



Advocating for Libraries: An Interview With Deborah Doyle
By Paul Signorelli, California Library Association Library Advocacy Training Project Manager
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Your own continuing growth/journey as an advocate has covered an amazing range of experiences: volunteer/docent for the main library in Francisco; involvement with the Friends of the San Francisco Public Library at multiple levels; involvement at the state and national level with Friends Groups; consulting; and, currently, serving as chair of the Sonoma County Library Commission; a member of the California Library Association (CLA) Legislative Committee; a board member for United for Libraries—The Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundations (a division of the American Library Association). Is there any consistent element you can spot that has been present each time you made one of those transitions—as an example to current and prospective advocates regarding what they should cultivate/watch for?



Join community groups—not just in the library world. Best library practices are not always best practices. See how other groups do things. In the library world, say “yes” to committees and conferences, if you can. Look for mentors. [Susan Hildreth](#) [a library leader who has worked at the local, state, and national level] asked me to join several committees and encouraged me to get a library degree. Many other library leaders in California were very generous with their time and expertise all along the way. If you are passionate about a specific issue, find out who the experts are and get in touch. Who are the decision-makers? If you have a story to tell, there are lots of places to tell it.

What first drew you into efforts to advocate on behalf of libraries?

A guy named Paul Signorelli [while serving as Director, Volunteer Services for the San Francisco Public Library system] ran an ad in a San Francisco newspaper. He introduced me to the Friends of the San Francisco Public Library as they were helping to raise money for a new Main Library and create funding for a shabby and woefully underfunded library system.

How much advocacy experience did you have up to that point?

None! *But* I had marketing experience. Several other board members did, too. We changed the name of the Friends’ “Advocacy Committee” to the “Advocacy and Fundraising Committee.” They dragged me to CLA conferences and to the Legislative Day in Sacramento, and suddenly I realized the connection between local and state advocacy and legislation. A few years later, ALA [[the annual American Library Association conference](#)] was held in San Francisco, and the additional connection between local, state, and national became clear. Add “fundraising” at all levels, and there I was: an advocate.

I also had library experience. My first job after graduation was as a writer in a government library, and, along the way, I had become a corporate research/resources manager.

One other important thing. My dad worked for the feds. We moved. A lot. So before I got to San Francisco, I thought the important money was at the federal level—because my dad was a senior budget guy at the Pentagon.

Let's move in that direction starting with a story that captures that moment when you viscerally made the connection between local and state advocacy and legislation.

When we started working on the [San Francisco Public Library] branch campaign and looked at some of our representatives in Washington, I learned that Nancy Pelosi had been a library commissioner. I also learned that it wasn't difficult to make a telephone call to her local office or even her Washington office. The first time I went to Washington on [National Library Legislative Day](#) (or when the ALA conference was held in DC), her staff didn't necessarily know what libraries were doing in detail, but were very interested to hear what a difference they were making for Mrs. Pelosi's constituents. Senator Feinstein's staff was, too. So will the staff of incoming Senator Alex Padilla.

My experience just kind of came together. The understanding was there at the various levels, but the connection—the “aha!”—took a bit longer. The Dillons, CLA's lobbyists [[Michael Dillon](#) and [Christina Dillon-DiCaro](#)] were very helpful at the state level. I learned a great deal when SFPL and its Friends worked very hard—and successfully—to win funding from the California Library Construction and Renovation Bond of 2000. Library patrons sent postcards. Friends sent a bus of library lovers of all ages to Sacramento to lobby. Community leaders made phone calls. But I learned even more working on the unsuccessful Proposition 81: California Reading and Literacy Improvement and Public Library Construction and Renovation Bond Act of 2006 as the SF campaign coordinator. Though voters in SF supported the measure, it failed throughout the state; sadly, there hasn't been a library measure on the California state ballot since then. From that experience, I learned the importance of funding and having a clear message.

You're striking an incredibly rich vein here, i.e., the idea that advocates/activists come from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, and that there is not a one-size-fits-all model for advocates/activists. What guidance would you offer to someone who wants to become involved in advocating for libraries, but doesn't know where or how to start?

Talk to a librarian who is an active advocate. They are usually very supportive—and delighted to put new advocates to work, whether it's on an in-house committee or project or an external group that actually meets with elected officials or their staff. But in the meantime, individuals can [find out who their representatives are at all levels](#): local, regional, [state](#), federal. Research their background. Find out what moves them. Advocates discovered that a very conservative Republican in the California Assembly was passionate about braille and talking books. Why? His best friend growing up had been legally blind.

What committees do they serve on? What kind of information can the library provide that might be helpful in their work on the committees? Are they veterans? Does the library have a program for veterans?

Write/call and let them know about library resources and library work within the community. Check to see if the library sends them a regular update on library activities. Organize a photo-shoot in a library. Always a good thing! Don't forget to publish the pictures in a newsletter and send multiple copies, or reprints of the article, to the legislator's office.

Call the Friends [Friends of the Library group in your area]. Find out who goes to meet legislators from the library, from the Friends—and volunteer to tell your story. While constituent letters and calls are

always appreciated, legislators can't see everyone. Usually, someone will take the lead in organizing a meeting with several people in attendance. Make the elected official an honorary Friend.

One other critical piece: Finding a mentor is great. *Being* a mentor is better. Please pass along your experience, strength and hope to those who are just discovering advocacy.

“In order to be a mentor, and an effective one, one must care. You must care. You don't have to know how many square miles are in Idaho, you don't need to know what is the chemical makeup of chemistry, or of blood or water. Know what you know and care about the person, care about what you know and care about the person you're sharing with.” — *Maya Angelou*

Any tips on how to initially contact legislators or their administrative aides?

Email is a fine introduction. It's best to go in a group the first time. Go with an experienced advocate. But have a story ready. Talk about something that they might be interested in. Make it short. Don't beg. But, from the larger group, there should always be an “ask”—whether it's about a piece of legislation, or agreeing to sign something, or coming to the library. Remember to get their business cards and thank them afterward. Write immediately. They see a lot of people. But not a lot of people follow up. If something good happens because of your ask, write again and tell them so. Collect the phone numbers and email addresses on the cards.

Write a small check to legislators, if you can.

Don't get in touch just once a year at “Legislative Day,” but keep in touch regularly. Today's appointed supervisor could one day be the Governor. (Mine was!). Or the Speaker of the House! (Ours was!)

Any thoughts on the importance of establishing long-term relationships with legislative aides?

Your team should have a strategy. Get to know legislative aides at all levels. Often, they are the ones that do the most work with legislative matters and or other issues. The elected officials are busy in meetings, etc. Find out who is responsible for libraries. If there isn't one, ask about education. Often you will meet with an aide, rather than the legislator. That's fine! They really do a lot of the work and can bring your issue to the elected official. They also may run for office one day. Regarding federal elected officials. Get to know their local regional manager. That person is quite a font of knowledge. Get them on your mailing list. Invite to interesting library events.



At a bigger level: Check in with [California Public Library Advocates \(CPLA\)](#), a non-profit whose members are Friends, Foundations, commissioners, trustees, and other library advocates. CPLA gives training on a variety of subjects—much of which relate to advocacy: how to write a letter to an elected official, etc.

Civilian supporters are very important, and can carry messages that paid library staff may not be able to.

ALA presidents have been a great source of inspiration to me. Have you had much in the way of interactions with them, and, if so, what lessons might other advocates learn from them?

I see them at conferences and certainly have met them. Their ideas are often inspirational. We are very excited that [Patty Wong](#) is the next President, so California will be very present in conversations. In fact, I'm honored that she's asked me to serve on ALA's Legislative Committee. I also find [ALA staff](#) to be

very helpful. The ALA-Washington staff is very experienced, delighted to share, and, frankly, would be delighted if California were even more active in advocacy. Check out [the website](#) for some terrific examples and useful information. Staff members of [United for Libraries](#) are also a wonderful resource.

Drawing upon your extensive experience as an advocate for libraries, what would you suggest individuals can do to effectively serve as advocates for libraries throughout California?

At the local level: know your library budget. Where does the money come from? What's the strategic plan of the library? Of the library support groups? Identify neighborhood leaders. Build a library advocacy leadership team that includes administration, trustees, and supporters. Tell community groups what the library is doing; keep the community informed. Look for businesses that might partner with or donate to the library or a support group.

At the state level, advocates should follow what the CLA [Advocacy & Legislation Committee](#) is doing, especially at the beginning of the year, as bills are being introduced and the California budget is being considered. CLA's long-time lobbyists, [Mike Dillon and Christina Dillon-DiCaro](#), will ask library supporters to call or email legislative offices about important matters.

An "[elevator speech](#)" is always handy to have. You run into a legislator. Because you've been keeping in touch, she remembers you and asks you what's new with the library. You have 45 seconds to tell her something memorable with a call to action.

Anything I didn't ask already that we should be discussing?

There should be a question that explores why library staff doesn't know how important advocacy is. What is the lost connection? Advocacy *and* fundraising. On the other hand, that's not what they learn in school—or what they are hired to do.

Also, and this is important: There is a difference between ongoing advocacy and project-driven advocacy. But, if you're doing the first properly, the second is not an impossible stretch.

The other thing I've alluded to before: Advocacy and fundraising go hand in hand. Before Prop 13, library funding wasn't nearly as big a deal as it is now. Librarians aren't even taught how to read their library budget! We have to tell funders (legislators, philanthropists, donors, voters, and more) what libraries do, how they do it, why it's important, how much it costs, and what libraries could do with a 10 percent increase.