

From the President

Editor's Note: Each biennium NORTH CAROLINA LIBRARIES uses the President's column to introduce the Association's new president to the membership. This year we used the wonders and convenience of technology to pose questions to President Beverley Gass through Internet e-mail. What ensues is basically an unedited correspondence between Gass and editor Frances Bradburn.

How did you decide to become a librarian in the first place?

Gee, I wish there were some fascinating story to tell about how I came to be a librarian — one where some wonderful librarian was an inspiration or one where the desire to connect people and information had always been something I knew I was destined to do. Not so.

I had completed my freshman year at the University of Tennessee as a home economics major — a year literally filled with cooking and sewing. Among other accomplishments of that memorable year was the making of a dress in a tailoring course. To pass the course, one had to sew a garment incorporating some 43 different techniques and subroutines of tailoring. In another course, we had to plan and prepare meals for any number of "home-like" situations. In a design class, I wore my Jackie Kennedy look-alike pillbox hat and gloves to demonstrate my incredible tasteful understanding of fashion, color, and style. Other peak moments that year came in the three-hour chemistry lab that inevitably occurred every Thursday afternoon no matter how snowy or beautiful the day. There, among the many other questions I could not answer, was the one where I never ceased wondering why I had not paid better attention in Mrs. White's high school chemistry class, a place in which I could at least see the periodic table of elements.

By spring of that year, I was completely baffled by college, if this were college and not some homemakers' hell! I was so distraught that I even went to the counseling department, a place in those days sought out by only the truly troubled. After a series of aptitude tests, I decided to take college algebra, which is even more puzzling now than it was then.

Out of desperation I started asking everyone in sight, except my parents of course. I cornered Mrs. Britton, my eighth grade English teacher and, by then, my sister's mother-in-law. Can't imagine why I asked her, but she was probably at my sister's house and had no choice but to listen to me. And most times, when you ask for advice in this world, you get it. Well, Mrs. Britton's advice was to become a librarian.

Best of all, that sounded like something appropriate for college study. It conjured up images of books and reading and literate people, images very different from those of my experience earlier that year where the only people I ever saw were home ec majors or football jocks who had wandered over to the home ec building to take their dreaded and required nutrition class.

Mrs. Britton's suggestion also felt right. She said there was lots of money available to train librarians and that schools were desperate for librarians. Given that my father had always told me that the finest thing a woman could do was to teach school, her suggestion for becoming a school librarian seemed like a match. With great relief, therefore, I began my second year in college as an education major, which was the route for an aspiring school librarian. All you needed to be certified as a school librarian in the state of Tennessee at that time was 18 undergraduate hours in library science.

Currently you are Dean of Learning Resources at GTCC. What positions did you hold before this?

Obviously, I did have a stint as a school librarian in the Chattanooga Public Schools where I was an itinerant elementary school librarian. It was an aptly named position for I felt like an itinerant, a migrant worker, for sure. After two schools, two libraries, and two sets of faculty and students, two years in that job was enough. Turned out Mrs. Britton was right, too. There was money for libraries. I was making nearly \$6,000 those days and working as hard as I could to spend what seemed like an endless supply of ESEA Title II money. Besides ordering books, I worked diligently trying to keep some kind of order in all those libraries. My home ec courses came in handy since one of my biggest challenges was finding the best way to clean the burlap cloth curtains that had been hanging for years on the windows of Sunnyside School library.

After Chattanooga and a brief period teaching high school English, I decided to get a masters in library science. Once I completed Emory University's library program, I moved to Memphis ready to really begin my library career. I became the children's librarian at the Poplar-White Station Branch of the Memphis Public Library and Information Center. That, too, was an eye-opening experience. Those folks loved libraries and wanted their children to love them. Story hours, puppet shows, summer programs so jammed with kids that all the other librarians and library staff just wished I'd find another job somewhere. And, sadly, so did I. Despite the visible success at being a children's librarian, I did not feel successful. I was really worried that maybe I was a malcontent who did not like to work.

By this time, I knew that I had to find a job where I really felt fulfilled so I called a friend with whom I attended library school at Emory. John Thomas, then director of the library at Davidson County Community College, told me about a job at neighboring Guilford Technical Community College. I flew from Memphis, had an interview with Mertys Bell, the Dean of Learning Resources and later president of NCLA, and knew that this was the right job.

Twenty-five years and a Doctorate of Library Science from Columbia University later, it still feels right. After a series of increased responsibilities and promotions, I have been dean of learning resources at GTCC since 1991.

If you were trying to sell NCLA to librarians across the state, what would be the main advantages of membership that you would highlight?

The opportunity to network would be the first selling point I'd pull from my kit of selling tips and techniques. I have loved the chance to know all kinds of librarians from throughout North Carolina. I once read a study where the characteristics of librarians had been investigated and, among other things, they were found to be a very bright group of people. It is interesting to reflect on the North Carolina librarians I know or have worked with and, to a person, they are all very intelligent. Since it is very important for me to be around smart people, NCLA provides a wonderful place to associate with some of the brightest folks around. Then I'd talk about the value of belonging to an association that serves its members. I would point to *NC Libraries*, the biennial conference, the work of sections and round tables for professional development, and suggest that an association that consistently produced these kinds of quality products for its members would really be worth the price of membership. Who among us, I would say, does not need access to professional support and information? Then, if they were still not convinced, I'd appeal to their desire to serve others. Who, but the hardest heart, would not be attracted to this possibility? I'd describe the ways that members can work for the good of the cause of libraries and librarianship, their colleagues and friends through NCLA. I'd point to the ways they could be involved in state level leadership and help shape the profession for North Carolina. And if I had not closed the sale by this time, I would pull out all the stops, appeal to their emotions and note that nowhere would they ever find an organization where they could feel so good and enjoy life so much. I'd note, too, that if they really wanted to help themselves, joining NCLA was no more than the cost of one visit to a therapist. I'd share the ways in which I had grown, and describe the opportunities that had come my way just by working for and serving NCLA. I would describe how my life has changed — and for the better. I'd close the sale every time. I'd make them weep!

Association members would probably like to know a little about your personal life — if you don't mind "sharing."

Oh good, I do have a personal life. And I would be glad to share. First of all, there's Anthony Bartholomew and Nelson, my family. Anthony and I have been together far longer than most folks have been married. We met when I was student teaching in Chattanooga during my last quarter at the University of Tennessee. He has been wonderfully supportive of my career and educational endeavors. Besides that, I like him more and more. Nelson, a great little dachshund, came to live with us during the NCLA Executive Board retreat of 1995. His first mother had died of cancer and his grandmother was keeping him. He lived on the one of those floors way up high on Sutton Place in Manhattan. Oh, he had a dog, but it was still boring and lonely. (The story of how I came to know about him is too long to tell here, but it's a good story, too.) Anyway, his grandmother wanted a better life for him and on February 15, 1995, flew to Greensboro with Nelson in her lap and brought him to my house. I had planned to stay overnight in Winston where the Executive Board was meeting. But someone said that Anthony might bond with him first and thirty miles seemed not too far to commute. Got home late that night and it's been love ever since! Beyond Anthony and Nelson, I'm pretty ordinary. I love to shop — worry that I have a shopping addiction — and am enjoying decorating my house that has been renovated from studs and sole plates out. That story would be good for another time, too. Hobbies, do I have hobbies? I can tell you about lots of hobbies I wish I had. Would that do?

What is your vision of NCLA?

My vision of NCLA has been forming in my head for the past several weeks. Once the conference was completed, those ideas have really begun humming. At this point, my vision is to create a vision. Does that make sense? I mean I want to work with members of NCLA to create a vision, one based on what the librarians and library staff members of this state want NCLA to be. At the Executive Board kick-off retreat, we will begin a planning process that really focuses on the needs of our customers. I happen to believe that our customers are the librarians and library staff members throughout the libraries of this state. We must find out what they want and then work like the dickens to get those things and beyond. We must work to delight those customers. Within this gathering of ideas that whirl through my head and conversations these days, are clear images of more members. I intend to find the means for increasing the numbers of folks in this state who belong to NCLA. Another clear image is an association that talks about "member benefits." What are those benefits? Do our members want us to arrange cruises to the Bahamas? Do they want us to be political activists in the state funding arena? Do they want a new computer every 18 months? I think "member benefits" is an important term that, if incorporated into our NCLA vocabulary, might help us build a larger membership.

I suppose that all this that I have described thus far is one and the same image. We must "grow" NCLA, and the first way we do this is by doing those things that will accomplish this growth. Selling memberships in a very assertive way is quite important, but creating an organization that members want is a sure way to build membership. Another image within this somewhat ethereal, yet emerging, vision is that of an association engaged in planning where sections, round tables, committees, all tie their objectives to the overall goals of NCLA in a very deliberate way. I envision an association where we all work within our organizational units clearly aware of what our particular members want and need from NCLA. It's a cyclical kind of planning, all based on what our customers want. It's a planning where we do what customers want, evaluate what we did, refine the process, and do more and better of what our customers want. Well, is that perfectly clear? Now that I have said, in every way possible, that I envision an NCLA that is responsive to its members, I realize that your question has helped me clarify the vision. Thanks for asking.

If you could make one change in the Association during your term as president, what would it be?

One change. I cannot think of one change, only. It's two changes I want to make. I want an NCLA that is significantly larger than it is today, and I want an organization that has fuller coffers than it has today. Those two things are possible if we create a vision for NCLA based on customer needs and expectations! Need I say more?