



**Mentoring, Storytelling, and People Bingo in Advocacy:
An Interview With Patty Wong, Director of Library Services, Santa Monica Public Library and
[American Library Association President-Elect \(2020-2021\)](#)
By Paul Signorelli, California Library Association Library
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What initially drew you into efforts to advocate on behalf of libraries?

I began as an elementary school student. My mom volunteered at our parochial school library because we didn't have a school librarian—all the more need for resources and funding and dedicated staffing—so I learned at an early age that one has to activate in addition to speak up and out if you want to make a change. We were library advocates and users as young children—my mom saw to that. I grew up in the Glen Park neighborhood of San Francisco, and we had a wonderful librarian, [Gladys Hansen](#). Not only did she introduce me to the world through the library, but she also let me know how they worked. I had inspiration even through high school with the school librarian there. She was a nun who benefitted from the 1906 earthquake. Catholics helped restore the city, so she got to ride the bus for a nickel. Why is that important? Because when it came to funding libraries in San Francisco and in the schools, she understood that, and took me to several Board of Supervisor hearings to make sure we had funding at our local SF libraries. She used her language and the uniform/habit she wore as a badge of honor.



Patty Wong

Ok, so then we go to my work in public libraries and [ALA \[the American Library Association\]](#) and [CLA \[California Library Association\]](#), and there I worked with a number of colleagues because we weren't funded well. When [\[California State Ballot\] Proposition 85](#) was on the books, we lobbied through CLA—letter-writing and calling legislators; when there was limited funding for new buildings, I would join our team to journey to Sacramento to testify on the impacts those funds would make for our geographically-isolated communities, our communities of color. And because as a front-line librarian I knew the importance of voice and my childhood, I brought youth—and others who were impacted—with me.

The advocacy was not only at the state level, but also locally with our city councils, with the library boards. We even created youth positions on the library commission for Oakland Public Library as a result of the need for a voice—that opportunity came through the [Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development](#) grant through [ULC \[Urban Libraries Council\]](#) and [The DeWitt Wallace- Reader's Digest Fund \[which, in 2003, merged with the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund to become The Wallace Foundation\]](#). The critical thing is to create opportunities for activism and voice, but also to create sustainability. How can we make a difference every day through community engagement?

Let's unpack that very rich set of memories a bit at a time, starting with a quick detour: wasn't Gladys Hansen head of Special Collections in San Francisco's Main Library later in her career?

Yes. In fact, she wrote that book on the 1906 earthquake [[Earthquake, Fire & Epidemic: Personal Accounts of the 1906 Disaster](#), with Richard Hansen and William Blaisdell].

I missed her when she left Glen Park; she left a big mark on me.

Sounds as if she was, in many ways, an early mentor for you. Care to tell a story or two about the important roles mentors have played in your development as a successful advocate?

Yes—Mrs. Hansen, of course, and my high school librarian, Sr. Margaret Therese (who lived long enough to see me get into the MLIS program at Cal).

And the largest impact of all was and continues to be [Regina Minudri](#).

Gina was ALA President when I was working for Oakland Public Library, and I was very active in [BALIS \[Bay Area Library and Information System\]](#) Youth Services. [Linda Perkins](#), another key influence, who was youth services coordinator at the time for Berkeley Public, took a shine to me and wanted me to come over to BPL.

When I did eventually come over to work for Berkeley, Gina took me under her wing. I had paid out of pocket about \$3,000 a year to go [ALA Annual](#) and [Midwinter](#) [two annual American Library Association conferences], but only working through [ALSC \[the Association for Library Service to Children\]](#). Gina made sure that she introduced me to [ALA governance](#); she placed me on a number of committees as an associate before there was that category (think “intern”) and really taught me what advocacy was all about. I would literally follow her to meetings, but she always had me come to the table. Later, when we were back at the library, she took me to meetings with our local electeds and attended city council meetings together even though the library had a separate parcel tax and didn't really need the city manager's approval. Later, when the city manager [[James Keene](#)] needed a rep from the library to help with a finance project—Berkeley was in the hole \$1,000,000 and had to make cuts—they wanted community input. I was nominated to be part of that. So, she was a great mentor that wanted me to see all of it—how things go through ideas to resolutions and legislation, the lobbying pieces of it, the formulation and funding pieces and negotiations, and the vote, and the impact of that vote.

I will also say that my choices as a student at Berkeley had everything to do with where I am today. I got my undergraduate at Cal in Women's Studies, where we learned that the personal is political. In fact, I had to advocate for myself to get in the library school at Berkeley. Judy Cook was dean at the time, and she looked me in the eye and said, “Is Women's Studies an actual thing?” This is when you had to have an interview as part of the process. I had to prove to her that my academic background was satisfactory for entry.

Part of advocacy is keeping up with all of the people who have had influence in your experience—they certainly touch many other opportunities. Another key mentor is [Mary Stephens](#), my predecessor at Yolo County Library. Mary is a true advocate. She and Ursula Myer and Gina were of the same era and vintage. They all pushed me to think out of the box about library funding, about the impact that libraries make—and truly to believe that a community is only as strong as its local library. Mary is still a critical advocate for Yolo County, and she introduced me to the key local



California Library Leader Memory Project-
Mary Stephens

women at Yolo County. Together, with our local elected leadership, we created a countywide broadband plan that paved the way to stronger Internet access in the most geographically isolated places. And, of course, that led to advocacy as part of the CLA [Advocacy & Legislation Committee](#) and [ALA governance](#) as well. My activism resulted in board invitations to deepen the work at the state level representing public libraries and our broadband needs with CENIC. And I almost forgot [former California State Senator] [Lois Wolk](#); I was her [2009] Woman of the Year, and we elevated that into a lot of great press for the library.

Let's connect those comments about becoming familiar with ALA governance and Berkeley city government to something you mentioned earlier: attending Board of Supervisors meetings during your early years. Care to describe any memorable moments you recall in terms of how attending those Board of Supervisor meetings affected your understanding of and appreciation for the legislative process and the impact advocates have on that process?

I probably forgot to mention that my husband at the time ran for Mayor of Oakland twice



As a new librarian, I spent quite a bit of time in the community, in the trenches, so to speak. I am lucky that councilmembers and other electeds actually were library users—or I invited them, through branch communications, to get them a library card and tour our buildings and learn more about our services. Certainly, if they saw our children and families using the library, we would get more funding. One of the things I remember most is attending a City Council meeting in Oakland; our local council member spied me in the audience and called out the library as we had something up for review. I

had gathered a number of our children to attend that meeting, and we were prepared to speak to advocate for the service. They actually did hear from our young speakers, and were floored by their words. Needless to say, it passed, but I learned quickly that those impacts made all of the difference. I moved to the main library from the Fruitvale area and many years later, some of the children—now teens from the Latin American Library—rode up with me in the Main Library elevator. My two managers were in the elevator, too, and the kids were all excited and asked when I was going to come back to the branch. These were kids who had come to the city council meeting with me that night. My managers replied that only I would have had kids remember me years later in that elevator. I was pleased, but I think that all of our staff have that opportunity to bring someone along. Those kids remembered me because I had a relationship with them, and isn't that part of advocacy?

When we had Legislative Day in Sacramento, I brought some youth library representatives with me. These kids were official representatives from our local Friends group—they actually attended meetings. (We instituted a youth rep from the schools to the Friends). I will tell you, the entire floor of the legislature peered out of their offices as my young colleagues told stories of how much the library meant to them. It was an opportunity for us to make a difference, and we got an audience and the attention of several legislators that day—not just their staff.

When you can bring young people and colleagues along in your advocacy work, you make a difference. In Stockton we coached dozens of local teens in youth development. Many of them participated in Youth in Government programs, shadowing elected and appointed members of our community. Those teens trained hundreds of City of Stockton staff in youth development in our pursuits to become a stronger city that worked with young people in service. One of those youth was [Michael Tubbs](#), former City of Stockton Mayor, who is now working on economic development policy for low-income families at the state and national levels. Imagine what we can do if we each brought someone along with us.

Storytelling, relationships, and inclusion--three key elements of a successful advocate's toolkit, right?

Yes, and that inclusion needs to involve your users and potential users and partners—you also need to stress the impact and meaning for your listener—all elements of good storytelling. Why should they care? You also need to leave your listeners with a story they can easily remember and tell others so that the work continues and your organization is memorable. When we go in, yes, we represent our own institution, but we are also speaking for libraries everywhere—and, of course, not just public libraries, but also our schools and academic and special libraries.

You cement that relationship. [California State Assembly Member] [Cecilia Aguiar-Curry](#) is a good friend and colleague and, even though I have left Yolo County, we still keep in contact. Her advocacy for libraries with even current legislation is prompted because she has a relationship with Mary Stephens, with me, and now with [Mark Fink](#), who is the County Librarian presently.

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?

1. Library staff: Everything is interrelated, and there is intersection in all that we do and whom we touch. Be aware. Understand your frontline opportunity to share the library's story. Everyone has a role, and sharing the library's impact on people helps create good will and engagement that is long-lasting. Remember what happened in [Douglas County](#), where the library measure lost by a handful of votes. Become aware of the electeds and influencers in your community. We used to play People Bingo with my staff so they could recognize all electeds, including school boards and others, so that all employees were aware.
2. Library community and other allies and potential users: Libraries need you. Become familiar with their needs, and partner with your local library to visit your legislators to understand the process and the need.
3. Library leaders and administrators: Remember that you have allies in business, nonprofits, faith-based, technology, vendors, neighborhood associations, homeowner groups, social service, BIPOC serving agencies, merchant groups, *youth*, who can assist and rally for all of us.
4. Thank our supporters for their work in advocating for all of us. Have a story ready when you can. Remember, it's not always about what can you do for me, but also what can I do for you. Here's what it has meant to us. It's not always about the dollars, but the action.
5. The buddy system and mentoring around advocacy works wonders. There are lots of tools. ALA has many of them; I worked on several. Use our ALA Washington Office [\[Advocacy and Public Policy\]](#) and our [Committee on Legislation](#) for assistance if and when you need it.
6. Partner and always go with someone. Also, some of the best visits have been online.
7. Ask someone who has been there before.



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