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Advocacy and Optimism:

A cycle for self-renewal

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It is easy, at times, to despair the future of Oregon libraries. In the past few years, there have been cuts and layoffs, controversies, and closures; a variety of disappointments affecting every type of library, in almost every region of the state. In such times, it's vital that we take care of ourselves, as well as our patrons and our libraries. Fortunately, the very act of advocating on behalf of libraries can be a work of self-renewal.

I put my faith in the optimistic nature of libraries. Each person who walks through the doors of a library is an optimist, with complete confidence that the right information, service, event or resource is simply waiting to be found. Like our patrons, we are optimists, too. We cheerfully check out books and materials, knowing full well that some of them won't come back to the library. We begin each reference question with the assumption that there is an answer and we can find it. We believe in our work, ourselves, and our community.

But it is not enough to merely possess an optimistic outlook; one risks becoming unrealistic and ultimately ignored if that optimism is not accompanied by action. Helen Keller wrote of optimism: "the world is sown with good; but unless I turn my glad thoughts into practical living and till my own field, I cannot reap a kernel of the good."

One meaningful way to act optimistically is to be politically aware and active. It's not a realm that comes easily to library people. At the reference desk, we work to remain neutral and provide all points of view. So it was a struggle for me to be a library advocate the first time I attended OLA Legislative Day in Salem.

Imagine my delight when I found that I hardly had to say anything! My representatives were eager to be the advocates—they love libraries! They told me about their neighborhood library, their children's school library, the library in the town where they grew up. They were animated and enthusiastic, and it was easy to steer the conversation toward the modest ways that they could help Oregon libraries. With the relationship officially started, it's now natural to drop them the occasional e-mail and alert them of upcoming matters of interest to libraries.

Likewise, I was quite reluctant last year when Janet Webster asked me to join Connie Bennett and testify before a legislative budget committee. My voice trembled and my testimony sounded insufficient as I heard myself read it aloud. I fully expected the legislators to question my statistics and vigorously disagree with my every fact. Instead, they smiled and nodded and asked only one question, "Did Eugene Public Library still host a Read to the Dogs program?" Regardless of what they decided in those budget sessions, it was apparent that they, too, loved and valued libraries. I left the hearing room a little like I do after voting or donating blood: a little shaky, a little overwhelmed, but satisfied that I had done something good.

Advocacy's great blessing is that it requires us to temporarily step away from the micro-dramas and the detailed spreadsheets of our daily work. It gets us unstuck from the minutiae by refocusing our attention on what is truly important. As advocates, we can talk proudly about the rich history of libraries, their role in a democracy, and the strong values we cherish. It's a privilege



to talk about things greater than our daily work, and advocacy provides that platform. Advocacy is a way to take the mundane, tedious and stressful daily tasks and put them in proper perspective.

When we promote libraries to others, we ourselves are reminded of the personal reasons why we choose to work in libraries. We have an audience with whom we can share our favorite stories—of the lives changed, discoveries made, and relationships fostered. And in telling the stories to others and seeing their reactions, we are hearing them again for the first time. We are reminded, once again, of how lucky we are to work in such an important place.

Like an astronaut viewing the earth from space, advocates stop seeing borders and divisions, and start seeing the commonalities. Once outside the library building, we can see the library in its environment and fully appreciate its impact on the community. As we step away from our desks, we walk into a place where people are, just like my legislators, eager to share their love of libraries.

I sometimes attend fairs and events, staffing a table with pencils, stickers and library flyers. The tables on either side of me frequently have better giveaways, but people make a beeline straight for the library table. Do they have a burning reference question? A desperate desire for a red sparkly pencil? Nope—they need to tell me how much they love their library. We owe it to our citizens to repeat those stories and share them with elected officials and decision makers. If the average citizen takes the time to sing the praises of the library, shouldn't we? Don't we owe it to ourselves and to them?

Staffing phone banks, raising money, and giving speeches are outside our comfort zone. But these acts help us to deepen our connections with like-minded volunteers, people we may know only as library patrons on the other side of the desk. Working alongside them, seeing them donating their time, energy, and money to the library cause inspires us to provide them with library services worthy of their efforts.

Advocacy isn't easy, but fortunately it's a growth process. It's rarely accomplished through one grand gesture; instead, it's composed of dozens of little encounters. This process provides renewal, as each interaction is another chance to revisit relationships already planted, while we tenderly sow new ones. Advocacy stretches us little by little, to try new things, develop new skills, and take risks. It provides an outlet for spending our natural optimism, and in turn, replenishes it. 

