

Foreword ...

by Barbara S. Akinwale
Guest Editor

"Beyond handouts: embryonic programs provide some innovative approaches to intractable social ills," reads the subheading for a May 17, 1993, *Wall Street Journal* article on new social programs being tried at local and state levels. As I read the article, I could not help but think about those intractable social ills and how they spill over into libraries. When we talk about social issues in librarianship, we are talking about an entity not different from the social issues that touch our everyday lives. So, do we separate libraries from the rest of society, or are we savvy enough to realize that what affects society as a whole filters into our libraries?

According to a 1992 *Business Week* magazine special foldout, America is changing. In some instances, the changes are good; in others, not so good. The article basically states that immigration patterns, more women in the workforce, a less agrarian society, global trade, more elderly, a downturn in earnings growth, more children in poverty, an increase in crime, rising medical costs, and a rethinking of our educational system, all are playing major roles in how America is changing. As America changes, so must America's infrastructure. Libraries are part of America's infrastructure.

Usually, libraries are spoken of in the same breath as education. I agree that libraries and education are synonymous and that we must be an open door for knowledge. Because the tax dollars of ALL Americans are used to operate libraries, we cannot afford to be exclusive in our quest to nurture all who enter our doors.

So, am I my brother's keeper? Yes, no, maybe so. Should I be or even want to be? Social issues in librarianship? Just exactly what are we talking about? And what is this thing called social responsibility? And why and how did we information providers find ourselves involved in this scenario? Questions, questions, all those questions and very few answers. Yes, we are concerned. But, is it our duty to be on the front line?

The authors of the articles in this issue have and will continue to grapple with those questions in sometimes anguished pursuit of the answers. We first tried to define social issues in librarianship i.e., social responsibilities. Terms that came to mind were neutrality, non-judgmental, awareness, resourceful, balance and breadth, lifelong learning, mainstreaming, facilitator, etc., etc.

Based on dictionary definitions, "social" has a variety of meanings. The definition that I think most of the authors chose to deal with has to do with the welfare of us humans and our responsibility to look after each other, therefore leading us to dwell on the social responsibility of the profession.

One of the articles specifically addresses the AIDS issue because, in 1993, the disease is still a major social issue in our lives. We librarians are still struggling with how a public institution should best address this issue. Jim Zola does an exemplary job of addressing the need for making our children knowledgeable.

Plummer Alston Jones entrusts to our sensibilities a treatise on the evolution of the social responsibility of the American public library. Suzanne Wise does an excellent job of introducing the reader to a selected, annotated list of programs and policies that deal with social issues. William Snyder addresses "special populations," i.e., the elderly or physically handicapped, and whether or not they require "special service." His premise is that we should mainstream them. Barbara Best-Nichols talks about those bastions of higher education and how they view "Johnny" when he graces their doorsteps full of questions and making demands on their time. Connie Mellon speaks from the heart on the subject of the school library and social responsibility, by thoughtfully examining the role of the school librarian. Virginia Orvedahl's and William Wartman's article on library life in a rural setting explains how this milieu does not preclude libraries from experiencing the urbiculture syndrome. By virtue of being a rural library, some unique concerns are evident; however, intractable social ills know no boundaries. Howard McGinn talks about coalition building, fund leveraging, and role changing, and refers to these processes as being the keys to expanded social services by public libraries. In "Point/Counterpoint," Carol Reilly and Harry Tuchmayer debate whether or not our libraries should be "all things to all people." Carol approaches the issue from an information and referral (I&R) position. Carol is personally acquainted with this venue, having spent many years as an I&R coordinator.

As librarians we cannot solve all of society's ills. We will continue to struggle with "should I or shouldn't I." Whatever decisions we make, I vote for the one that implies "just do it." After all, libraries do change lives!





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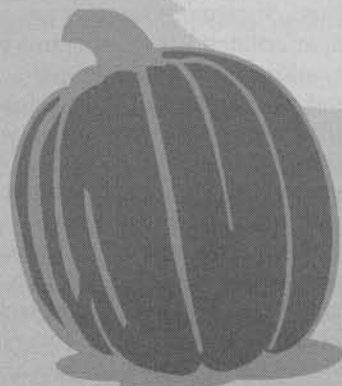
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