

ALA Annual Conference Report

Aubrey M. Madler

2010 Gordon M. Conable Scholarship Recipient

During the past few years, I have learned a lot about and taken a great interest in the principles of intellectual freedom and what a great gift it is that we provide for our communities. Many of North Dakota's libraries are located in rural communities and oftentimes, only one librarian staffs the library, making it difficult to travel to conferences and to partake in training opportunities. Utilizing electronic means of communication and information dissemination is an integral part of their networking capacity. I am a current member of the North Dakota Library Association Intellectual Freedom committee. Through this role, I maintain a blog that serves as a dissemination tool for news and issues surrounding intellectual freedom, and I have read many articles about banned materials, censored information, and efforts taken to challenge our basic rights. Other countries are not so lucky, as they have strict censorship practices for electronic material, the China/Google topic is a prime example. I consider the right to information an entitlement that our Constitution promises and I find it extremely important to preserve this right for American citizens.

My goals while attending the 2010 ALA conference, were to learn more about privacy, censorship, and free speech rights as they relate to library services. I also wanted to learn about ways in which to share this information to libraries in North Dakota through blogs and other electronic means. I hoped for opportunities to exchange information with colleagues, develop contacts across state lines, and build relationships with a mentor that can help me contribute on behalf of intellectual freedom issues as I venture further into my professional career.

At the conference's close, I achieved these goals and more. I felt so welcomed by members of the ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom, the Freedom to Read Foundation, the Intellectual Freedom Committee, and the Intellectual Freedom Round Table (of which I am also a member). Everyone was eager to mentor me and to discuss ideas and issues surrounding First Amendment rights. I came away from these conversations with the confidence to continue and enhance my dissemination and advocacy work through blogging.

I am glad I was able to sit in on several meetings. In addition to learning about issues facing various types of libraries, I got a feel for what each of the four groups (OIF, FTRF, IFC, and IFRT) do on behalf of intellectual freedom and how I might get involved with some of them. For example, I found that these issues encompass more than just libraries as attorneys also serve actively on the FTRF. They work to maintain our right to read by defending court cases

and offering legal council to libraries. On that note, the Merritt fund plays an invaluable role in supporting libraries during lawsuits. I love that ALA provided for me, a seat at the 40th Anniversary Merritt Fund dinner where I heard an emotional story from a librarian who was under scrutiny for hindering an investigation because she would not relinquish computer use records. It is unfortunate that we need this fund in place, but it is a wonderful form of support for those standing up for intellectual freedom and our right to privacy. I hope that one day, such a fund is no longer necessary, but until then, I will become a contributor and will share information about this important fund to fellow librarians and First Amendment advocates.

In addition to the FTRF meetings, I sat in on one of the IFC's meetings as they discussed an important new interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights: Prisoners' Right to Read. I appreciated witnessing the complex editing process undergone to disambiguate terminology and phrasing so that the document best represented its intent. I had not before considered the freedom to read issues faced by those incarcerated, and I am glad that this group took the initiative to make sure librarians serving the incarcerated have a guide to follow and a support system in place through ALA.

Another discussion during the (IFC) meeting regarded placing labels on books. The IFC looked at Common Sense Media's grid, used by online booksellers to label books by their content. One might see this form of labeling as a strict form of censorship by authoritative entities, thus affecting the book's success. The IFC is in the process of exploring the pros and cons of using this grid system to label books and discussing ways that librarians can use it effectively or offer additional sources, such as <http://www.storystnoops.com>, as selection tools. This labeling system has the potential to prevent minors from accessing information on various ideas and learning about their world as well as the potential to inflict self-censorship.

I was able to view one "celebrity" session and I chose it because it focused on the celebration of a novel's publication. A novel that faced frequent scrutiny in libraries for its racial content. Nancy Pearl's interview with Mary McDonagh Murphy was entertaining and moving. There was not a dry eye in the auditorium as reflections from Oprah Winfrey, Rosanne Cash, and Tom Brockaw projected on the screens. I heard them describe reading this novel as young adults; then again, at later phases in life, they got deeper and deeper into the novel's experience. I could not help thinking repeatedly of what we would miss if we did not have the freedom to create such works, publish them, and experience their personal meaning generation after generation.

My conversations with fellow right-to-read advocates reiterated similar thoughts when we identified that reading a novel as a youth is a completely different experience than reading the same novel as an adult. Children and adolescents will absorb from the story what they are able

to at that phase in their life, which makes these novels so appealing to all ages. As member and secretary of my local Friends of the Library group, I hope to explore ideas in which to celebrated banned books week, including telling them about the grant available to support readouts and similar activities.

By about mid-conference, I felt quite tired and considered that an excellent sign that I was making the most of every moment and taking in everything possible. This was also a time when I realized I heard several times—including Sunday morning's session about a high profile book challenge, and in the afternoon session regarding self-censorship— that it is easy to talk or read about things that are easy—things that are accepted by the majority. Yet, the First Amendment helps us work through topics and issues that may not be so comfortable to accept. It gives the minority a voice—a chance to be heard and understood. I love this concept, as it is the basis of the democracy within which we live. Libraries play such an important role in giving the minority the gift of a voice and in helping them to share this voice so that others may understand and learn.

I heard this concept once again during Monday afternoon's session, *Blasphemy!: When Religious Values Clash with Intellectual Freedom*. Both speakers (Irshad Manji and Paul Sturges) were excellent—they entertained me—they captured my undivided attention. as spoke about our right to offend and that by not acting upon that right, we destroy our own intellectual freedom—our freedom of speech. As Irshad said, offense is not bad. It creates the opportunity for deeper thought. . It takes brave people to exercise their right of free speech and ask the arduous questions (not only write about them) with the utmost of respect and clarity.

After days of sessions and making valuable contacts, I had the chance to meet Irene and Ted Conable, wife and son of the late Gordon M. Conable, who were both so welcoming and generous—after all, they are the reason I am here. They affectionately reminisced about their life with “Gordie”, whom I am disappointed to have never met. More than ever, I am energized and motivated to continue acting on behalf of intellectual freedom and the freedom to read in honor of his legacy. I feel so blessed to have had the opportunity to learn about defending our right to read, share ideas, and access information, and to meet those that Gordon had to leave behind.

I must say thanks again to all those that welcomed me into their circles. I value my newly formed connections as well as all that I learned surrounding intellectual freedom issues, and I will continue explore ways in which to ensure our democratic freedoms.