ChangeMasters All: A Series on Librarians Who Steered a Clear Course toward the Twenty-first Century

An Interview with Lotsee Patterson

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The library profession is known for its long-standing advocacy for cultural equality, taking to heart the self-evident truths expressed in the Declaration of Independence that all persons "are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," and, by extension, the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights statement that "a person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views."[1] Although many outstanding individuals have worked to advance this cause, Lotsee Patterson, professor of library and information studies at the University of Oklahoma, rises as one of the most influential library advocates of these times.

Her office, nestled in the basement of Bizzell Memorial Library, bears evidence of her long, distinguished career. The bookshelves hold her publications, papers, and training manuals; the walls are covered with awards from various organizations; the file cabinets contain rough drafts and notes for legislation she helped write. In conversation, her verve and passion for advocacy, leadership, teaching, and mentorship shows clearly on her face. Patterson's empathetic belief that all people deserve equal access to library services is rooted in her childhood. Despite this ideal, experience has taught her that not all people are being served equally, and that the cultural and social effects on these underserved communities are devastating.

Growing up in the 1930s on her mother's Indian land allotment in southwestern Oklahoma, Patterson spent her days working the land and caring for animals. The Great Depression pressed upon the nation, and its effect on rural Oklahoma was severe. Many know of the devastating hardships of that period from John Steinbeck's epic novel *The Grapes of Wrath,* but for Patterson the experience was real. Although her family could feed themselves by farming the land, her neighbors and the community lost practically everything. Acutely aware of the poverty that surrounded her as a young girl, she reminisces, "People that didn't live through it don't understand the gripping fear of that period of time." These visceral experiences with economic deprivation within a rural community gave her a sympathetic understanding of the hardships facing the Native American tribes, which she would later dedicate her life to addressing.

Lotsee Patterson

Although the 1940s brought relief from the Great Depression, it also brought World War II. Though the economy was stimulated, life continued to be challenging for Patterson. She remembers, "Things were rationed. Things were hard. You were fearful. In times like these you realize the importance of some things that are not material." For Patterson, she learned the importance of books, and unlike many, she had plenty to read. Though her family struggled, she felt grateful to have "something to read that took [her] mind and spirit away from reality." Her mother frequently ordered books by mail through the Oklahoma Department of Libraries. She was able to explore life beyond her home, the war, and economic depression; in fact, books became the salve for this young girl who had already lived through the worst of times.

Later in life, she felt sympathy for those individuals who didn't have access to reading materials as she did. When she began teaching at Boone School in 1959, it became obvious to her that reading had been a unique luxury for her; looking among the faces of her students, she had a poignant awareness that these "kids never had anything to read, not in the homes—no magazines, no books, no newspapers, nothing." Even the schools did not have textbooks for the children. It did not matter to the school officials; they didn't expect much out of their students. They were just "Indians," after all.

While appalled by these negative expectations, Patterson was determined to do her best, despite the impossible task of feeding young minds without any materials to do the job. Patterson would go on to improve services to tribal and indigenous libraries throughout the world, but her motivation has always been rooted in the simple desire to give people access to books. Thinking back to her own

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childhood, she remarks, "I just took stuff for granted, and I was horrified to think that kids never had anything to read in their homes." This situation deeply affected her, and Patterson soon realized she could not pass her love of reading onto her students without exposing them to books. She muses, "Reading is something that is very hard to explain to people that haven't done it. How do you tell someone the pleasure that you get from reading a book?"

Although she began her career as a teacher, in 1968 fate presented her with a fortuitous opportunity. While teaching at the Riverside Indian School, her principal asked her to attend the School of Library and Information Studies program at the University of Oklahoma during summer break. It was a natural fit for Patterson. Soon after starting the semester, she wanted to attend the program full-time. Through the encouragement of her new friends at school, she applied for and received a Higher Education Act, Title II B grant and living stipend. Surprised that she was actually going to receive money to continue her education, she immediately took action and, locating a house, arranged the details of relocating her life and five children to Norman, Oklahoma. Patterson diligently earned her degree in little more than a year, but even so acknowledges that if not for the encouragement and help she received from others, she might never have even thought an opportunity like this was possible.

Today, Patterson uses this unique understanding to mentor others and encourage them to earn their librarianship degrees. She understands how overwhelming it can be to attend a major university, and she knows what it takes to make a student's journey through school successful. Drawing from her own early experiences, she shows others that they, too, can expand their lives the way she did. Some of her most meaningful experiences throughout her career have come from mentoring Native American students at the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Oklahoma. For some students, it has taken Patterson's skills of persuasion to get them to leave the reservation and enroll in school. For others, it has taken her expert skills to guide them through a major university's bureaucracy. She speaks candidly, "These are people whose lives probably would have never changed. They would have never come to library school. First of all, they wouldn't think they could; and secondly, they wouldn't have had the money."

Patterson argues that the improvement of library services to Native Americans is greatly affected by the recruitment of Native American students into the profession of librarianship. She is acutely aware that there are many social, cultural, and economic barriers that hinder Native Americans from entering into the profession.[2] She says, "They need the encouragement. They need to know that somebody is not going to let them fail." Patterson has helped several students make the long trek through the library and information studies program at the University of Oklahoma, and she counts these success stories as one of her most valuable contributions to the profession.

In addition to her ongoing role as a mentor and educator, Patterson is nationally recognized for activist work that began in 1973, when she took a position as an assistant professor at the University of New Mexico. It was a time of political and social unrest throughout the United States. Following the lead of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the American Civil Rights movement, the American Indian movement was gaining national attention due to the forced occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Headquarters in 1972 and the federal standoff at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1973. Amid the civil and political wars raging throughout the nation, Patterson focused on the ways she could advocate for her fellow American Indians by improving their educational resources. As a professor at the University of New Mexico, Patterson reached out to the community and began working with the local rural schools. Again she was confronted by the familiar situation of an astounding lack of library resources, and even of libraries, but what disturbed her even more was the ambivalent attitudes of the school officials to provide these materials. Through investigation, she realized the only federal money available to help was for training. Within her first year at the university, Patterson seized upon the opportunity and wrote a grant to train library aides. Even though the libraries did not exist yet, she believed that if she started training individuals, the libraries would eventually be built. And she was right.

Her program, the Institute for Training Library Aides in Pueblo Indian Schools, provided training materials and workshops for library aides. Grant participants were selected from surrounding Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) day schools, and they earned college credit for their participation. In addition, money in school budgets as well as smaller grants helped Patterson develop small collections of library materials. At the end of the grant, six BIA schools had library collections with trained employees.[3] The news of her success spread quickly. It was not long before the Pueblo tribes asked her to establish libraries on their reservations. Patterson agreed and wrote her second federal grant in 1974, the Library Aide Training Institute for American Indians. Following the formula she had established the year before, she trained library aides in librarianship fundamentals and began developing tribal libraries in the pueblos. Fourteen American Indians participated in the library aide training and, under the University of New Mexico, these participants earned twenty-four hours of resident credit, and some were eligible for an associate of arts degree. The project was as successful, "if not more successful, than the first."[4]

Thus, in the early 1970s, Patterson began her legacy of helping tribal communities develop library collections and giving students the same joy of reading she had as a child. She was able help the Pueblos build libraries from the ground up, including project staff, library aides, audiovisual equipment, supplies, and collections. Over time, Patterson saw her work with the Pueblo tribes take on

greater meaning, as the small collections of library materials housed in nooks, corners, and old buildings started to transform into cultural centers. Now, when Patterson visits them, she sees places where elders can pass on their traditions to the younger generations, and the younger generations can learn and become well-educated for the future. There are still a few people working in the Pueblo libraries that were originally trained by Patterson. These individuals hold the memories of what life was like before her guiding influence.[5] She recalls, "You started with nothing . . . just the fact that you could get libraries on the reservations, so remote, so far away from any kind of resource like that—it has been so rewarding." Patterson was so successful in creating quality libraries that those established at Zuni, Santa Clara, and Laguna were classified as public libraries, making them eligible for annual state library funds.

Patterson was able to use this same influence on a national level during the early 1970s, when she helped to create the American Library Association (ALA) Office of Library Outreach Services Subcommittee on the American Indian.[6] As national awareness rose concerning tribal libraries, this group eventually developed into the American Indian Library Association (AILA), an affiliate of ALA. It is the only national association that provides support and advocacy for library-related issues of American Indians and Alaska Natives.[7] The association honored Patterson, a cofounder of the organization, by making her the first recipient of the annual Honoring Our Elders Award. They recognized that her strong leadership role and dedication to the betterment of tribal libraries was groundbreaking and unique. Her work made her an expert on developing library services on native lands.

In 1976 the United States government recognized her expertise in tribal librarianship when they asked her to participate in a committee formed by the Department of the Interior's Office of Library and Information Services. Asked to draw conclusions on improving library services, the committee responded by publishing a report, "Bureau of Indian Affairs Plan for the Improvement of Library/Media/Information Programs," that became the basis for the White House preconference "Indian Library and Information Services On or Near Reservations," which Patterson cochaired in 1978.[8] Librarians, tribal leaders, and members of Congress all came together to discuss the issues facing Indian libraries; as a result, many important advances were made.

Among the issues discussed was the funding for tribal libraries, which often fell through holes in the system. Most state library associations did not support tribal libraries because they viewed them as a federal responsibility and therefore rejected any role in their operation.[9] However, as Patterson had discovered with her previous work with New Mexico's Pueblo tribes, the only federal funding available was for training and small projects. No initiative had yet established reliable annual funds for tribal libraries. Although public libraries were available to the tribes in surrounding cities, individuals on the reservation did not always know about this option or felt reluctant to leave the reservation for library services. It was clear during the preconference that funding for tribal libraries had reached a critical state.

Those discussions were continued a year later, at the 1979 White House Conference on Library and Information Services. More than sixty resolutions were passed to improve library services. From these resolutions came the most pivotal initiative to help tribal libraries achieve permanent federal funding—the National Indian Omnibus Bill, which Patterson coauthored. This legislation would provide training, support, funding, and technical assistance to federally recognized tribes. Though it took more than five years to fully pass Congress, in 1985, Title IV: Library Services for Indian Tribes and Hawaiian Natives Program was added to the Library Services and Construction Act.

Not only did this new legislation provide permanent funding for tribal libraries, it also increased their visibility with state and national library associations and political leaders. Soon standing ALA committees began adding tribal library concerns to their national agendas. Patterson's experiences in Congress taught her many things. She remarks today: "There are ways to do things by going through Congress and legislation. There are those in Congress that really do care and who are really good. You can affect outcomes . . . I thought, democracy does work."

Once this legislation took effect, the Department of Education sent out a Request for Proposal (RFP) for an outside contractor to help implement the new funding opportunity. Patterson answered with a proposal for a structured training program to help tribes make the most of this grant. She won the RFP, left the University of New Mexico, and brought the Training and Assistance for Indian Tribal Library Services (TRAILS) program to her alma mater at the University of Oklahoma for implementation. The fourteen-month program provided assistance through a toll-free telephone number, written communication, and on-site visits.[10] In addition, Patterson developed a training manual that was given to every federally recognized American Indian tribe. The TRAILS training manual has become internationally known as a critical resource for training and developing libraries for indigenous populations. In fact, the First Nations of Canada and indigenous populations of Australia both use the TRAILS manual to support the development of libraries within their countries.

Patterson's participation in international librarianship reached a new level when she became involved in the International Indigenous Librarians' Forum. This forum began in 1999 and was first hosted by the Maori Library and Information Workers' Association of New Zealand. Every two years the forum is hosted in a different country, with the goal of furthering the opportunities for networking, support, advocacy, and dialog concerning pressing issues that relate to indigenous libraries. At the Second International Indigenous Librarians' Forum, Patterson

co-presented a paper titled "Culturally Responsive Guidelines for Alaska Public Libraries." These guidelines for information professionals were developed by the Alaska State Library during a workshop that Patterson facilitated.[11]

The guidelines were so well received that they were chosen as the background theme for the Third International Indigenous Librarians' Forum in 2003. Patterson was invited to co-chair the forum, which was hosted in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The forum boasted 125 delegates and speakers from around the world and was sponsored and endorsed by the American Indian Library Association and the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. The manifesto for the forum's theme was written by Patterson and states that library and information professionals "are a force for cultural and intellectual survival of indigenous people" and, furthermore, "there exists a need for policies, procedures and practices within libraries, museums, archives and educational institution that acknowledge the value of indigenous culture."[12]

As influential as Patterson has been at affecting outcomes at the regional, national, and international level, she downplays her contribution, emphasizing the roles of librarians within the tribal libraries themselves: "We've got some really dedicated people there, and they work for almost nothing. They are my heroes. They are out there making a difference in those little places; that is important—what I do is probably far less important." Despite the doors of opportunity she has helped open, the only role she lays claim to is the role of faithful cheerleader.

Of course, her contributions to the profession do not go unnoticed by her peers. Patterson is the recipient of many awards, including the U.S. National Commission on Library and Information Sciences Silver Award, which was given to only twenty-five recipients throughout the nation. She was also given an Award of Appreciation from the National Congress of American Indians. In 2001, Patterson received the ALA Beta Phi Mu Award for Equality and Leadership. This annual award recognizes library school faculty for their notable service to the education of librarianship.[13]

Most recently she was awarded an ALA honorary membership. This prestigious award is bestowed only upon those professionals "whose contribution to librarianship or a closely related field is so outstanding that it is of lasting importance to the advancement of the whole field of library services."[14] ALA recognized Patterson for her enduring commitment "to establishing quality library services and programs for Native Americans, her accomplishments as an advocate for native and indigenous libraries on the regional, national, and international levels, and her contributions as an author, library educator, and mentor."[15] This is high praise from an association with so many dedicated and groundbreaking leaders among its membership.

Though she has received the highest praise for her work, the fight is not over. Her eyes glittering, she says there is always something that lights her fire, and "the coals keep getting reflamed everyday." It takes a strong will such as hers to constantly challenge the status quo and bring about critical changes. She has played a pivotal role in gaining national and international attention to the stark issues that face tribal libraries. And, as the challenges rise up in front of Patterson, she meets them head on: "You have just got to think you can do it, and do it." Truly she is a testament for mastering change and, thus, changing all.

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