

The Long Game

An Interview with Molly Raphael, ALA President Elect

Brian Leaf

Leadership can sometimes seem elusive as a new or mid-career professional. Veteran librarians who have worked long enough to suffer from “organizational bureaucratic fatigue” know how hard it can be to sustain growth. For newer professionals, effecting change can seem frustrating. How have top leaders in the profession contended with these issues? Early last fall, I was asked to interview Molly Raphael, President-Elect of the American Library Association (ALA), for LL&M. I had the brief opportunity to meet with Molly at ALA Midwinter 2011, where I was immediately impressed by her frankness and willingness to travel to North Carolina in order to complete this interview.

When the time came, Molly shared at length with me her thoughts on leadership, mobility through ALA, and what she’s learned as an “accidental librarian” who rose to become leader of the “oldest, largest, and most influential” professional organization in the world. Her accomplishments, which have spanned her entire career, can be found on [her website](#). In this article, I will highlight a couple of the lessons that she shared with me. The final cut of her interview can be downloaded in two parts from the Table of Contents in this issue.

Not everyone is born thinking they will become a librarian, and that was certainly the case with Molly. She entered library school because a “professional degree seemed like the best way to get an interesting job.” However, her passion and desire to help others helped her gain a foothold in both her career and the ALA. Early on, she discovered that ALA was not addressing the needs of the deaf and hearing-impaired community. By doggedly pursuing a solution, she found that there were many others who had similar interests, and became co-founder of the Library Service to the Deaf Section in ALA. It afforded her opportunities to interact with high-level leadership and gain mentors. These experiences helped her not only understand the structure of ALA, but taught her to navigate the upper echelons of leadership. While she describes herself as a naïve librarian at the time, finding a need and doing something about it made her successful.

As she advanced through her career, overcoming “bureaucratic fatigue” was as much a product of having worked in a large, bureaucratic organization in DC as it was her desire to always be a part of the solution. An intrinsic desire she possessed in her career was to always be in a place where she could “learn and grow,” and she did so by moving into new positions before feeling burnt out. While she did feel regret over leaving work that she enjoyed, she actively looked for opportunities in which she could build upon the knowledge she gained from that work. Molly also draws on her experiences growing up during the Civil Rights movement. Like many young people today, she was impatient—wanting to move from Point A to Point B as quickly as

possible. However, she found that people who took steps and made incremental progress to reach those end-goals were more successful than those who tried to leap.

Despite many successes in ALA, she reveals mistakes made in the past that are closely tied to her platform of advocacy. There is a clear recognition that libraries are vulnerable in an economic downturn, and she faults that with having “not told the library story better.” Libraries are not positioned in peoples’ minds as transformational and impactful organizations, but as “nice-to-have” institutions. Regular patrons and friends of the library groups are fantastic—but the people that need to be reached are those with outside influence, such police chiefs and other community leaders. Rather than settling with just a “nice-to-have” attitude with libraries, people need to be talking about how essential libraries are. Now, she is focused on producing tools and programs that foster that type of discussion and external value-building, though readily admits that libraries are playing catch-up.

For Molly Raphael, the rewards of leadership were being able to see things happen—that is, setting goals and seeing people reach those goals. She feels internal satisfaction being in a service profession where she has been able to improve services and make an impact on the community. She gives credit to those who do the work, and sees the leader as someone who sets the vision and is ready to support that work. As she takes on this new leadership role in the ALA, she is certainly someone with vision--and one who has worked the ground floor and understands what needs to be done moving forward. Best of luck, Molly! –Brian Leaf

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