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# Abigail, George & Nan Talk about Library Advocacy

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*Abigail Elder is the current President of OLA. She has worked in several Oregon libraries and is now director of the Tualatin Public Library. As OLA president and as a public library director, she advocates for libraries every day.*

*George Bell has been recognized with life-time OLA membership for his service to Oregon libraries. He has served on the boards of Salem Public Library and the State Library, and on OLA's Legislative committee. His professional background includes working as a reporter and a public affairs manager for state agencies.*

*Nan Heim has advocated for libraries as OLA's lobbyist for over two decades. She owns and manages a public affairs firm and considers advocacy by librarians themselves to be essential for OLA's success.*

Abigail, George and Nan got together recently to talk about advocacy for libraries. George suggested that Abigail, as the professional librarian, be the moderator.

## Librarians advocating in communities

Abigail: The first question I have is, since librarians sometimes tend to think of libraries as the center of the universe, what is the greater landscape that we should be considering?

George: A great question. It's my perception that librarians need to reach out more to their communities. I think they see themselves as public servants rather than as advocates who should pound the table trying to persuade people.

Nan: But librarians must be doing something right. They've been so successful at getting support locally for their libraries.

George: Absolutely! All four libraries levies just passed in the May election. A substantial part of the public reveres their libraries. When a person goes to a public library, he or she gets first-class treatment, all the help he could possibly want.

But I see precious little outreach. I don't see librarians out meeting with neighborhood associations, for example. Neighborhood associations meet regularly, and they're always looking for speakers. What if the library director made a date to go speak to a neighborhood association once a year to explain new programs, new books, all that you do.

Abigail: The rotary, the Kiwanis, all those groups are always looking for speakers. I have a ten-point slide show that I take around at a moment's notice. I talk about books and services, about how the library is a good steward of your tax dollars.

George: That's just what we need.



### **Library advocacy at the Legislature**

Nan: At the state level, I think we've been very successful in advocating for things that don't involve spending state money.

George: First Amendment issues, for example.

Nan: Yes. I think the fact that librarians have been successful at the local level hurts at the Legislature in terms of funding. Legislators know that local support for libraries is strong and they feel no obligation to rescue you. What concerns me lately is a buzz has started that maybe we have too many libraries. It started with law libraries, but it seems to be spreading

George: I think there is a perception, getting stronger, that libraries have not kept up with technology and are about to be overtaken by technology. Who needs the library if you have a Kindle?

Nan: OLA is asking all the public library directors to invite legislators to take part in summer reading to children, at a busy time of day, to show how many people still use libraries.

George: Hallelujah!

Nan: It's important to show Ready to Read at work, but also to show libraries as busy places to counter that "too many libraries" buzz.

George: How does it look for the next session?

Nan: Okay for now, but with the slow recovery of the economy and budget cuts, you never know.

Abigail: That's why getting our legislators into the libraries this summer is critical.

Nan: Exactly! I should mention that our event at the Capitol every session is a great advocacy event. Legislators come and choose donated children's books for a school or public library of their choice. Other organizations envy us because so many legislators come. They love choosing children's books.

### **Children as library advocates**

Abigail: It often comes down to people using libraries as a child or their children using libraries.

Nan: I hear that all the time from legislators and other people: how thrilled their children are about going to the library and finding books, even with computers at home!



George: Toddlers coming in and getting books ... that's money in the bank for libraries!

Nan: I have an anecdote about how children can be great advocates for libraries. Back in the '90s, we were fighting a bill in the Legislature to mandate filters on public library computers. Our argument was that the decision should be made at the local level. But it was an uphill fight in committee.

At a hearing, a group of school children came in on tour, just to watch and listen. They were around 11. One legislator said, "I've heard these filters aren't very effective. I'd like to ask these children, do you think you could break through these filters?"

The children were great! They said, "We could do it in two or three minutes!" It was a turning point for our success in killing the bill. It was totally unplanned, but it showed what great advocates children can be.

Abigail: I remember being at a budget hearing and a Boy Scout stood up in his uniform. He talked about the library, how important it was to him and how he'd been going there since he was two. No one is going to argue with a Boy Scout! It ended up on the front page of the paper with a photo.

George: That's what's been happening here in Salem. City government warned people weeks ago they were facing a terrible shortfall, millions of dollars. They scheduled half a dozen budget hearings around town. Citizens showed up and brought their kids to testify. It works! The library cuts have been reversed.

Nan: B.J. at Salem Public has a wonderful idea for the project this summer, bringing legislators to read to children. She's going to have it part of their program to have note paper and crayons for children to write thank you notes to the legislators who read to them.

Abigail: You're going to see those thank you notes on legislators' walls!

### **The message: Books, books and more**

Nan: So what are the best messages about libraries? Books, research?

Abigail: OCLC says books are our brand. Technology and other services are important, but books are still our basic, most important message. People identify with books. It can be a book on a Kindle or an actual paper book. But people equate libraries with books, and that's a popular message.

George: There's a threat out there we need to address: private, for-profit libraries. This needs to be headed off by talking about all the services we provide: where we are now, what we're doing, and where we hope to go. These private companies are coming in and saying they can do all this more cheaply. That's nonsense. People need to know what libraries are providing and what kind of training it takes to provide it.



Abigail: Contracting out for private management is a threat to the fundamental core of libraries, our responsiveness to our communities, and our democratic piece.

Nan: Legislators tell me nostalgic stories about their childhood experiences with libraries. We shouldn't abandon the power of nostalgia.

Abigail: We talk about the digital divide. Even though I might have a computer at home, I still want it out there for people who don't: kids who need to do homework and people looking for jobs. Every job requires you to apply online these days. I recently helped someone applying for a job as a fry cook, a job that would never require you to use a computer, but you could only apply online.

### Who should deliver the message?

Abigail: We've talked about children and librarians as messengers to the community about the value of librarians. Who else could deliver our message?

George: I wonder if we've made quite enough use of our library boards, advisory committees and volunteers. In Salem, we have Friends of the Library, a dedicated group raising money in their shop for the library. We need to enlist those people to talk for us. I had an op-ed piece in the *Statesman Journal* three months ago on the Salem library being the worst funded in the state for comparably sized libraries, and how the library needed more support to continue the great things it does.

I got positive feedback from the article except for one woman who called and griped. Only one, but that's out there. The best way to counter that is to have volunteers out there defending the library.

Nan: I think some people who **don't** use the library appreciate it.

George: They can understand its importance to the community.

Nan: Someone was saying the other day that maybe we've put too much emphasis on bricks and mortar. I think library facilities—bricks and mortar—are important as community centers.

George: Absolutely. It's no accident that in Salem the public library is next door to City Hall.

Abigail: And the people who work in our cities. For everyone who comes to work in our city, I give a welcome packet with a library card application, facts about the library and how the library can help them do their job. We offer to put their informational brochures on display.



### Sound bites and Sign-off

Abigail: One last thing: Everyone uses sound bites. We need to make sure they use **our** sound bites. When someone mentions our library to our Mayor, he always says, “One thousand people a day!” That’s the sound bite I’ve given him.

George: I’ve told you everything I know ...

Nan: No, you haven’t!

George: Well, I’m starting to think about you having to transcribe all of this.

Nan: Okay, we’re done! 🌿

