

From the President

The North Carolina Library Association was organized on May 14, 1904, by a group of seven librarians who met in Greensboro and elected the first president, Mrs. Annie Smith Ross of the Carnegie Library, which had opened the year before in Charlotte. Mrs. Ross was the first professionally trained public library director in Charlotte. Carnegie was the first free public library in Charlotte, the second in North Carolina, and was funded by a grant from the Carnegie Foundation. One hundred seventeen years after our association was formed, I was elected as the 57th president for the 65th biennium. When the first Annual Meeting was held in Charlotte, NCLA had 49 members. In recent years, we have averaged over one thousand members. NCLA is an affiliate of the American Library Association and the Southeastern Library Association. We are the only statewide association concerned with the total library community in North Carolina.

Our association is strong because of our members. The work that each of us puts in, our collaboration, our networking, our ideas, our enthusiasm, our passion, results in the success and strength of NCLA. It takes the talents of each person to make an organization great. So whatever your role within NCLA, whether you are a new member, or already a member of a committee or section, each person plays an important part. Some of you have taken on leadership roles such as director-at-large, secretary, vice chair, and a few of you will even become president. Librarianship is about lifelong learning. By volunteering and being a part of associations like NCLA, we each are able to learn and grow and give back to our profession to continue the important work that our predecessors started.

“*The mission of the North Carolina Library Association shall be to promote libraries, library and information services, and librarianship; and to champion intellectual freedom and literacy programs.*”

One of NCLA’s goals is “to support formal and informal networks of libraries and librarians.” One way that we build these networks is through mentorship. My presidency has been influenced by my predecessors. Past presidents like Beverly Gass, Robert Burgin, Ross Holt, Dale Cousins, Michael Crumpton, Wanda K. Brown, Rodney Lippard and Lorrie Russell have all mentored me in some way, even if they do not realize it!

Through NCLA, we build relationships and gain expertise. We learn from one another. We work together. We look for opportunities to collaborate outside of our comfort zone. We communicate and understand the value of listening. In 2008, I attended NCLA’s Leadership Institute and developed a statement of leadership purpose. During my experience, I learned that by providing good customer service and going the extra mile, we create *loyal* customers and *they* become our promoters. *They* advocate for libraries alongside all of us, and we desperately need advocates.

NCLA’s 65th biennium began in the midst of a global pandemic. Our nation was in lockdown and millions of people died. It was a time of fear, of uncertainty, Black Lives Matter, the Me Too movement, and a harsh political climate. We were a country divided, and still remain so. As we slowly emerged from the pandemic, we were faced with book challenges in astronomical numbers. Intellectual freedom is in jeopardy like never before.

In July, 2023, former President Barack Obama wrote a letter “*To the dedicated and hardworking librarians of America*” in response to the threat to intellectual freedom. In his letter he states, “*It’s no coincidence that these ‘banned books’ are often written by or feature*

people of color, indigenous people, and members of the LGBTQ+ community—though there have also been unfortunate instances in which books by conservative authors or books containing ‘triggering’ words or scenes have been targets for removal. Either way, the impulse seems to be to silence, rather than engage, rebut, learn from or seek to understand views that don’t fit our own.”

It is so refreshing to hear a political leader recognize the work that we do as librarians for our communities and express appreciation and empathy. President Obama recognizes that *“it’s not just about books. You also provide spaces where people can come together, share ideas, participate in community programs, and access essential civic and educational resources. Together, you help people become informed and active citizens, capable of making this country what they want it to be.”* Our work as librarians matters.

President Obama goes on to say, *“That’s why I want to take a moment to thank all of you for the work you do every day—work that is helping us understand each other and embrace our shared humanity.”* We are all human, no matter the color of our skin, the country of our birth, the beliefs we hold, the opinions we have. A copy of that letter follows this column.

Our conference theme this year is “Cultivating Community: Strengthening Roots, Supporting New Growth.” It is such a fitting theme for us as we emerge from the pandemic. We look to our past, our roots, to learn from those who have paved the way for us and

also support the new growth of our members who are coming after us. It is my hope that NCLA will continue to grow, not only in numbers, but also by becoming stronger as members working together. In these tumultuous times, it is vital that we stand united as an association and as librarians in the fight for the freedom to read.

I’ll end by quoting another great president, Dr. Beverly Gass, written in *From the President* in the Fall 1999 issue of *North Carolina Libraries*, as I could not have said it more perfectly:

“Being president of NCLA has been one of the wonderful professional experiences of my career. In addition to having the opportunity to work with librarians and library staff from across all types of libraries in this state, being president has given me the sense that maybe I can help make a difference. Surely, though, the difference is not one that anyone of us makes alone, but only as we work together for the cause of library services to all the people of North Carolina. I thank you for allowing me to be president of NCLA and wish that you might have similar joys and opportunities in your life. I am grateful for those of you who have served as the Executive Board of NCLA. It has been my honor to stand before you and before all the members of the North Carolina Library Association.”

I look forward to seeing everyone in Winston-Salem.

Letter from Barack Obama, July 17, 2023

To the dedicated and hardworking librarians of America:

In any democracy, the free exchange of ideas is an important part of making sure that citizens are informed, engaged and feel like their perspectives matter.

It’s so important, in fact, that here in America, the First Amendment of our Constitution states that freedom begins with our capacity to share and access ideas—even, and maybe especially, the ones we disagree with.

More often than not, someone decides to write those ideas down in a book.

Books have always shaped how I experience the world. Writers like Mark Twain and Toni Morrison, Walt Whitman and James Baldwin taught me something essential about our country’s character. Reading about people whose lives were very different from mine showed me how to step into someone else’s shoes. And the

simple act of writing helped me develop my own identity—all of which would prove vital as a citizen, as a community organizer, and as president.

Today, some of the books that shaped my life—and the lives of so many others—are being challenged by people who disagree with certain ideas or perspectives. It's no coincidence that these "banned books" are often written by or feature people of color, indigenous people, and members of the LGBTQ+ community—though there have also been unfortunate instances in which books by conservative authors or books containing "triggering" words or scenes have been targets for removal. Either way, the impulse seems to be to silence, rather than engage, rebut, learn from or seek to understand views that don't fit our own.

I believe such an approach is profoundly misguided, and contrary to what has made this country great. As I've said before, not only is it important for young people from all walks of life to see themselves represented in the pages of books, but it's also important for all of us to engage with different ideas and points of view.

It's also important to understand that the world is watching. If America—a nation built on freedom of expression—allows certain voices and ideas to be silenced, why should other countries go out of their way to protect them? Ironically, it is Christian and other religious texts—the sacred texts that some calling for book bannings in this country claim to want to defend—that have often been the first target of censorship and book banning efforts in authoritarian countries.

Nobody understands that more than you, our nation's librarians. In a very real sense, you're on the front lines—fighting every day to make the widest possible range of viewpoints, opinions, and ideas available to everyone. Your dedication and professional expertise allow us to freely read and consider information and ideas, and decide for ourselves which ones we agree with.

That's why I want to take a moment to thank all of you for the work you do every day—work that is helping us understand each other and embrace our shared humanity.

And it's not just about books. You also provide spaces where people can come together, share ideas, participate in community programs, and access essential civic and educational resources. Together, you help people become informed and active citizens, capable of making this country what they want it to be.

And you do it all in a harsh political climate where, all too often, you're attacked by people who either cannot or will not understand the vital—and uniquely American—role you play in the life of our nation.

So, whether you just started working at a school or public library, or you've been there your entire career, Michelle and I want to thank you for your unwavering commitment to the freedom to read. All of us owe you a debt of gratitude for making sure readers across the country have access to a wide range of books, and all the ideas they contain.

Finally, to every citizen reading this, I hope you'll join me in reminding anyone who will listen—and even some people you think might not—that the free, robust exchange of ideas has always been at the heart of American democracy. Together, we can make that true for generations to come.

With gratitude,

Barack