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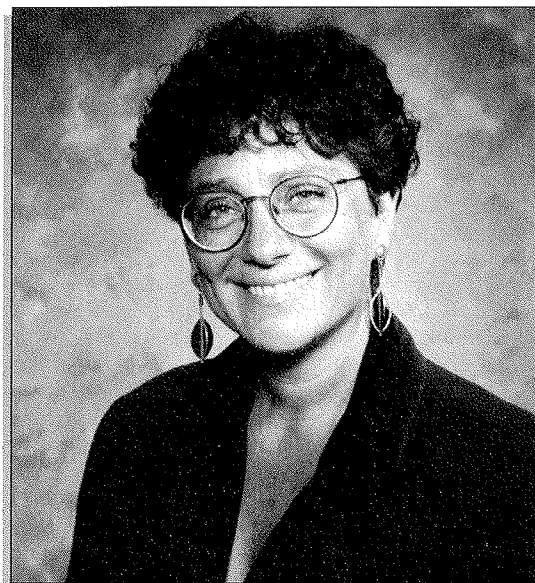
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Coming of Age with the OCA

by Deborah L. Jacobs
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Deborah Jacobs

Now that Lon Mabon and the Oregon Citizens Alliance have left us alone for an electoral season, I am rested enough to celebrate. Celebrate? Yes, we can all celebrate that they came and we, the library community of Oregon, not only "won," but we toughened up and became great political and intellectual freedom fighters in the process. Of course, the OCA and their message of hatred and intolerance caused great pain and serious dissension within our state. They were frightening, well organized, and the threat they posed was serious. And, if all this weren't enough, they came after our books and our libraries.

In the process of fighting the OCA's threat, we not only developed politically, but were forced to refine our thinking, develop strategically, and build better coalitions and collaborative relationships. And as a side benefit, the battle also inspired us to truly diversify our collections and become more inclusive institutions for the entire community. During the past five years we discovered the playing field had shifted significantly. Intellectual Freedom is no longer simply an intellectual exercise. And we discovered that political involvement, when the issues deeply impact libraries, is our moral responsibility.

BECOMING AWARE

For years, the Oregon Library Association debated the level of its involvement in the political arena. Elsewhere in this issue is an article describing our successful efforts with the Legislature. But, as of 1991, OLA as an organization had not been involved in a statewide election. We had heated discussions about whether or not we should get involved politically in the OCA debate. Some of us, including State Librarian Jim Schepke, were tenacious. We believed the OCA agenda of hate affected us in many ways, but our focus was on the obvious issue of censorship of library collections. While the OCA talked about its commitment to traditional family values, the library community had some "traditional values" of its own, like the right of free speech.

Meanwhile OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee, under the leadership of Pat Grace and George Bell, began monitoring the OCA's proposed initiative which would have amended the Oregon Constitution to declare homosexuality as "abnormal and perverse." Language from the ballot measure stated: "State, regional, and local governments and their properties and monies shall not be used to promote,

encourage or facilitate homosexuality, pedophilia, sadism, or masochism." When the impact of this initiative became clear to OLA members, the debate about "should we or shouldn't we" involve ourselves quickly ended. The Oregon library community became energized and unified.

SOUNDING THE ALARM

The Intellectual Freedom Committee initiated activities to alert association members, library staff, board members, and the general public of the impact of the proposed initiative on libraries, and to urge Oregonians not sign the initiative petitions which the OCA was circulating. Pat Grace wrote an article for the *Oregon Library News* which detailed the case against the initiative and sounded the alarm. He concluded the article by saying:

"Don't sign the petitions, campaign against the initiative, keep the library doors open to everybody, keep libraries as depositories of the widest possible diversity of views and modes of expression. TAKE THE OCA SERIOUSLY."

At the April 1992 OLA membership meeting there was unanimous approval of a resolution in opposition to the OCA. This action became the foundation for OLA's subsequent herculean efforts.

OLA's worst fears about the OCA and its agenda were given substance when an OCA-sponsored ordinance, similar to the statewide initiative, was passed in Springfield. In addition to a City Council member asking for a list of recent acquisitions, Scott Lively (the OCA's then-communication director) was quoted as saying:

"We're going to show that the rhetoric used by our opponents regarding banning books was nothing more than fear-mongering. But, if we

how to do it!

find that a book about homosexual lifestyle like *Heather Has Two Mommies* is in a library, we will do everything we can to get it out of there.”

Well, we might have been missing something, but this clearly sounded like book banning to us! OLA was activated and held simultaneous press conferences in Corvallis, Portland, and Springfield and a news release was issued statewide. During the press conferences librarians urged the public not to sign the initiative petitions and detailed concerns about what could happen if the measure passed. The press conferences and the news release were widely reported by both print and broadcast media. Thus OLA's name became recognized for its quality response to this challenge and the issues of intellectual freedom and library materials were permanently injected into the campaign by a credible source - librarians - who the public trusted in such issues.

DEVELOPING THE STRATEGY

The OLA Executive Board held its annual two-day retreat to plan activities for the coming year. This was my year as OLA president and I thought I had a full year-long agenda – and this was before the OCA. In spite of this, OLA decided to put off everything until after the election and focus purely on defeating the OCA initiative. All committee, division, and round table efforts were to be focussed on this one area. Three key groups (Intellectual Freedom Committee, Public Relations, and Social Responsibilities Round Table) were given direction to develop an action, or, if you will, battle plan. A special budget item of \$1,000 was appropriated for the effort.

A statewide coalition of groups and organizations was formed to raise funds and campaign against the measure. OLA decided to maintain a liaison with the coalition but wage its own effort against Measure 9, based on the threat to intellectual freedom and the integrity of libraries. While this decision was naive, our effectiveness was exceptional.

IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY

A series of low-cost, but high-visibility activities was planned and executed during the summer and fall months leading to the November election.

- Space was purchased in the Oregon Voters' Pamphlet. OLA's statement stressed the potential for a purge of homosexual authors if Measure 9 were to pass, and it listed about 40 prominent authors whose writings might be subject to removal from library shelves.
- The Board of Trustees of the Oregon State Library adopted a resolution in opposition to Measure 9. The resolution stressed that the Board has a "responsibility to oppose censorship and protect and promote intellectual freedom in libraries throughout the state of Oregon." The resolution was mailed to all Friends and Trustees groups in the state, along with a cover letter urging them to

adopt a similar resolution, and then to seek news media reports of their action. More than 20 groups responded.

- A letter to the editor was mailed to every daily and weekly newspaper in the state. The letter said in part: "The notion of evaluating literature on the basis of the writer's sexual orientation would be laughable if it were not so dangerous. Intellectual freedom has always been the cornerstone of libraries in our country. Discrimination against any group or segment of Oregonians has no place in our society. Or in our libraries."
- The OLA Legislative Committee published a flyer describing appropriate anti-measure 9 activities for Association members. It proved a useful tool for library workers wanting to get involved and to do what they could against the measure.
- The October 1992 issue of the *Oregon Library News* was given over entirely to the subject of Measure 9. The issue gave members of the library community an opportunity to explore aspects of the controversy they might not have otherwise considered.
- As the library community asserted its position, news coverage and editorial comment increased dramatically, especially in the month just prior to the election. The *Oregonian* ran a major story in which the issue of library censorship was thoroughly explored.
- The highlight and culminating activity of the OLA campaign was a rally and march through downtown Portland a week before the election. More than 200 people – library staff, board members and library supporters – marched through downtown Portland chanting "RALLY FOR THE RIGHT TO READ...NO ON 9! NO ON 9!" To emphasize the message of potential censorship, marchers carried books such as Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, that could be banned under the language of Measure 9. The march ended at the entrance to the Multnomah County Library, where speeches were given by librarians, authors, bookstore owners, and representatives from the anti-Measure 9 coalition.

Measure 9 was defeated, 57% to 43%. The day after the election Lon Mabon was asked "what went wrong." In part, he said, "we shouldn't have gone after the books."

FOLLOWING THROUGH

In early 1993, the Intellectual Freedom Round Table of the American Library Association announced that its prestigious state program award was being presented to the OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee. The award carried with it a commemorative plaque and a \$1,000 check (just the amount we spent!). The letter of notification said, in part:

"Not only does our Committee concur that OLA's IFC has galvanized support for intellectual freedom with the State Association, intervened with extraordinary effectiveness in an intellectual freedom crisis in Oregon, and created an effective model program which could be adopted by others, but it set a new standard of excellence for response to future threats to intellectual freedom."

Meanwhile the fight was continuing against the OCA, which now was promoting its initiatives on the local level. Many communities were now having their own "Sons of 9." Right in the middle of this fight came some more energizing and delightful news. The Oregon American Civil Liberties Union honored the "Librarians of Oregon" as the collective recipients of the E.B. MacNaughton Award. To quote from that award:

"Our most dedicated champions of free speech and intellectual freedom have been the librarians of Oregon who have resisted all efforts to restrict what we can read, hear, and see."

During the 1993 legislative session, many Oregon legislators stuck their necks out and supported gay-positive legislation. The OCA immediately announced plans to initiate recall petitions for all of these men and women. OLA again jumped into the fray. We initiated three actions:

1. We wrote letters to the legislators thanking them for their vote;
2. We wrote letters to the editors in their local communities thanking the legislators for being defenders of the First Amendment and thus protecting libraries; and
3. We honored each of the legislators at the end of the session with a certificate of appreciation.

These actions in defense of our elected officials were greatly appreciated and have been remembered.

STAYING ALERT

The OLA has continued its activity in the state-wide arena. In 1994, we again fought the OCA as well as Ballot Measure 19, a censorship initiative. The lessons we learned in 1992 have served us well in subsequent elections. This year, in spite of the OCA not being on the ballot, we worked hard to defeat three measures. We were successful with Ballot Measures 31 and 46, but unfortunately not with Ballot Measure 47. In addition to submitting information for the Voter's Pamphlet, OLA members wrote position papers and letters to the editor, and held discussions throughout the state. Although not many people attended the sessions, the position papers, letters to the editor, and coalitions with other groups were successful activities in informing the library community and citizens about the impact of these issues on libraries.

Members of OLA have also started a political action committee – People for Oregon Libraries. While the PAC is an entity totally separate from OLA, it provides an endorsement and financial contribution to candidates for the state legislature who are supportive of libraries and the tenets of intellectual freedom. The PAC also endorses local library measures and can provide support on ballot measure initiatives.

We learned many lessons during the past five years. As noted elsewhere – we've learned through experience how to "stay safe in the political arena." We have also become extraordinarily vigilant about making sure our library collections are diverse. We learned that the best way to negate the OCA is to work in an "inclusive" manner with people who might fall for the OCA's hate-mongering. We've learned to stay focussed on issues that are about us – books, libraries and censorship – thus not diluting our message. We became a strong and essential partner to other coalitions in Oregon. Now, anytime a campaign committee is formed, OLA is always asked to participate – to have a "library voice at the table." And finally – by staying true to ourselves and our mission – we have kept our reputation as people who are guardians of democracy. As the ACLU said in its award to the "Librarians of Oregon":

"The Librarians ... have been the courageous guardians of ideas and information throughout a barrage of political pressure brought to focus on them. Without their commitment to the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights, without their commitment to the First Amendment, without their commitment to provide communities a refuge for intellectual freedom, the fundamental principle on which our nation rests would crumble."

To continue, we need all of your support, energy, and talent. And, in addition to you, we need you to enlist friends, board members, and library users. We have seen what happens when we are tenacious and focussed. We have built a strong foundation for the future. Now it is up to you. Just because the OCA has folded its tent is no reason to become lax. Issues and events abound, ranging from the staggering and growing repercussions of Ballot Measure 47 to the remaining battle over the Internet and the Communications Decency Act. In spite of how often it's quoted, Thomas Jefferson remains poignantly relevant – "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." ☐

NOTE

Some of the information found in this article originally appeared in articles written by George Bell and Patrick Grace.

Deborah L. Jacobs is the director of the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library and former president of OLA. Interested in learning more about how to get politically involved in OLA or in People for Oregon Libraries? Please contact Deborah at jacobsd@peak.org