

NLLN Continuing Education Scholarship Reports for 2007/2008

**S. Eileen Beutel
PLA National Convention
March 26 -28, 2008**

Ideas! Opportunities! Learning! Meeting new people! Energy! These are some of the words that I might use to describe the Public Library Association's national library convention. PLA opened with a general session by John Wood, an executive from Microsoft who left the company to dedicate his life to providing libraries and schools to children in developing countries. Wood's story was very engaging and his work is truly inspiring. The difference between John Wood and some other philanthropists is that he not only provided funding and/or materials, but he made it part of the mission of his "Room to Read" nonprofit organization to involve the local citizens in the planning and the labor for the schools and libraries. This gave the people a sense of ownership and pride. Another noteworthy part of Room to Read's mission is to provide scholarships for girls in countries where boys go to school but girls are typically denied an education due to poverty and tradition.

The smaller sessions were excellent. The only problem was that there were too many good choices at any given time. Two sessions that I attended on programming offered practical tips. The first, "Running the One Woman (or Man) show: Successful Adult Programming When you Have a Million Things To Do!" presented by Julie Biando Edwards, asked the question, "Why program?" The speaker explained that as a public library it is our job and our responsibility to be plugged into our community and it is the best way to stay relevant. Programs help us to be visible and they connect us to the public. Programs will bring in new people who may not come to us otherwise. Programs can help circulation when staff create displays of materials that relate to the topic of the program. Ms. Edwards urged us to allow staff time to brainstorm and share ideas about possible programs and not to say "no" to ideas. Instead, take the ideas and tweak them.

She also urged us to be willing to fail. We need to try something different. If it fails, we can learn from it and go on to something else. She urged us to make programming a priority and to make a decision that we will learn how to write grants to be used for programs. Some topics for programs included: sports, crafts, concerts offered by students or local talent, nutrition and health topics, local history and something on treasures in your attic. The session entitled, "Sexy Senior Programming@Your library was both practical and entertaining as we listened to the ideas presented and ended by going through some fun exercises that the speakers use with their seniors. We were challenged to offer programs for senior citizens because they are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population and because they are often underserved. Seniors want to know about the new technology and they want to learn to age successfully. It is good to partner with other entities such as senior citizen centers, assisted living and nursing home residences. The presenters from the Bethel Park, PA public library have had success by bringing their preschool storytimes to senior residences. The interaction between children and seniors is beneficial to both age groups and young parents are pleased to see their children become comfortable with the elderly. We learned about organizing a Laughter Club which meets weekly and can be held at the library or at senior centers/ residences.

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Programs at the library can be for the general public or for teens and attendees can be asked to bring someone else who is over the age of 50. I am making a resolution to use some of the ideas presented in both sessions to do more programming at our branch.

Two sessions that I attended offered alternative ideas to traditional ways of thinking and working in public libraries. "Dewey or Don't We" was presented by staff from the Maricopa County Library District of Phoenix, AZ. The presenters emphasized that they listened to their local citizens and acted on what they learned in terms of what people would like to see in a library, what they find easy and what is difficult in using a library.

The libraries are customer-focused and they are technology driven. The collection is made up almost entirely of popular materials. The Perry Branch worked with vendors to provide materials that are not cataloged according to Dewey but according to subjects or topics using a bookstore model. The thing that I would take from this session is to listen to our own customers and to begin to explore options for offering perhaps a modified approach to the one presented. More and more I have experienced that Dewey is not user-friendly. The other session was entitled: "Dangerous Ideas: What If Libraries..." The panel took turns offering "What if" statements for us to explore, such as, What if we stopped cataloging; What if we promoted Wikipedia; What if we cooperated with the FBI in all criminal investigations; What if mistakes by staff were expected and embraced? What I would like to take from both sessions is to challenge my own thinking and assumptions and to be willing to explore alternatives. The first thing that I would like to focus on is to use mistakes (my own as well as others) as an opportunity for learning.

The session, "Catch a Northern Star: MN Authors Who Speak To Teens" was a panel of five authors who shared some of the books they are working on or have currently published as well as the book or works that they consider their best. They made some comments about publishing. There seems to be a trend for a blending of YA and adult level fiction. One other session that I attended: "Libraries Prosper with Passion, Purpose and Persuasion" urged the attendees to purchase the PLA advocacy toolkit and explained some of its points. The speakers emphasized that libraries have an exceptional story to tell and that we need to advocate for ourselves. They also recommended telling our library story from the customer's perspective. What do we want people to know about the library and who needs to know? We need to make a case for library support by connecting to the things that people care about, for example, their health, their children, their education.

I am most grateful for the opportunity to attend the PLA convention, thanks to NLLN and to LARL. It was a renewing and enriching experience in so many ways. In return I plan to make use of the ideas and tips toward better and expanded library service.

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4/3/2008