

ALA's OLOS:

Reaching Out to Library Outreach Programs

by Satia Orange

Soon after his arrival last year as the new American Library Association's Executive Director, William Gordon created a panel at the entrance to the Executive Offices with the Association's mission:

The American Library Association provides leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all.

The boldness of the ALA's mission, set in strong gold lettering, serves as a beacon of purpose for staff. The Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS) supports the Association's mission for access to information in local library communities for traditionally underserved populations.

OLOS was initiated in 1970 as the brainchild of several members and staff, including Virginia Matthews, who was the first director of the then Office for the Disadvantaged. Over the years the office continued to support librarians' efforts to address the needs of people who felt disenfranchised in libraries. Through the years the office focused on library service needs of Native Americans and other people of color, the elderly and new and non-readers and their families.

Today the office's strategic plan addresses equity of access and 21st century literacy, two of the five key action areas of ALA's Goal 2000. OLOS initia-

tives encourage librarians to provide opportunities for maximum intellectual stimulation in America's libraries. Priorities for the office include the dissemination of information and training as well as partnerships with other national organizations serving similar populations. For ALA, those populations now include new and non-readers, people geographically isolated, people with disabilities, rural and urban poor people, and people generally discriminated against based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, language, and social class.

OLOS also serves as the staff liaison for the following committees and round tables:

- the OLOS Advisory Committee
- OLOS Subcommittee for the ALA Poor People's Policy
- OLOS Intergenerational Subcommittee
- the Literacy Assembly
- the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT)
- the Ethnic and Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table (EMIERT)
- the five associations of librarians of color

The office administers a three-year Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund Initiative, Literacy in Libraries Across America (LILAA), funded in 1996. The initiative provides separate funding for thirteen project sites in four states, in addition to a generous grant to ALA for the provision of technical assistance.

The Literacy Assembly is one of OLOS' liaison groups, with representa-

tives from ALA divisions, round tables, and committees in the Association that address literacy in various formats. The Assembly meets at each ALA conference to develop strategies for addressing twenty-first century literacy in the Association. The new Literacy Officer will assist the Assembly in focusing on that objective.

The Assembly will sponsor a preconference at the 1999 ALA Annual Conference called "Building a Community of Readers: Literacy in Libraries Across America," along with several other programs that relate to literacy and lifelong learning.

The OLOS Subcommittee on the Poor People's Policy concentrates on library services to poor and homeless people. The policy (6.1) addresses the library needs of poor and homeless people. It is accompanied by several objectives to be addressed by the Association. At the June 1999 ALA Annual Conference, the subcommittee will sponsor its first pre-conference, "Reality Check for Libraries: Making a Difference in Services to Poor and Homeless People."

A newly formed OLOS Intergenerational Subcommittee addresses the availability of resources for the elderly, and disseminates information regarding program resources. The subcommittee plans a pre-conference in 2001.

The office's new Web site, at <<http://www.ala.org/olos>>, includes a number of resources for library outreach support. The 1998 *Diversity Fair Notebook* introduces "diversity-in-action" initiatives in 50 libraries that ex-

hibited at the 1998 ALA Annual Conference. *The List of Library Outreach Services to Underserved Populations* is a resource guide for librarians and the general public. There is also access to committee and staff lists, schedules of conference programs, and other library resources to support the OLOS target populations.

The degree of commitment, research and collaborative effort of individual libraries and communities can define the secret to quality library outreach. Libraries across the country continue to demonstrate creative strategies for reaching out to their users:

- The Queens Borough (NY) Public Library has the largest number of ethnic groups in one county in the country. Its Flushing Branch, located in an Asian American community and opened in June 1998, is situated at a busy intersection. The library is always busy and the ample number of seats is always filled with users. Queens' WorldLinQ, an innovative and multilingual Internet Web-based information system, connects international news and resources in six languages, free of charge.
- The opening ceremonies of the Greensboro (NC) Public Library's Central Library in November 1998 was the final step in meeting information needs as identified by the community. Through the use of focus groups and other means of direct community input, the library's staff and volunteers, architects, corporate and community partners, and users designed a building that resolved the concerns for equity of access to collections and services. As children from Greensboro's branches helped deliver books to the new children's room, community leaders marveled at the open access computers and free Internet resources. The "Community of Readers," for which the city has received acclaim, has surpassed their goals by listening to their users.
- The Carver Road Branch of the Forsyth County (NC) Public Library met one of its community needs in an aesthetic manner. The kente cloth shelving panels and upholstered chairs provide a welcome atmosphere to users who openly demonstrate cultural identity. Accompanying exhibits, programs, and collec-

tions relate to the community's interest in their history. The building replaces a smaller, older edifice, which has been redesigned as a repository for African American history.

- Over 45% of the Dade County (FL) population are foreign-born and 57% speak a language other than English at home. The Miami-Dade Public Library System has addressed this concern by instituting a three-tiered approach for access to information for its users. First, the library enlisted the help of community organizations to register new immigrants for library cards at fairs and new citizen ceremonies. Corporate support allowed the library to fund concerts, bilingual storytelling hours, art exhibits, and other cultural events featuring new citizens' native countries. The third step was to partner with the local school system, government agencies, and universities to conduct programs at the libraries on citizenship, English as a Second Language classes, and life skills. The library also developed a comprehensive collection of materials relating to these topics. The nationally recognized initiative increased library use by 10% annually.
- A once-a-month Library Disability



Chinese Dragon, 1998 Diversity Fair, ALA Annual Conference, Washington, D.C.

Outreach provides homebound services at the San Jose (CA) Public Library. The staff visits library users in their individual homes, and in convalescent and residential care facilities.

- The Outreach Programs at the William K. Sanford Town Library in Albany, NY has a closed circuit radio information service for people who cannot read regular print due to blindness, limited vision, or physical disability.

Access to information must be valued in our society. As a community, we must embrace libraries on five levels to ensure our own survival as a literate society:

- We must find those in our communities who do not use the library and who see it as foreign to their lifestyles. We must discover their information needs and guide them through the maze of data vehicles and resources. We must welcome them.
- We must talk with those who do use the library to ensure that their information needs are being fulfilled. We must celebrate them and welcome them to make them feel comfortable in using their libraries.
- We must learn to be open and non-judgmental and train our colleagues, up and down the chain of command, to do the same. We each must become connectors in guaranteeing access to information for all of our users and ourselves in libraries.
- We must support our staffs by advocating for training and enrichment opportunities. We must challenge them to grow intellectually, and encourage them to further their knowledge and understanding of new strategies and techniques. We must value them so they will value library users and their needs. We must show them respect and appreciation for their efforts, so they will respect and appreciate library users.
- We must become partners with those who make access to information a reality: the users, the staff, the volunteers, the policymakers, the philanthropists, the community and corporate donors. We must make them allies and collaborate with them for better libraries and services.

Finally, we must value libraries and access to information ourselves.