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## Growth Through Involvement

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# Growth through Involvement



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When I read that the Spring issue was going to be on the topic of growth, I immediately thought about how my involvement in OLA has provided an incredible growth experience for me. As I head into the years when many librarians start to feel “been there, done that,” my involvement has kept me excited about my profession and given me many opportunities for learning things that my job—although I love it—does not provide. I’ve worked up my nerve to talk to legislators about library issues. I helped rewrite bylaws and mission statements. I organized food, carpools and room assignments for a two day meeting. I’ve made mistakes and gotten advice and support about that.

Most surprisingly, I discovered that I enjoy board meetings. My friend Deeda Chamberlain used to say of her time on the OLA Board, “It’s great to be part of an organization that actually accomplishes things.” For me, it’s inspiring to sit in a room for 4 hours with smart, committed people who care passionately about the same things I care about— working to make things better for all librarians, library users, and people who should be library users. I also loved Children’s Services board meetings, which were like driving a car with the steering wheel disconnected. I never knew what amazing places we’d go, quite exciting.

So, after that initial idea, I of course thought that nobody would want to read all about me, so I e-mailed some questions to a few of the remarkable people I have come to know through my involvement in OLA. The questions were:

1. How did you first get involved in OLA?
2. How do you think your involvement has helped you grow as a person and a professional? (Or, what have you learned through your involvement that has helped in other areas?)
3. What are the things you value most about your involvement?
4. What else should I have asked you?

I asked library students, school librarians, youth services librarians, academics and support staff, at least one person from every division.

Involvement for some began with the want-ads on the OLA web page, <http://www.olaweb.org/seeking-volunteers>, others joined a committee. Others were invited. Some started while still in library school, others waited till later in their career. I drifted in gradually. Two actually began their involvement as OLA board members. For me, answers to the second question are the heart of the matter and I will quote directly from people’s answers.

**Margaret Harmon Myers:** “I believe I’m a better employee overall for having been involved with the Support Staff Division. Job satisfaction isn’t a constant, but working with my peers in OLA has given me purpose and satisfaction, as well as confidence in my abilities.”

**Danielle Jones:** “I have learned so much from being involved with CSD and OYAN. As a new librarian I felt that I was being mentored by more seasoned folks. I got a chance to hear about what other libraries are doing.”

**Stephanie Thomas:** “I learned more about what’s happening with all types of libraries around our state. This knowledge helped me bring back partnerships and information to other teacher librarians.”



**Sylvia Baker:** “*Professionally:* I learned much about balancing strengths and weaknesses, how to volunteer generously with skill areas I am strong in and patiently seek opportunities to grow the skill areas that are weak. I learned that professional relationships can nurture your perception of yourself and help you place yourself within the larger world of library services. *Personally:* I learned how to evaluate/balance personal priorities with professional priorities and let them ebb and flow as needed.”

**Jeana McClure:** “Being an OLA member enriched my master’s program beyond simply attending conferences. I was able to participate in a strategic planning workshop in early 2014, on the heels of completing a strategic planning exercise in my library management class. It was a great experience to see the information from the classroom come to life in that workshop. I also got the idea for my practicum during the strategy workshop, which was to research best practices in story time for OLA’s Children’s Services Division. That exposed me to a wealth of new material and resources, and the best part was getting to exchange ideas with youth librarians from all over the state. Now that I’ve graduated, staying involved through OLA committee work keeps me connected with the profession through the Advocacy Task Force, by contributing to CSD’s literacy calendar, and helping review the youth services guidelines.”

**Candice Watkins:** “It’s been an incredible and inspiring experience to work with such energetic and devoted library professionals. Mentoring, leadership, social justice, CSD, OYAN, ACRL, school libraries, OBOB, legislative, conference—one organization, OLA, coordinating all of this work? Yes! It has stretched my boundaries for sure; we all need that kind of growth in our work. Without it, things really do become dormant. Challenge brings new passion, new ideas, new perspective, new colleagues, new possibilities!

Being a librarian is as much a part of who I am personally as it is professionally. I carry my library lens everywhere I go; that stretching of my professional boundaries informs my personal life and leads to growth there, too.”

**Sara Thompson:** “The more involved I get with OLA, the more I recognize how important collaboration and long-term planning can be to our careers and even personal projects. OLA conversations have helped form better connections even with librarians in my own town at other institutions.”

What people value most brought a rich list including:

- Contacts, networking and relationships
- Collaborative atmosphere, inclusiveness and learning from others
- Feeling listened to and enthusiastically welcomed
- Seeing the big picture and
- The opportunity to act in a leadership role that their job doesn’t offer them

The following comments and questions from some respondents were also illuminating.

**Margaret:** *Why would I recommend OLA involvement to others—what does OLA membership offer them to make it worth the cost of membership? (I hear this question often).*



I find it exciting to be involved in a professional organization where I might help create needed change. This involvement teaches appreciation for what is already being done and for the viewpoints of others. It also keeps me abreast of what is happening with libraries nationwide, from legislation to funding to cutting edge patron service. Isolating oneself to one's own institution can lead to tunnel vision; I see things from a broader view having worked with OLA.


*Sara: I tend to be a very future-focused person, so maybe a question about my expectations for the future of OLA. Or where I see OLA going.* To answer that—I'd like to see OLA become more cohesive. Rather than splitting ourselves up along lines of academic / public / Portland / rural / large / small / librarian / staff, I'd like to see the emphasis of our communication and conferences be on the things we all have in common as library folks.

*Jeana:* It would be interesting to explore how to overcome the barriers to participation. I know getting time out of the library to participate, and travel considerations prevent folks from participating fully. Is that problem solvable? Can technology overcome some of that, through Skype, Google hangouts, video conferencing, etc.? Is it possible to sponsor some regional workshops, like in eastern Oregon or southern Oregon, and not be so Salem-Portland focused?

*Sylvia: What is your current level of involvement?"*

After working with the Support Staff Division Executive Committee and Conference Committee for several years, which I loved, I chose to take a pre-determined (pre-determined by personal responsibilities) amount of time off, before choosing to participate this actively again. So, right now: I am an OLA member, I read the OLA publications and I anticipate participating in conferences in the future.

Clearly, OLA has helped all of us grow, both professionally and personally: new skills, new contacts, deeper connections, a broader vision. What could your involvement do for you? To look at the other side of the coin, sometimes I imagine we could for Oregon, for libraries and their patrons with an even more engaged and involved membership.

I'd like to end with this quote from Sara: "I think OLA is on the cusp of big changes—in identity, in workflows, in outreach and audience. I'm excited to be in the thick of things, both watching and participating as these changes happen. Just think—there will be an OLA time capsule sealed up this year and it won't be opened again until 2040!! I'll be nearing retirement (I hope) by then and my little branch campus will be a drastically different place then it is now. How will OLA be different then? How will we be reaching out to the non-library community about all the great work happening within the library community? And most importantly, will I finally finish reading *Moby Dick*?" 

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