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Back Talk-Library Dreams

Anthony W. Ferguson
anthony.ferguson185@gmail.com

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people profile

Cheryl E. Highsmith

Coordinator of Electronic Resources & Serials, Leatherby Libraries, Chapman University, Orange, CA 92866
Phone: (714) 532-7769 • Fax: (714) 532-7743
<highsmic@yahoo.com> • <highsmith@chapman.edu>

BORN AND LIVED: Champaign County, IL, and elsewhere in IL; later in Philadelphia, PA; and now in Orange County, CA.

EARLY LIFE: Champaign, IL.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Active member of ALA-ALCTS and (substantial) academic library experience in both public and technical services positions; certified teacher at the secondary level and member of the AATG.

FAMILY: Mom (a retired librarian); three siblings, including a brother who is a librarian; nieces & nephews.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE: Reading; writing.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Mysteries by a short list of authors; historical non-fiction.

PET PEEVES: Poor planning.

PHILOSOPHY: Do it right the first time.

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: As I am submitting this profile, one thing does not stand out, other than chairing a committee and making an award presentation at ALA Annual 2012. This article might supersede that, and there are other possibilities. Let’s just say I have a lot of “irons in the fire.”

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Book/book chapter publication(s).

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Fewer service positions identifiable as librarians; consolidation of services and content access points via vendor/publisher mergers or otherwise; library acquisitions increasingly driven by patron options/selections made at the point-of-use.

Back Talk

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save some money and appear to be generous by helping the other libraries. Added to all of this was the advent of open-access materials including the riches of the Web, open-access journals, and now the mass availability of millions of non-commercial eBooks.

I began this piece by examining Dr. King’s dreams and how they have been largely realized. We then moved into a brief review of how libraries and the profession followed suit and made it possible for America’s black readers and librarians to join and enrich the mainstream. While there is much yet to be done, I think this is remarkable and is due to the fact that, as my non-librarian wife often reminds, librarians are such nice people. While these changes have been extraordinary, I think the advent of so much non-commercial and relatively affordable commercial e-content is equally amazing. We often talk about the need for “even playing fields.” While I don’t think they completely exist, I do believe that with the advent of the Web we are much closer to achieving the dream of all librarians: To help people to find the information they need.
While thinking about writing this Back Talk column, I was also watching reports concerning Martin Luther King’s 1963 “I have a Dream” speech. President Obama’s second inauguration speech, and the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Dr. King hoped that Americans would work, pray, stand, struggle, and if need be, go to jail together, so that all men would be equal, so that the sons of slaves and slave owners might sit together as brothers, so that there would be freedom and justice for all, so that people would be judged by their character and not by the color of their skin, and so that black and white children could play together as brothers and sisters.

As I reflected upon these hopes for America voiced by King some 50 years ago, the year I graduated from high school, I thought that while we have not fully achieved all of his dreamed for goals, America had made real progress: local laws allowing job discrimination have been struck down, combined black and white church congregations are common, workers of all colors march together to fight for their rights, black and white politicians in the former slave states do work together, sports teams are integrated, and while the issues of racial quotas, diversity, affirmative action and reverse discrimination are still hot topics, and the reelective of a black president.

With these thoughts in mind I then turned to the problem at hand: My need for a Back Talk column and so I began to wonder about the amount of social progress that had been achieved in the library and information field.

There is an very informative two-part article freely available on race and librarianship by Lipscomb in the Journal of the Medical Library Association (Lipscomb, Carolyn E. Race and Librarianship: Part 1 www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC442167/ and Part 2 www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1175796/). In 1936 when the American Library Association (ALA) held its annual meeting in Richmond Virginia, it took special steps to invite black librarians to take part in the conference. However, while Virginia laws permitted blacks and whites to attend conference sessions together as long as they sat in separate sections, they could not stay at the same hotels nor could they eat meals in the same dining rooms. Subsequently, due to the uproar this produced, ALA established a Committee on Racial Discrimination and resolved that in the future they would not hold their conference where attendees could not be treated equally. In 1954 ALA also “banned” states from having black and white chapters, and Georgia and Alabama withdrew the affiliation to the parent group. In 1961 ALA asked its chapters to report on their steps toward integration and urged them to end discrimination within three years. Consequently, Louisiana and Mississippi also disassociated themselves from ALA rather than comply. This isn’t to say there were not actions within these four states to integrate, but only that the powers of tradition favoring the separation of races dominated the discussions.

In the early 1960s there were further attempts to integrate public libraries in the deep south. A 1961 “study-in” at the Jackson public library in Mississippi resulted in the arrest of nine black students from a local Christian college. They were ultimately fined $100 each but given suspended sentences. Subsequently ALA amended its Library Bill of Rights to state “The right of an individual to the use of a library should not be denied or abridged because of his race, religion, national origins, or political views.” While some libraries continued to maintain separate reading rooms, denying access to certain kinds of books and by removing all desks and chairs so that blacks and whites could not sit next to each other, gradually conditions improved and librarians, like the rest of America, integrated. (“Segregated Libraries.” Americanwiki.pb-works.com/w/page/32944222/Segregated%20Libraries”)

Fast forwarding to the present year, we find that libraries in this regard have changed significantly. In the current version of the African American Library Directors in the USA sponsored by the University of Kentucky Libraries there are approximately 150 black directors, assistant directors, and directors of major departments listed. (http://www.uky.edu/Libraries/NKAADirectors.php) While this number is admittedly small compared to the total number of librarians, progress has been made. Based upon census samples, in 1950 there were 990 black librarians, or two percent of the total number of librarians. By 1990, the most recent year for which I could find data, that had changed to 27,958, or nine percent of the total number of librarians. (Oxford University Press. blog.oup.com/2011/06/librarian-census/)

While the number of black library directors might be smaller than many might wish, the quality of those serving or who have served is remarkable. For example, Robert Wedgeworth was the Executive Director of the American Library Association from 1972 to 1985, the Dean of Columbia University’s School of Library Service from 1985 to 1992, and the University Librarian and Professor of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois from 1993 to 1999. Another example is Loretta Parham, who was just made a member of OCLC’s Board of Trustees. Loretta is currently the Executive Director and Chief Executive Officer at the Robert W. Woodruff Library-Atlanta University Center, Inc. She was formerly the CEO and Director of Vanderbilt University’s library system and chaired Solinet.

When my generation of librarians, whether school, public, special or academic, joined the profession in the late 60s and early 70s, I believe we all shared the dream of helping people find the information they needed to be successful. In my own academic library case during the pre-electronic era, the emphasis was on collecting as many primary and secondary source printed materials as possible and teaching students and teachers how to find them once they were added to the collections.

In the early 70s when we started to provide access to electronic databases, we added to our workloads the job of interpreting patron needs when doing their database searches for them. Thankfully, once the databases became more user-friendly we got out of the users’ way and let them do their own searches. Then the focus of at least my own work became justifying new funds and redistributing old funds to buy as much of the right electronic full-text information resources as possible. Initially, this meant adding e-journals to our existing print research journal subscriptions. Later we flipped the equation and worked on figuring out for which titles we still needed print copies. We then found that via the “big deal” packages we could even get more content for the same or a bit more money than in the print world. This step toward the acquisition of more electronic content was then followed by the heady early days of consortial e-journal and eBook buying. For smaller/poorer libraries this was like Christmas, and the larger/richer libraries got to