

July 2014

## Library Advocacy in Hard Times

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### Recommended Citation

Hummel, P. (2014). Library Advocacy in Hard Times. *OLA Quarterly*, 18(2), 4-5. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1352>

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*OLA Quarterly* is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

# Library Advocacy in Hard Times

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In her recent memoir, *Up the Capitol Steps: A Woman's March to the Governorship*, Barbara Roberts describes grappling with how to lead the state in the early 1990s, as voter-approved property tax limitations began to create devastating effects on public services. Quoting from the book, *Leadership on the Line*, by Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, she frames the issue as follows:

People do not resist change per se. People resist loss. You place yourself on the line when you tell people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear ... the hope of leadership lies in the capacity to deliver upsetting news and raise difficult questions in a way that people can absorb, prodding them to accept the message rather than ignore it—or kill the messenger. (Roberts, 2011, p. 238).

Faced with a game-changing loss of state revenue, Roberts sought to be an advocate for tax reform, communicating to Oregonians what they *needed* to hear rather than what they wanted to hear. Although her goal of stabilizing public funding in Oregon sadly remains only a tantalizing dream, I believe that the governor's approach two decades ago has particular resonance for public library leaders today, in large part because we are facing many of the same issues she faced. Mistrust of government is at an all-time high. Costs are rising faster than revenues, and there are simply not enough dollars to go around. And, despite our best efforts to position public libraries as essential, we are often in direct financial competition with other services (such as public safety, health, and roads) that are perceived by many to have a stronger claim to being truly essential than do our beloved libraries.

In such a challenging environment, how do we successfully advocate for the best interests of our libraries, and for the people that our libraries serve? As Roberts' example suggests, hard times call for a focused effort to illuminate what is truly at stake. Faced with many competing demands for financial support, it is easy enough for elected officials, administrators, and other decision makers to assume that, somehow, the public library can manage with less: just buy fewer books, shut off the "OPEN" sign a little more frequently, reduce a program or two. What's the difference? We'll still have a building full of books, and isn't that what a public library is all about?

R. Buckminster Fuller once famously described God as "a verb, not a noun." The same can be said for a public library, which is commonly seen as a physical entity, rather than a force in the world. In reality, the public library's essence is less about the books and DVDs on the shelves or even its staff, than it is the actions, interactions and transformations that its existence makes possible, every day, for people from all walks of life. As library advocates, our job is to ensure that this continual flow of energy is well articulated by ourselves and by others. When supporting the library doesn't cost our audience anything, this work is easy; when it requires that the library be prioritized over competing interests, it is much more difficult to speak truth to power. In this situation the key questions for me as a library advocate are: Am I motivated by the best interests of my library and my community? Are my words and facts



accurate? Am I respectful of context and of those I am communicating with? If I can answer yes to these three questions, the real issue is whether coloring within the safe lines of the “nice librarian” stereotype is worth the price of remaining silent. Usually, it is not.

The bottom line is that in tough times, library advocacy takes genuine courage, not only because we may be criticized as overreaching, but also because we ultimately don’t control the outcome. If the stars don’t happen to align, a brilliantly executed advocacy effort can still result in failure. Conversely, success can emerge, like a startled phoenix, from the most inauspicious of circumstances. As I have attempted to understand my role as a library advocate, one of my best mentors has been the Library Association of Portland’s early head librarian, Mary Frances Isom, who said the following to her colleagues at a 1919 library conference:

Most librarians hampered by small funds, swamped with trifling details, burdened by petty economies, are too timid. We have not been accustomed to meet life in the large, we hesitate to stray from the neat footpath into the open field. Have we not learned to plunge a little, to take a chance or two, to bank on the future? Only he who dares wears the laurel, only he who spends acquires (Isom, 1919, p. 19).

Almost a century later, Isom’s challenge to the profession still stands: *Have we not learned to take a chance—or two?* Ultimately, library advocacy is about engaging fully in the political process; and, as any politician (including Barbara Roberts) would confirm, losing at least some of the battles comes with the territory. However, when we choose to actively bring our passion for libraries into the political arena, we are ensuring that, at the very least, library users have a coherent and consistent voice. Over time, the power of that voice can have a positive impact in ways we can never totally anticipate. 🌿

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