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Political Action and Your Library Association

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Elsa is the Director of Library Services at the Oregon College of Art and Craft and serves as the current president of the Oregon Library Association. She earned her MLIS from the Pratt Institute in New York City in 2009, and her B.A. from the University of Oregon. She has worked in public libraries, a museum archive, and academic libraries. Among the many things she loves about library work is serving students and collaborating with the amazing people who work in the library world.

Political action. Libraries. The two seem to intersect more often than one might expect (unless one is a library worker, supporter, or patron; in which case it doesn't seem terribly unusual). People in our line of work are often called upon to assume the mantle of library-worker-activists. These calls to action affect us in our various roles as professionals, as private citizens, and as members of the Oregon Library Association.

Libraries are Political Places

This article is not a history of political involvement by pioneering library champions—although it could be. It could outline the struggles and sacrifices of real heroes in the name of stewardship, education, privacy, freedom from censorship, and so much more. There are many wonderful examples. I remember starting library school on the east coast right around the time the “Connecticut Four” librarians were standing up against the overreach of the Patriot Act. These people were examples of the kind of librarian I wanted to be, and still want to be: someone who defends civil liberties and fights for what is right. I continue to feel inspired



and grateful to be a member of a profession that has a brave history of standing up for the public good. Though it is true that libraries are a reflection of the communities they serve and are operated by people, who are inevitably fallible, sometimes libraries have not been on the right side of history. For example, Stephen Cresswell wrote an eye-opening article called “The Last Days of Jim Crow in Southern Libraries” in *Libraries & Culture* in 1996 about the sometimes ignored history of racially segregated libraries as a stain on the tradition of libraries being a bastion of free and equitable access.

However, my aim today is not to recount the political history (positive and sometimes negative) of libraries, though it is an interesting topic. For more information in that vein, you can find plenty of resources. One example I can recommend *Libraries & Democracy* edited by Nancy Kranich, (2001).

Please excuse the digression. My goal in this article is to give the reader a sense of what the leadership of the Oregon Library Association has been thinking and doing in the current political climate. In case you haven’t looked out your window, the current climate is blustery with a chance of rain.

The Oregon Library Association

Our association supports Oregon libraries, the people who work in them, and the communities we serve. That commitment casts a wide net in a large state full of people with diverse backgrounds and different political ideas on both local and national levels. We may have a spectrum of personal political beliefs, but we have a unifying body of core values as library workers.

The people in leadership positions in the association, such as the president, vice president, and other executive board members are elected to serve you, the OLA members. We all work hard to speak up and stand up for Oregon libraries. That’s definitely a team effort. This work is ongoing, and we have guiding principles to direct us when issues appear murky.

Many of our members are unaware of our association’s [Legislative Agenda](#), and if you are one of them, I invite you to read it on the OLA website. It outlines our guiding principles: Intellectual Freedom, Lifelong Learning and Literacy, Equitable Access, and Stewardship of Public Resources. In relationship to these principles, the agenda states: “To fulfill these principles and provide leadership within Oregon, OLA will study and respond to any measures, legislative or ballot, which affect the ability of Oregon libraries to follow the guiding principles. The Library Development and Legislation Committee is charged as the lead in these efforts” (Oregon Library Association, 2017).

OLA has an advocacy body, the Library Development and Legislative Committee (LDLC), whose members are brilliant and incredibly knowledgeable. We employ a lobbyist, Nan Heim, whose expertise and skill in navigating the political landscape in Salem are extraordinary. As OLA president, I am indebted to the LDLC for their advice and the ability to use them as a sounding board when I’m called upon to make statements of a political nature on behalf of our association.

I am writing this in the hope that a brief explanation of my perspective—as OLA’s current president—will illustrate my view concerning OLA’s mandate as an association in terms of political action, and the resources we have at our disposal to take action when appropriate. I have found that many of our members, even those on the board, are not always



familiar with our Legislative Agenda, and I hope that discussing it a bit here will help shine a light on it. The board is also developing a Core Values document with the objective of making these guiding principles more visible and easier to locate. I believe the term “Legislative Agenda” in itself may not be what interested parties seek to look at when they are exploring OLA’s guiding principles.

Political Engagement for the Association, the Employee, and the Individual

OLA is a 501(c)(3) which means there are restrictions on the kind of lobbying and advocacy work we can do. For example, we are non-partisan, meaning that we can absolutely not support or oppose a political party or a candidate for public office. We are allowed to do “grass-roots lobbying,” which includes communicating with the public about an issue, and making calls to action, but we are restricted in what we can do in terms of “direct lobbying.” Our voice is important, and I know that our members hope that OLA represents them and their interests. It is vital that we speak up and are active if our professional ethics are endangered. It is my hope that we are able to do this responsibly, effectively, and speak with one clear voice. The Oregon Library Association is a powerful body, and when we mobilize, we can accomplish big things. This is why we don’t always simply defer to the American Library Association to speak for Oregon Libraries on the national level—we get active ourselves. That said, the Oregon Library Association can’t speak for every individual working in an Oregon library. You may want to engage politically on an individual level, and that can mean different things as an employee and as a private citizen.

As library workers, we may have limitations on what we can do, in terms of political activity, in our workplaces. Public employees should be aware of the constraints on their political activity at work, as should employees of nonprofits. As private citizens, we are of course free to express our political beliefs and be engaged as we see fit (letter-writing, protesting, campaigning, and so on). You may well be limited in what you can do in your workplace, so it makes sense to use your own time and your own resources for your political engagement and speak for yourself rather than for your employer or institution.

I realize that I’m not providing a complete “how-to” for the library worker/political activist/OLA member, and I don’t pretend to. If you have questions about what you can and can’t do on the clock and in your organization, you should talk to your employer, or take a look at District Dispatch from the American Library Association, which has some good tools and resources. Furthermore, I would encourage you to look at a past issue of the OLA Quarterly called “Political Action” from Winter of 1997, 2.4 (full citation below). OLA past president and current LDLC co-chair Janet Webster wrote an excellent piece titled “Staying effective and safe in the political arena” that is as relevant now as it was when it was written 20 years ago.

Conclusion

At this writing, we’re being called upon to contact our elected representatives to preserve IMLS funding, which is in danger, we’ve watched in sorrow as public libraries in Douglas County closed this year due to funding issues, and we continue to face threats to privacy, net neutrality, and intellectual freedom. There’s a lot of advocacy work to be done in the



name of libraries. It feels very daunting, but please remember that these challenges are not new, and we are prepared to face them as an association, and as individuals who are dedicated to our libraries and communities. 🐼

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