practice" was **Clara Chu**'s Jean Coleman Lecture theme in 2008. Clara examined library history and how libraries have not always been focused on services to marginalized populations, a history that we must never forget. She reminded us of the strides that the profession needed to make towards equity and access in that 21<sup>st</sup> century climate of challenging inclusion.

Hailing from Lee County, FL still, **Kathleen Mayo** continues as a champion for older adults. In her 2009 lecture, she focused on the impact of lifelong learning and intellectual stimulation as important in local libraries. Our charges from Kathy were to 1) network with local agencies already addressing their issues; 2) support "aging in place" initiatives; and 3) consider deposit collections for senior centers and nursing homes, acknowledging the contributions of local communities' elders.

It was **Kathleen de la Pena McCook**, the OLOS Advisory Committee chair my first year, who campaigned for an Association tribute to Jean Coleman as the first director of OLOS. She articulated the relevance of Virginia Mathews' contribution to the OLOS concept in her Coleman Lecture in 2010, "Librarians and Human Rights." Quoting from the 1948 United Nations Proclamation on Human Rights, Kathleen listed accomplishments of the United Nations and IFLA, and the progress of library communities in recognition of those issues in their local communities. She noted the 8 Millennium Development Goals and encouraged librarians to respect and implement them in local practices. Her work continues, as she is receiving the 2019 Joseph W. Lippincott Award at this conference as a "passionate, visionary activist and advocate for equity, diversity, dedication to the core value of social justice and service for all populations." Congratulations, Kathleen!

**Robert Wedgeworth** recruited Jean Coleman to ALA during his tenure as ALA Executive Director. In his 2011 Coleman Lecture he remembered her as "a sweet, soft-spoken woman with a will of iron." Bob lectured on "Literacy in Libraries: Challenges and Opportunities." Considering his later role as president & CEO of Pro-Literacy Worldwide, he advised on the impact of the Literacy Act of 1991. He outlined the disturbing numbers of Americans with

disappointing levels of literacy qualifications for employment. With new legislation he advised librarians to become more involved and proactive in addressing literacy, for youth and adults.

**Carol Brey-Casiano** was ALA president 2004-2005. Her lecture in 2012, “Diversity on the World Stage,” drew from her experiences as a leader in U.S. libraries and in Colombia, Brazil and Paraguay, three nations with whom she worked closely in her position with the U.S. State Department. During her ALA presidency, Carol highlighted programs from across the country that featured local authors and dignitaries in reading aloud from the Association’s Many Voices, One Nation booklist, and other books representing selected regions’ rich heritage and diverse groups.

In 2013, **Loriene Roy**, ALA’s president from 2007-2008, lectured on “What’s Love Got to Do With It?: The Place of Love and Forgiveness in Library and Information Studies.” Loriene’s lecture drew upon her experiences at the Fetzer Institute’s Global Gathering: The Pilgrimage on Love in Forgiveness, which was held in Assisi, Italy in September 2012. Loriene explored the roles love and forgiveness play in library and information studies programs. She detailed the five-day meeting, which showcased projects exemplifying the power of love and forgiveness across 16 disciplines, including the information and communications professions.

**Virginia Bradley Moore’s** 2014 Coleman lecture, “Equality...Equity...Diversity: Libraries, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Mission,” looked at how the Association had respected and promoted the ideals of Martin Luther King Jr., via several initiatives, including the annual Midwinter Sunrise Celebration, still sponsored by the ODLOS Advisory Committee. Ginny’s leadership in the Social Responsibilities Round Table, as founder and chair of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Task Force celebrates initiatives in libraries across the country. In her lecture she advised that a forum for dialogue about the ways libraries observe Dr. King should continue.

**Carla Hayden**, the 2006 Coleman Lecturer, was invited back in 2015 in recognition of her efforts to keep the Enoch Pratt Free Library and its branches open, and continually engaged with the Baltimore community during the civil unrest in the wake of the death of Freddie Gray in April of that year. “This is just a continuation of libraries being vital,” she said. “It’s just part of the tradition of public libraries in America being here in good and bad. I’m proud that we were able to carry that on.”

As director emeritus of Queens Library’s Langston Hughes Community and Cultural Center, **Andrew Jackson, Jr. (Sekou Molefi Baako)** was selected as the 2016 Lecturer, reflecting on his extensive library outreach to schools, libraries, organizations, cultural institutions, correctional facilities, churches and academic arenas. Sekou has been recognized by the Black Caucus of the American Library Association and other library and community organizations, and cited for his professional achievements in advocating for cultural awareness

and access to information resources for all. As a respected library leader and academician, his expertise is still sought in strategies for delivering library services to marginalized communities.

**Janice Rice**, the 2017 Jean E. Coleman Lecturer, was the last Coleman Lecturer before today. Janice greeted her audience from her Ho-Chunk ancestry, acknowledging the names of pioneering American Indian library pioneers, Jean Coleman, Lotsee Paterson, Virginia Mathews and others. Janice called for mutual respect for the ideas, voices, the languages and values of all cultures that make our libraries and communities so rich." In her lecture, "Visions of the Web: Indigenous Values, Voices and Literacy," Janice made a direct challenge to the Association to "create an overarching web of communication that keeps libraries relevant for our respective communities." She continued, "We cannot afford to have only one unit of ALA devoted to a more meaningful inclusion of American Indian voices."

So you see, the uniqueness of this annual conference program, the Jean E. Coleman Library Outreach Lecture, highlights folks with their own backstories in the delivery of services. Again, they've been representatives of the marginalized populations they choose to support and be advocates, and their lectures have reflected their personal and career advocacy for so many others in similar circumstances. And each year their challenges to the American Library Association have been similar – taking major steps toward expanding outreach in the quest for what is now popularized as EDI, equity, diversity and inclusion.

As an elder in life and in this profession, I am blessed with lots of time on my hands, and on my smartphone. And therefore, as probably some of you know, I spend entirely too much time on Facebook, the only social media platform I choose to support. I seldom accept new friends anymore, but I'm blessed that my FB community ranges from family, childhood, college, library colleagues spanning from a multiple years and locations, church, and folks who've picked me up along the way, including some friends I share with my children.

One group that I treasure these days is 'we here,' a closed Facebook group of librarians of color, by us, for us, who crave the communal connections, the opportunities to vent, while offering possibilities and reminding us of our worth. ALA has multiple opportunities for that kind of kinship.

To them, and to you I say, heed the focuses of these lectures, the challenges to our Association, our profession. Accept the charge for resolution as your own, our own. Your voices, our voices, are welcomed and must be heeded, if nowhere else but in this Lecture series, in this room, in this convention center, at this annual conference, in this Association, and in your libraries, now.

We could say that Jean E. Coleman was a pioneer, of sorts, certainly not the only, but at least the first assigned to lead that small unit within the American Library Association in 1970, to prove that ALA was paying attention to the library needs of marginalized folks, however defined at that time.

Coleman Lecturer need not be your title. Librarian is more than enough. Or whatever role you choose to claim. I see your faces. I recognize your names. I know the work that you do every day! But the challenges of the conditions I've repeated multiple times this afternoon are still before us, you and me, to accept and solve for countless folks who depend on us.

No matter what you call the responsibility...serving the underprivileged, the underserved, the unserved, the under-represented, or ...outreach toward equity, diversity, and inclusion. It's what each of us do to make that difference that is still needed, yet still undone.

As Carla Hayden said in 2015, let's "sing louder and strongly with a few new stanzas in unison and harmony," to make the dreams of so many their realities. Let's continue to help them build on their backstories.

And remember those not present, not represented in our Association, who in local community libraries are daily meeting the public, those everyday folks who seek assurance that the information and resources they need are accessible and of value to their successes.

I close by saluting the staffs of OLOS, before and after my tenure, and the current staff and constituencies of ODLOS, and all in ALA for making sure that we as a profession are present in communities that need us, need libraries, more than ever today and tomorrow.

Let's continue to do the work! Thank you for listening!