

Once in a Lifetime

ALA leader bids final farewell as term ends

by Jim Rettig

If you find the no-frills Billy Goat Tavern on a list of restaurants for the American Library Association's Annual Conference in Chicago, the likely reason is that it inspired and remains true to the 1970s *Saturday Night Live* "Cheezborger! Cheezborger! No Pepsi, Coke!" skit. Walls decorated with blowups of columns by Mike Royko and others celebrate Chicago newspaper's 1960s and 1970s heyday. For 40-plus years I have associated the Billy Goat with that heritage.

As I look forward to conference and back on my year as ALA president, I am borrowing the format used by miscellaneous-observations *Chicago Daily News* columnist Sidney J. Harris:

■ Public libraries have been America's first responders to the economic crisis. They have provided résumé-writing workshops, expanded access to the internet for job-seekers, and met urgent new community needs in creative ways.

■ We can make a difference! Because of our lobbying and publicity efforts, the Consumer Product Safety Commission postponed a needless regulation requiring testing of children's books for lead content. We must sustain our effort until Congress exempts books.

■ Radio call-in shows invariably attract callers who testify to their love for their library and librarians. I wish a listener would call in and say, "I didn't realize how much my library offers! I'm going there right after this show."

■ Is any state library association conference more essential to its members than Alaska's? Some of its members serve as the only librarian in small villages, separated from others by distance and limited transportation links. The conference gives them an annual opportunity to interact with their peers from throughout their vast state.

■ The United States retains regional differences in food specialties; but no regional differences exist among librarians on issues such as access to information and intellectual freedom.

■ Librarians in other countries look to ALA for inspiration and leadership. Our name, our work, and the values we exemplify have great respect abroad.

■ State library association awards ceremonies should be recorded and posted to YouTube so all of us across the country can hear the stories about our colleagues' creativity and successes. We can and should do a better job at sharing our success stories so we can learn from and be inspired by one another.

■ The similarities among our types of libraries are fundamentally greater than the differences. All of us need to support library issues, not just issues that affect the type of library in which we work. Our

libraries form an integrated ecosystem and our advocacy efforts should promote the health of the whole system and all of its elements.

■ Today's students in our library/information schools are bright, committed, creative, and eager. They assure a bright future, unless the tight economy denies them the jobs they are preparing for.

■ The robust response to my grassroots programs initiative (tinyurl.com/c2ketl) for Annual Conference is just one indicator that ALA members desire change in the way their association does its work. I look forward to seeing what those changes will

be and how members use ALA Connect (connect.ala.org/) and other tools and technologies to create them.

As president I have met members and heard your concerns from New England to Hawaii, from Alaska to Florida. You have listened generously to my ideas about the challenges we face and why we all need to advocate for the entire library ecosystem.

Thank you, my fellow ALA members, for this extraordinary, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. ■



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