

From the Chair



Saying good-bye, or four things I learned as GODORT chair

Kirsten Clark

I started writing this column right before a wonderful trip to Iceland and England. The column was due while I would be gone so, being the true anal-retentive person that I am, I wanted it off my plate and off my mind while I enjoyed the wild beauty and northern lights of Iceland, and the equally cosmopolitan beauty of the large, bustling city that is London. However a major problem occurred: the complete blanking of my mind for 1,600 words to provide to the editors. The fact that due to the usual schedules any of us face with publishing, most people would be reading this column after ALA Annual, after I'm no longer your chair, may have factored into the general feeling of blankness. What could I impart that would have any lasting meaning to the ten people that faithfully read this column instead of skipping over to the awesome informational columns and articles found within this issue?

I admit with a certain amount of relief that this is my last column. You see, one of the things that I was not prepared for, and I don't think anybody could be, is the huge amount of work being chair of any large organization entails, especially when it is done in a volunteer capacity. We are elected about fourteen months before we actually become chair. The number of changes that can occur in one's personal and professional life in that time frame can be awe-inspiring. Suddenly you are thrust into the position that sort of sneaked up on you because you were dealing with all those other things between the time that Jill Moriearty (former GODORT treasurer) got on her knees and begged you to run, and you are crowned with an amazing, sparkly knitted crown (courtesy of Amy West, former chair and knitter extraordinaire), and photos of you in said crown start circulating on Facebook and Twitter.

How then do I characterize a year at the helm of GODORT? I will start by saying it has been a wonderful year. I've met new members, gotten to know current members better, and hopefully moved the organization forward through our work. Yet I have also been frustrated with myself and others, wished things could have been handled differently, and in general wondered what the point of it all is. By thinking those thoughts, I realized the topic of my column.

What happened in this year will be forgotten in a couple years. Some initiatives will be dropped because they didn't

work or aren't sustainable, and new ones will take their place. Some will gain momentum and become another thread in the tapestry that is GODORT. This in no way discounts the incredible efforts that are put into what we do, but this work is a foundation, which we will use to build upon. There are, however, some really large threads in our tapestry that I would like to focus on in this last column. Threads that bind us together, but also have the ability to unravel huge sections of the overall organization. So in this last column I want to list a couple that I have noticed this past year. Not everybody will agree with them, and that's fine with me. By the time you read this I'll be back to being a mostly plain old GODORT member who has a couple duties as past-chair. Then we can talk not as a chair to an organization, but as fellow members who want to see GODORT succeed into the future.

1. We have dedicated members.

Those who have served in GODORT for ten, twenty, even forty years, do so with a dedication that I think many organizations would love to see in their own employees. Please know that I say this with the inclusion of myself in this group, but this dedicated group has been the same dedicated group for a long time. A huge part of my time last spring and summer as chair-elect was spent trying to find people interested in serving on GODORT committees. I had grandiose plans of bringing in all sorts of new people. However, there aren't enough new people: (1) interested in GODORT, (2) interested in government information, and (3) interested in shelling out several thousand dollars a year of their own money to attend even one ALA conference. That leaves a dwindling group of dedicated members to continue trying to move GODORT forward. This amazing group deserves incredible kudos and applause. This group also deserves a break because we are working our way to a lot of GODORT burn-out.

2. We don't have a new group of dedicated members for the future.

To start, I am in NO WAY discounting the new GODORT members who have stepped forward to serve this organization. I am so happy you want to join in with a group of dedicated people. It is not the people that are interested but the low number of interested individuals overall that I'm worried

about. We can no longer look just to the documents librarians of the world. We need to look beyond. But, to do so, we need to make GODORT relevant to those outside our primary audience, and we need to understand that their idea of what government information means isn't always the same as ours.

3. ALA, including GODORT, is a large organization with a lot of structure, a lot of hoops, and a lot of bureaucracy.

This year I have been provided with several moments of wanting to hit my head against a wall as I try to navigate the known red tape and the unknown hidden trip wires that go with a large volunteer organization. One of the things I hear about constantly in my own large work organization is the need for better communication. One does learn who to talk to over the years, but when nearly the entire governing structure turns over on a yearly basis, the time spent finding lost information and reinventing the wheel is huge. What saddens me is that we lose good people and good ideas due in some part to this bureaucracy.

4. There is a balance point.

As I look back over the past year, we worked on the things I outlined in my first column as the action items. We have moved forward on the Strategic Plan by looking at outreach through our online webinar and by presenting changes to the *Bylaws* that offer more flexibility. We have also looked at solidifying our policy on virtual membership through bylaws

changes. In that column, I also mentioned finding a balance point. I was focusing on that point between having enough structure within GODORT to get things done and needing enough flexibility to respond in a reasonable and timely manner to issues as they arise. There is a balance point between new members and established members. There is a balance point between moving an organization forward to deal with the serious issues and realizing the underlying enjoyment we should have in being GODORT members.

Looking back, there is one thing I wish I had added to the list of accomplishments for the year: to have more fun. I wish there had been more silliness, more laughter, and more lightheartedness to counterbalance the seriousness, the disagreements, and the burnout. So I leave you this year happy to have served this organization, but with the realization that my time in GODORT leadership is coming to an end, and I look forward to building on what I learned this year. My dedication to GODORT is not changing, but for me it is time to let the next group come forward so it can lead us into the future. There are so many ways that GODORT members can work within ALA, within the profession, to expand the knowledge of government information, and not just by serving in a GODORT position. The one thing I would add for those wanting to serve is have fun doing it. Because I realize now I did accomplish some good things, but the thing I will remember most is sitting in a conference room in New Orleans laughing with my friends and wearing a hilarious knitted crown.