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Julie Miller

Butler University, jlmlle5@butler.edu

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Community, Collaboration, and the Cowboy Cha-Cha: An Interview with ALA President-elect Camila Alire

by Julie Miller

ALA President-elect Camila Alire was the keynote speaker at the WALE 2008 annual conference in Olympia, WA. I first met Camila several years ago when she was Dean of Libraries at the University of New Mexico. When I heard she was coming to the WALE conference, I e-mailed to ask if she was willing to be interviewed for Alki. She graciously agreed.

Alki: The theme of this issue of Alki is “collaboration across boundaries.” How does that theme resonate with you?

CA: Well, you know we’re in this library field, and one of the things that has been absolutely important is that we can’t do it alone. We’re not funded in our libraries, we’re not funded in our association work, to be able to go it alone. So the whole idea of collaborating and resource sharing, whether it’s human resources or financial resources or material resources, all of that is part of collaboration, so I love the theme—we just can’t do it without collaborating.

Alki: The WALE conference committee was delighted by your offer to speak at the annual WALE conference. As ALA president-elect and in your role as ALA president, what will be your focus?

CA: I am going to really talk about and emphasize the impact that libraries have on all of our communities, whether that community is schools, or academic institutions, or cities and counties—it doesn’t matter what our communities are. And when I talk about that impact, I’m really talking about the value of libraries and the value of all of us as library employees. There’s going to be two arms to that. One is advocacy. I’m not talking about the advocacy we do with decision-makers and legislators. I’m talking about grassroots advocacy, where we’ve got our rank-and-file librarians and library staff really involved in being able to advocate themselves for their respective libraries and also to advocate for themselves as library workers.

Then the second arm is really literacy advocacy. I’m doing that because a literate community, again no matter how we identify that community, is a very informed community. For me, literacy can go across all lines. I’m talking about reading literacy, technological or digital literacy, cultural literacy, and information literacy. So that’s what I’m hoping to focus on and we’ll have a leadership group that will be working with me to put this together.

Alki: What I really like about that is the next theme for our March issue is “The State of Reading in Washington” and the theme for the July issue, which is the WLA conference issue, is “Impact and Influence.”

CA: This is perfect!

Alki: I want to talk about your significant work in advocacy for libraries. Sometimes it seems that the library community’s ability to



ALA President-elect Camila Alire and WLA President Martha Parson at the WALE 2008 conference in Olympia, WA.

influence others is dissipated because we’re somewhat fragmented. We have competing organizations, sometimes with conflicting values. We’re sometimes separated by library type. How can libraries overcome this challenge?

CA: Actually, Julie, that has not been my experience at least relative to legislative advocacy. I say that from the standpoint of being involved in several states and being involved in ALA’s National Library Legislative Day. That’s the time that, of all times, other than seeing people at conferences, that’s the time that we have trustees, we have citizens, we have academic library folks, school library folks, and public library folks, all represented. And we’re pretty much unified when we go into either our state legislator’s office or our federal legislator’s office. I’ve not experienced that fragmentation from the real action environment.

What’s really important is we can’t afford to be fragmented because the whole idea of this impact on our communities or convincing people that the library is the heart of all of our communities, really means trying to bring all kinds of libraries together, and the people who work in those libraries, to be able to advocate for their particular library, to be able to advocate for the role of and value of libraries in general, and to be able to advocate for themselves. I think that will help in terms of the perception of some kind of fragmentation.

Alki: One successful collaboration, or grassroots advocacy effort, that worked here in Washington recently was the “three moms from Spokane,” who were able to gain some real political influence to pass funding for school libraries. Have you had a chance to meet them?

CA: Oh, I’ve met them, and what a hoot they are! I met them in Anaheim. They came to the reception that was held in my honor, celebrating my being elected [ALA president]. I really enjoyed them. There’s one thing I want to say about grassroots advocacy. For me, there are two

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Julie Miller is the editor of Alki and associate dean of libraries at Eastern Washington University.

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kinds. They [the three moms] are absolutely grassroots advocacy, and theirs is tied to getting to the decision-makers and to the legislators to try to make a difference and to get them to change their minds relative to funding for school libraries. That is absolutely necessary in what we do, and we need to support those kinds of efforts.

The grassroots advocacy effort that I’m talking about is member-driven advocacy. That is, that any member of ALA could be trained--it doesn’t matter if they are library support staff or if they’re MLS librarians, but I’m talking about the frontline rank-and-file people--who can be trained to be advocates for their particular library, and who can be trained to advocate their value and their library’s value to other people. That’s the kind of grassroots I’m talking about, so it’s a little bit different than the legislative grassroots.

What’s really interesting is that, when ALA did a survey of members, advocacy was one of the top two things they wanted ALA to be involved in. For those of us who are library administrators, we’re being paid to be advocates. That’s part of our jobs. But think of all of these rank-and-file librarians and library support staff who are out there—if they could be trained to do this effectively, and part of it is understanding the power of personal persuasion and having the self-confidence to do that, which would be part of the training—think how effective we would be because [then we would have] all of those people who are not [currently] advocating for their respective libraries, whether school, academic, or public libraries.

Alki: The Power of Personal Persuasion, of course, is the title of a document that Julie Todaro created, I think when you were ACRL president, that I’ve used to help me be a stronger advocate. How are you going to do outreach to the rank-and-file membership of ALA because it sounds as though you’re talking about people who don’t necessarily go to the annual conference and whose involvement may be reading *American Libraries* every month?

CA: One of the things that makes ALA so strong is our chapters, our state chapters like WLA. This leadership group is going to put this [advocacy initiative] together with products, and part of that will include the promotional aspect. I anticipate that we’ll be very much involved with the chapters and with getting the information down to the chapters. We have the ALA Advocacy Office, now, that’s been funded for about a year. They already have a model where they’re going out to the various state associations and state chapters. Jim Rettig, our current ALA president, has advocacy as his major initiative. This [initiative] will just spring off what he is doing. But I want this to be member-driven advocacy. I want this to be the rank-and-file folks involved. We’ll come to their states to do the training, as well as have the training at ALA’s national conferences and at the different division national conferences. We can’t do it overnight. It will start during my presidential year, but it will continue through the Advocacy Office.

Alki: To shift gears a little bit, in the state of Washington, demographics are changing, and our communities are beginning to see greater cultural diversity. I know you’ve done a lot of work in diversity, and that

you’ve been REFORMA president, and you’re one of the 100 most influential Hispanics in the U.S. It seems to me there’s an opportunity for libraries to play a leadership role in their communities in welcoming this diversity. Can you give some examples of libraries that you’ve seen and observed in your years in working in this area that are really doing it well, and that you think are models of serving a culturally diverse user group?

CA: Let me talk about the areas that I’m most familiar with, and that is obviously our Latino communities across the country, and then let me talk about two places that I’m most familiar with. Ghada Elturk is a one-person show for Boulder Public Library. She does unbelievable outreach for Boulder Public Library that includes not only trying to get to the Latino underserved community in Boulder, but she also reaches out to other ethnic and racial groups and does a lot of bilingual programming. She develops wonderful partnerships with different organizations and groups in the community to do programming. I think that’s a great example.

The other example that I’m most familiar with, because I’m from Colorado, is Denver Public Library. It started under the leadership of Rick Ashton, the former city librarian, but it has continued from his tenure. They have done a lot to reach out to their different diverse communities. I can speak particularly about the Latino community in that they used to use [the money they received as a library serving populations over 100,000] to put into collection development for Spanish language materials and bilingual materials. So they put a lot of good collections into their branches. But it’s not just the Latino community. They’ve also been working with the Hmong community in west Denver.

I would tell you there are superb programs across this country, from California all the way to the Queens Public Library that still is supporting their New Americans project. It’s really important, like you said, because we’re talking about the changing demographics of this country. There are more and more people of color in the country, and we need to be able to serve them and we need to be able to reach out to the underserved. Libraries are the perfect organizations to do that because our services are free. Having said that, we know we all pay tax dollars to support libraries. But to come in and use our public libraries, people can do that without having to have money in hand.

Alki: You are coauthor of a new book, *Academic Librarians as Emotionally Intelligent Leaders*. I’ve heard about emotional intelligence and wanted to ask if you could talk about it and why it is important for libraries now.

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“I am hoping that I’ll be a resonant ALA leader, but I’m going to have to work on it some more. I’m not there yet.”

CA: The reason I am so sold on emotional intelligence leadership, or EI leadership, is because libraries and people working in libraries have had to go through so many changes in the last decade or so, changes due to technology, changes due to funding issues—just a myriad of reasons why we’ve had to change so that our organizations are extremely dynamic. Change is not easy for a lot of people, no matter whether they’re working in libraries or some other area. Change is very hard. If you’re an EI leader and you’re a change agent, you have to be aware of your own emotions and manage them. And then you have to be very aware of the emotions of people you work with and how to help them and manage their emotions. If you’re an EI leader and going through a change, you’re able to see people who fear the change, people who are angry about the change, people who are sad about the change, and people who are happy about the change. And deal with them because you’re aware of the emotions, and you know then you have to act accordingly to get them to move along with the change.

Alki: You include a chapter on resonant leadership. It seems a key component of this leadership model is taking care of yourself, self-renewal, self-revitalization, when you’re in a leadership position. What do you do to revitalize and reenergize yourself in order to remain engaged and passionate about libraries?

CA: That’s a hard one—that’s one of those I’d better practice what I preach. [Laughs.] I would tell you I really believe in resonant leadership because you have to take care of yourself in order to help people and to lead people. I do try every day to take my dogs out for this long beautiful walk. We live out in the country. I also try to spend some time with my husband and do some relaxing. It’s very difficult, because it’s an early day for me, and the day is a long day, but I always make time to stop what I’m doing and to do that wonderful walk. With resonant leadership you have to be very mindful of yourself and taking care of yourself so you can then be in condition to lead others. I am hoping that I’ll be a resonant ALA leader, but I’m going to have to work on it some more. I’m not there yet.

Alki: What question do you wish I’d have asked you by now?

CA: You’ve asked a lot of good ones. I’m real interested in mentoring and networking and role-modeling, and I think they all fit together. I tell library school students and new librarians, young librarians, that developing a network is so key to their success. That network needs to be within their library environment, within their state association environment, and also within the national environment. I can’t tell you how [much] my success and my career have been dependent on the network I developed.

Part of that, in terms of the leader’s role, is the mentoring and role modeling that we play. I always see myself as a role model. I’m very mindful of what I do and what I say as a professional librarian and as a professional administrator because I know there’s always somebody watching me, somebody looking at me as a potential role model. We never know when we’re somebody’s role model. So we always have to be mindful of

that as someone in a leadership position.

The second thing tied to that is mentoring. I think it’s a professional obligation for all of us who have been successful in our jobs, in our profession, within ALA, within the state associations, to be mentors to people who are up and coming, to people who have just started the profession, because our success is their success. Our being able to pass this gift of a successful career in our wonderful profession is what mentoring is all about. We need to mentor people, and then, as they become successful, they then need to pass that gift to somebody else coming into the profession.

Those are the three areas that I’m glad I had the opportunity to bring up. Thank you.

Alki: Finally, there’s one more question. I know that you like to have fun—what’s the most fun you’ve ever had in a library?

CA: Oh my gosh! I think the most fun was—for people who know me—my motto is, “You work hard, and you play hard.” You work hard, and you give as a volunteer to our different associations all you can give during the day, and then you have fun that evening. But you’d better be able to get up the next morning for that 8:00 meeting you’re chairing and do a good job!

Having said that, with that motto, I remember that in the Colorado Library Association, every other year we’d go up to the mountains to some resort, and that’s where we would have our conference. One year we were going someplace close to Aspen, and they were going to have a country-and-western band. This was at the time when country line dancing was so big, and I thought, this is crazy—they’re going to have this band, but nobody’s going to dance because they don’t know the line dances.

I was dean at the University of Colorado-Denver library, and I offered to the folks going from UCD to CLA to give line dancing lessons. We had about twenty people, and every lunch-time I would teach them these line dances. We’d practice to these different country-and-western songs. Then when we got up to this conference, there we were, and we were the leader of the pack. Everyone knew their dances! We did the cowboy cha-cha and the boot-scootin’ boogie, and we did all of these wonderful dances. And that’s one of the most fun times I remember—but we’ve always had fun in the libraries I’ve worked in.

Alki: What a great note to end on. Thank you.

CA: Thank you, Julie, for the opportunity. 