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A Better Future for Children Through Libraries

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(a division of the American
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I've been a librarian since 1972. Although I entered graduate school thinking I wanted to be an academic librarian (wouldn't I always stay youthful if I worked with college students?), I soon realized that children's librarianship was where I wanted to concentrate. I knew in my heart that libraries help children have a better future. Is there a better specialty to which one could dedicate herself?

During my career, I have held a variety of leadership positions in libraries and in professional organizations. Each has taught me something I needed to know to go on to the next phase in my career. I learned that the Kansas State Library could hire someone as a Children's Consultant who had never worked in a library except as a sixth grade volunteer. At the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County (OH), I learned that a children's librarian in the first hour of her first day on the job knows more about libraries and books than a teacher with her third grade class in tow. Eight and a half years at Arlington County Library (VA) taught me to respect all readers advisory questions, even the weekly request from the little girl dressed in pink who only wanted "pretty books." At the Westport (CT) Public Library, I learned what great partnerships result when both school and public libraries are well-staffed and stocked, and how to juggle the schedules of four staff that provided over 14 programs for preschoolers each week out of one library building. At the Oregon State Library, I learned how much Oregon communities love their libraries and about the dedication of library staff in far-flung places. Now at Multnomah County Library, I continue to learn about how to create library services that address 21st century needs.

As I write this article at the end of April, I am two months from the completion of my term as the President of the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), a division of the American Library Association. The organization's over 4,000 members work in a variety

of settings: some are public or school librarians, while others are booksellers, editors or publishers, or work in academia teaching children's literature or children's library services. All find a home in ALSC, which strives to create a better future for children through libraries. Through working on ALSC committees such as Planning and Budget, and serving on the Board of Directors, I learned practical skills I use every day. Three times on the Newbery Committee taught me more about facilitation and guiding a group through a decision-making process than any well-intentioned training. I honed my collaboration skills serving on the ALSC/Public Library Association Task Force on Preschool Literacy Initiatives, which culminated in Every Child Ready to Read @ your library. As President, I am learning not to be intimidated speaking to congressional staffers at National Library Legislative Day; to groups of 1,200 at the Youth Media Awards Press conference (or 47,000 simultaneously on ALA's first live Web cast in January 2006); to over 1,500 people attending the Newbery Caldecott Banquet; or to the media from both small community newspapers and large magazines, such as *Parents*; to being interviewed about the Newbery and Caldecott awards on the *Today* show.

At the same time, I've tried to make a contribution on the state level. In Kansas, I planned a week-long conference on using a new technology—video—to help libraries capture local information. In Virginia, I demonstrated how to ignore children playing with Velcro on their sneakers during preschool storytime. In Connecticut, I helped establish the Nutmeg Award, a children's choice award that has now expanded to include books at more grade levels. In Oregon, I've worked to bring stability to summer reading programs; contributed to the development of the Youth Services Guidelines (now being revised); and am the 2007 Evelyn Sibley Lampman Award Chair.



I'm thrilled to see the interest in Oregon and many other states in helping parents and caregivers maximize children's chances to succeed in school by investing in the preschool years. Every Children Ready to Read @ your library is inspiring library staff to learn new skills and take needed risks to reach audiences who really need to hear the library and literacy message. I know that the longer we do this work in Oregon, the more we will continue to see reading scores increase and the more we will see the percentage of kindergartners entering school ready to learn increase. I'm gratified that ALSC and YALSA have more Oregon members than they did when I arrived in the state in 1983. I know that children and teens in every community know more about the Newbery, Caldecott, Sibert, and Printz awards because of Mock Caldecott workshops I helped plan and because more Oregonians serve on these committees now.

There are a few other lessons I've learned: in my lifetime, I'll never read all the books for children and teens that intrigue me and I'll never catch up with my e-mail. But is that what is important? No. What matters is maintaining a sense of optimism. After 34 years of providing

(or encouraging others to provide) great library service for children, I remain convinced that libraries make a difference for children and teens today and every day. In each position we hold in our libraries, in our communities and in our professional organizations, we learn more about the power of libraries to change lives. The baby who cries when he is forced to leave the library, the preschooler who learns every song in storytime, the elementary school student who trusts the librarian to find just the right book for her book report, the middle school boy who admits that what you showed him on the computer helped him earn his first ever "A," and the teen who stops by every day to see if you have any new graphic novels... these are the reasons we stay optimistic. All our work improving libraries is for them. Yes, libraries do help create a better future for children. And that's something we need to shout from the rooftops.

Since 1995, Ellen Fader has been the Youth Services Coordinator at Multnomah County Library in Portland, Oregon. In July 2006, she becomes the Immediate Past President of the Association for Library Service to Children.



Ellen Fader (right) with 2006 Caldecott Award Winner Chris Raschka (center) and 2006 Newbery Award Winner Lynn Rae Perkins (Left) just before they appeared on the *Today Show*.

