

Okeima R. Lawrence
New Orleans
American Library Association Conference 2006
June 23 – June 27

On my first day of ALA activities in New Orleans, I attended the New Orleans Rebuild Project. A project comprising of a number of ALA attendees working towards rebuilding damaged library facilities throughout the New Orleans area. Eighty of us assembled outside the New Orleans Children's Resource Library, a picture of us can be seen in the latest issue of ALA's newsletter, and worked our way into the building. We removed thousands of books, furniture, and pictures. There were hundreds of shelving pieces that would have to be, painstakingly, put into a van later that day. My group, shuttled by two bus loads of us brightly coloured in yellow t-shirts, worked in the beating New Orleans sun for about 5 hours. With our hard work we completed the project 5 hours ahead of time. It was a wonderful opportunity to meet a number of librarians from across the US, each sharing stories of their library experience(s) and the communities they touch, each in a unique way.

The Diversity committee had a number of interesting activities throughout the conference. I had the pleasure of attending the Diversity Fair. At the Fair, Creole Indians danced their way into the conference room and authors and poets took to the stage. It was an excellent gathering of Southern writers and poets expressing their work with such colorful southern charm.

On June 24 I attended the session called: *Beyond Katrina: Politics, Race and Law*, sponsored by the Association of College and Research Libraries. The speakers were Warren Billings (Professor of History and the Historian of the Supreme Court of Louisiana), Wane Parent (Professor of Political Science), and Adolph L. Reed, Jr. (Professor of Political Science). In the session they talked about libraries, communities and the socio-economic make up of New Orleans. In particular, with the large number of displaced people, those who have left the city/area in order to build new lives elsewhere and those who came back to rebuild; New Orleans now faces new challenges in order to rebuild, and make a more socially responsible city. We discussed:

- How do communities engage in and address issues around race and class?
- The greater context of class and race in the US., particularly in large metropolitan areas
- Katrina brought to light the wide-range of social and economic indicators, including figures on housing, employment, insurance claims, and foreclosures.
- Communities in isolation: the haves and the have-nots
- Is Corruption in America growing- prevalent?
- "[Katrina was] Not a natural disaster, it was a failure in the kind of investments [necessary] - No one steeped up and took responsibility" (Reed).
- "[Katrina] Showed Americans social disparity" (Reed)
- "[Katrina] Lack of strong central authority to gather resources and mobilize" (Reed)

CNN reporter Anderson Cooper, Former Secretary of State Madalyn Albright, and First Lady Laura Bush spoke at the keynote speaker's event. Cooper talked about his experience reporting on Katrina. He recalled several touching stories. Albright eloquently encouraged librarians to continue to fight for freedom of speech and liberty. She also warned us about the overarching powers of those who want to stifle those freedoms and liberties at home. Laura Bush talked about the initiatives that are being put forward by the federal government and reflected upon her personal library experience.

The ALA conference highlighted several important themes for me. One, the important role libraries play in communities; two, the cultural and economic transcendence librarians have in building communities and their shared will power to effect social change in order to have a society and culture of educated and socially responsible citizens. To say the least, this essence transcends communities and borders. ALA was a wonderful opportunity for me to see this in action at a grand scale and served as an excellent comparison to the challenges that we face here at home and the solutions that we can learn from each other.



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July 20, 2006

Mr. Okeima Laurinco
Toronto Public Library Board
789 Yonge St.
Toronto, Ontario, M4W 2G8
CDA

Dear Mr. Laurinco,

Thank you for joining forces with Highsmith to renovate the Children's Resource Center during the ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans. The project was a huge success and a rewarding experience for everyone who participated. The outpouring of support was amazing, and we are proud to have been able to take part in such a monumental event.

The same care and detail that went into planning and designing the Children's Resource center goes into every project headed by our Environments for Libraries division. With 50 years of experience serving libraries, we have a practical understanding of your facility and programming needs. Whether you're renovating an existing building or planning new construction, we will personally oversee the details, delivery and installation of your project from inception through grand opening.

Highsmith Environments for Libraries brings a refreshing, new point of view to the design process to make your library a beautiful destination that works for you, your staff and your patrons for years to come. Please feel free to contact us if you need assistance with any current or upcoming projects.

Thank you again for your support — together our efforts created an inviting learning environment that will serve the children of New Orleans for years to come.

Sincerely,

Margaret Sullivan
Director, Merchandising

Kim Zuelsdorf
Director, Corporate Design

MLS/KZ:db

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