

american libraries

January/February 2026

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION



NEWSMAKER:

Brian Selznick p.14

PLUS: Speed Puzzling,
Advocacy Storytelling,
ALA Financial Update

**YEAR IN
REVIEW** p. 20

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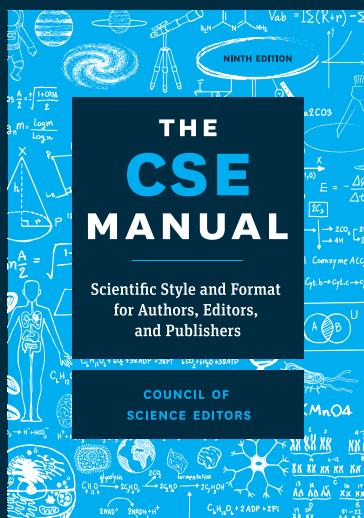
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Hope amid Hardship



Sanhita SinhaRoy

Last year was tumultuous for many, and those in the library world certainly felt the effects. As we reflect in our Year in Review (cover story, p. 20), the 2025 news cycle was often bleak—from the Trump administration’s attempts to shutter the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the closure of the 200-year-old book distributor Baker & Taylor to the workforce reductions at ALA and the longest government shutdown in US history.

But there were some bright spots as well. In many parts of the country, anticensorship efforts gained traction. In November, a US district court struck down attempts to dismantle IMLS. ALA also welcomed a new executive director, Dan Montgomery, whose column in this issue (“Reinvigorating ALA,” p. 6) provides a road map of priorities for the Association.

Among those priorities is, of course, advocacy. ALA President Sam Helmick reminds us that storytelling is one form of advocacy (“Your Library Story,” p. 4): “Sharing your story helps others see the difference you make and why your work matters.”

Wondering how to get started? Flip to “Unlocking Possibilities” (p. 28), where Sallyann Price recaps United for Libraries Virtual 2025, which featured sessions on cultivating advocates and shaping the public narrative about why libraries matter.

Brian Selznick knows a thing or two about storytelling. As our Newsmaker (p. 14), the Caldecott-winning author-illustrator talks with ALA Communications Manager Phil Morehart about how books “teach empathy, they open worlds, they make us human.”

In this year of transitions, *American Libraries* said goodbye to three colleagues in 2025, including, most recently, Rebecca Lomax, our longtime, award-winning art director. We remain deeply grateful for her talent, hard work, and camaraderie over the years.

And we are immensely thankful to you, ALA members, for your ongoing support and commitment to libraries and the ideals they represent.

As we enter 2026—ALA’s sesquicentennial year—here’s wishing you rest, resolve, and cause for celebration.

Sanhita

There were several bright spots in 2025. In many parts of the country, anticensorship efforts gained traction, and in November, a US district court struck down attempts to dismantle IMLS.

Address: 225 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1300
Chicago, IL 60601
Website: americanlibraries.org
Email: americanlibraries@ala.org
Phone: 800-545-2433 plus extension
Career Ads: JobLIST.ala.org

EDITOR AND PUBLISHER

Sanhita SinhaRoy → *Pips*
ssinharoy@ala.org | x4219

MANAGING EDITOR

Terra Dankowski → *Immaculate Grid*
tdankowski@ala.org | x5282

SENIOR EDITOR

Greg Landgraf ← *Minute Cryptic*
glandgraf@ala.org | x4218

EDITORIAL AND ADVERTISING SPECIALIST

Carrie Smith → *All blueberries Jigsaw*
casmith@ala.org | x4216

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Lori McCue, Phoebe Mogharei → *Crosswords*
← *Riddle*

CONTRIBUTING DESIGNERS

Rachel K. Dooley, Lauren Ehle → *Jigsaws*
← *Wordle*

ADVERTISING

Melissa Carr melcarr@ala.org | 704-491-7789
Ryan King rking@rkmediaadv.com | 773-414-9292

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George Kendall → *Rubik’s Cube*
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Your Library Story

In a world filled with noise, storytelling stands out



Sam Helmick

As guardians and facilitators of stories, library workers can shape narratives that inspire change, nurture empathy, and cultivate lifelong learning.

Your story matters. Not just because you curate collections or answer reference questions, but because you build bridges between people and knowledge. You have witnessed quiet triumphs: a child learning to read, a student discovering their passion, a senior reconnecting with history. These moments are part of our collective story, and they deserve to be shared.

Stories have extraordinary power to connect people across cultures, ages, and experiences. By curating diverse narratives, libraries promote inclusion and understanding. Librarians are natural storytellers, yet many of us stay behind the scenes. Perhaps it's humility. Perhaps it's the belief that the work speaks for itself. But in a world filled with noise, your steady, informed, compassionate voice is needed more than ever.

Telling your story isn't self-promotion. It's advocacy. It shows the world what libraries truly do. Behind every book spine and digital login is a human being who cares deeply about access, equity, and lifelong learning. Sharing your story helps others see the difference you make and why your work matters.

Storytelling deepens the connection between libraries and their communities. It fosters education, promotes inclusion, and sparks imagination. As guardians and facilitators of stories, library workers can shape narratives that inspire change, nurture empathy, and cultivate lifelong learning. Embracing storytelling in all its forms ensures that libraries remain vibrant centers of human connection and knowledge.

That is why ALA's Show Up for Our Libraries campaign (bit.ly/ALA-ShowUp) invites every library worker and supporter to speak up about their impact. When you share what your library makes possible, you help secure funding, defend intellectual freedom, and inspire others to act.

Through Friends groups, trustees, advocates, and ALA's United for Libraries (see p. 28), we

can help turn stories into action, mobilizing neighbors, business leaders, and voters who understand that libraries strengthen every community they touch.

And when our stories are challenged, Unite Against Book Bans (uniteagainstabookbans.org) helps us stand together to defend them. Every challenge to a book is an attempt to erase a lived experience or silence a perspective. Our shared advocacy reminds the nation that the freedom to read and the freedom to tell our stories are inseparable.

At the national level, advocacy and storytelling intersect through ALA's National Library Legislative Day, to be held February 25–26 in Washington, D.C. Library workers and supporters will gather and meet with legislators, share personal stories, and advance federal policy to strengthen access, funding, and the freedom to read.

So how do you begin?

Start small. Share a moment that moved you. Write a blog post about a program that matters. Speak at a local event. Mentor a new librarian. Use social media to highlight the heart behind the stacks.

What you have to say is important. Your story does not need to be dramatic. It needs to be honest. Real. Yours.

When we tell our stories, we remind the world that libraries are not just buildings or budgets. They are living testaments to human curiosity and care. Together, we become not just keepers of knowledge but beacons of it.

Step out from behind the desk. Lift your voice. Tell your story.

Our stories are worth sharing. Let us keep writing them and telling them together. The world is listening. **AL**

SAM HELMICK is community and access services coordinator at Iowa City Public Library.

Bold Changes

Work is under way to address the Association's financial challenges



Larry Neal

When I volunteered to serve as ALA treasurer, I knew it was going to be one of the greatest challenges of my career. Only a few months in, it has already exceeded my expectations.

I am thankful for the work of my predecessors Peter Hepburn and Maggie Farrell, and of Dina Tsourdinis, ALA's chief financial officer, and her team to get our financial house in order. That means everything from timely reporting to clean audits to properly recording grants to an updated operating agreement. Unfortunately, ALA's financial picture, while at last clear, is not a pretty one. And it's a similar picture currently seen at many other associations and nonprofit organizations.

Fiscal year 2025, which ended in August, saw a deficit of \$15.4 million. Our short-term cash flow is at a point where ALA must borrow on lines of credit at prime interest rates—the most favorable rates banks offer to creditworthy customers. Begrudgingly, I had to recommend that the ALA Executive Board approve the FY2026 operating budget with a \$7 million deficit, \$5 million of which is structural.

Saddled by a bureaucracy of our own making, the process takes nine approvals to arrive at the final budget. And that final budget came in late October, two months into the fiscal year.

If this sounds like a financial crisis, it is. If it sounds like significant change is needed, it's long overdue. If it sounds hopeless, it isn't.

Thankfully, work is well under way to address ALA's challenges. In June 2025, ALA Council adopted a new strategic plan to provide focus and to set priorities. In short, the Association cannot be all things to all people, and activities and programs that do not translate into member value or interest (think Midwinter and LibLearnX conferences) must come to an end.

In addition, some programs must be paused until new funding is obtained or revenues are

such that we can subsidize them. Be assured that ALA will continue to prioritize intellectual freedom, advocacy, and the goals and objectives identified in the strategic plan (bit.ly/ALA-StrategicPlan2025).

To address the structural deficit, ALA has engaged in programmatic and internal operational studies, known collectively, along with the strategic plan, as ALA Forward. This work has resulted in significant reductions in staff and office space, centralization of internal functions in Conference Services and Publishing, and combining and sunseting committees and programs that no longer deliver a good return on member value. Other cost-saving measures include eliminating the presidential initiatives budget, fewer in-person meetings of the Executive Board and endowment trustees, a salary freeze and partial retirement contribution pause for ALA staffers, and renegotiating contracts or reducing the use of contractors and consultants.

During this time of transformation and renewal, as every corner of ALA is impacted by these changes, your trust and support are critical. Your continued membership, attendance at one or more of the amazing conferences planned for this year, and use of online offerings through ALA eLearning will enrich your career and strengthen ALA's bottom line.

At the end of the day, we are all here for the good of the Association and to ensure current and future generations of librarians and library workers are supported in the essential work we are doing for the communities, students, and clients we serve. We may even look back at 2026 as the year we finally made the bold changes necessary for a strong, sustainable ALA.

For updates throughout the year, members can visit bit.ly/ALA-treasurer. **AL**

LARRY NEAL is library director of Clinton-Macomb (Mich.) Public Library.

If it sounds like significant change is needed, it's long overdue. If it sounds hopeless, it isn't.

Reinvigorating ALA

Building unity, strength, and power



Dan Montgomery

By now, you've likely heard of ALA Forward (bit.ly/ALAForward), the initiative that has resulted from more than a year's worth of conversations and focus groups among members, leaders, staff, and affiliated folks, and has set a course for reinvigorating ALA with a clearer strategic vision and a defined process to realize that vision.

As I write this, still in my early weeks at the Association, I've been asked often about my own priorities for ALA. Well, my primary goal is this: to support us in achieving the vision outlined in the ALA Forward initiative. This includes ensuring ALA's financial stability, fostering membership trust and growth, and bolstering advocacy.

I liken the process to the very founding of our organization—wherein a group of concerned library advocates today band together to create a new entity to achieve ambitious goals that, when realized, will reshape the profession and our nation. This sums up our current moment as well as our beginning.

We must prioritize **financial stability**; that's job one. Doing that will achieve all our other objectives. Tied to that is a more tenacious approach to our services and value to members, so that **members see themselves** in the Association. Put simply, we have to increase membership numbers. A larger ALA means a more powerful ALA, and that leads to increased and **more successful advocacy**.

With the multiplying and increasingly dangerous threats to librarians, reading, and the freedom to access materials, our position as America's premier defender of the right to read must be unquestionable. I invite you to join ALA (and bring colleagues on board as well) and become more deeply involved.

As we begin ALA's sesquicentennial year, I thought it useful to read about our founding.

(A special thanks to ALA Librarian Colleen Barbus for tracking down terrific historical materials for me!) ALA's founders met in Philadelphia in 1876 and signed the articles of association to create ALA “for the purpose of promoting the library interests of the country, and of increasing reciprocity of intelligence and goodwill among librarians and all interested in library economy and bibliographic studies.”

Amazingly, 150 years later, that statement remains a concise version of what ALA is about. It doesn't capture all that we do and stand for now, of course, as we've grown and developed significantly over a century and a half. But it's hard to argue with its bedrock values. And the ALA Forward goals are a timely update on the foundation laid in 1876.

There is another pronouncement from our history I would like to call attention to: the Freedom to Read Statement, adopted in 1956. It begins, “The freedom to read is essential to our democracy.” More than at any time in recent American life, that freedom must now be fought for; it speaks to the need to strengthen our advocacy in defense of our core values.

My friend and teacher-union leader extraordinaire, the late Karen Lewis, liked to ask three essential questions when confronted with a question about what a union should concentrate on: Does it unite us? Does it strengthen us? And does it build power? I believe that if we get it right by prioritizing our finances, growing membership and member engagement, and fortifying our advocacy, we will answer Karen's three questions with resounding yeses.

I look forward to working hard with you this year and celebrating our 150th as we roll ahead into the next 150. **AL**

DAN MONTGOMERY is executive director of the American Library Association. Reach him at dmontgomery@ala.org.

Our position
as America's
premier
defender of
the right to
read must be
unquestionable.

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Barnes, Calzada Seek 2027–2028 ALA Presidency

On November 6, the American Library Association (ALA) announced the candidates for 2027–2028 ALA president: Tamika Barnes, associate dean of Perimeter College Library Services at Georgia State University in Atlanta, and Becky Calzada, district library coordinator at Leander (Tex.) Independent School District.

Barnes became president of the Georgia Library Association (GLA) in January and is a member of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and the Black Caucus of ALA (BCALA). She has served on ALA's Executive Board and Council, as well as on ALA's Budget Analysis and Review Committee, two presidential advisory committees, and the ACRL Conference Experience and Inclusion Committee.

Barnes is the recipient of the 2021 GLA Bob Richardson Memorial Award and the 2017 BCALA Library Advocacy Award. She is also a 2024 Library Senior Fellow at University of California, Los Angeles, and a 2019 fellow at the Leading Change Institute.

Barnes, a Spectrum Scholar, holds an MLS from North Carolina Central University in Durham and a bachelor's in biology from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"I am deeply honored to be nominated to stand for president-elect of ALA," Barnes said in the statement. "Libraries have shaped every part of my life and career—they represent access, equity, and the power of information to transform communities. This nomination is both humbling and inspiring, as it reflects the trust of colleagues who share a belief in advocacy, inclusion, and service. I am committed to leading with integrity, transparency, and collaboration, ensuring that our Association continues to be a strong voice for libraries and library workers everywhere. Together, we can meet today's challenges with courage and vision, advancing our shared mission to empower learning, strengthen democracy, and build more connected and equitable communities."

Calzada served as 2024–2025 president of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and is on its board of directors. She is a member of the Association for Library Service to Children, ALA's Intellectual Freedom and Library Instruction round tables, and the Texas Library Association

and its legislative committee. She has served on ALA's Center for the Future of Libraries Advisory Group, ALA Policy Corps, and a presidential advisory committee.

Calzada is the recipient of the 2025 Eleanor Roosevelt Literary Freedom Award and the 2022 AASL Intellectual Freedom Award. She was recognized in *People's 2023 Women Changing the World* issue and is featured in the documentary *The Librarians*.

Calzada holds an MLIS from University of Texas at Austin and a bachelor's in elementary education from Texas A&M University-Kingsville.

"I'm honored to stand as a candidate for ALA president," Calzada said in the statement. "Our Association must be member-informed and continue to position libraries as critical democratic institutions in society, where inclusion is valued and opportunities are available for all in every community and school we serve. We have been navigating rigorous, unyielding times, yet through it all, librarians and library workers have stepped up to the mark and answered the call to lead and serve. We remain resilient, dedicated, and hopeful in every microinteraction that

occurs daily in many vibrant library spaces across the country. With a proven record of building coalitions, I am prepared to listen, lead, and amplify the needs of ALA and rally ALA members to become engaged in their Association."

Barnes and Calzada, along with any petition candidates, will make statements and answer questions from members in a virtual ALA Presidential Candidates' Forum this year. More information to come.

Ballot mailing for the ALA election is March 9–April 1. Members must be in good standing to vote. For more information, visit bit.ly/ALA-elections. ●



Tamika Barnes



Becky Calzada

ALA Announces Staffing Reductions

ALA announced a series of workforce changes on October 21 as part of its ongoing ALA Forward initiative, an effort aimed at aligning the organization's structure and programs with its strategic priorities, sustainability, and mission impact (bit.ly/ALAForward). Approximately 30 staff roles were eliminated through a combination of voluntary departures and a reduction in force, representing roughly 10% of staff across 12 units in the Association.

"These decisions were not made lightly," said ALA President Sam Helmick in the statement. "They represent difficult choices made with deep care for the people and mission that define ALA. Change of this magnitude carries real weight for colleagues, for the work we share, and for the communities we serve. As we approach ALA's 150th anniversary, we are facing these challenges with honesty and resolve, preparing the Association to stand strong for generations to come. We hold profound gratitude for those whose service has shaped this organization, and we carry that legacy forward with humility and purpose."

Among those affected by the workforce changes is Deborah Caldwell-Stone, longtime director of ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom and a leading national voice in the fight against censorship. The Office for Intellectual Freedom continues under the leadership of Deputy Director Sarah Lamdan, a legal expert and longtime advocate for access to information. ●

Applications Open for Graphic Novel Grants

ALA's Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table has opened applications for the 2026 Will Eisner Graphic Novel Grants for Libraries. First awarded in 2014 to honor pioneering graphic novelist Will Eisner, the grants fund resources for graphic novel collection development, programming, and professional development.

This year's cycle includes two awards: one growth grant, which provides support to libraries that would like to expand their existing graphic novel collection, services, and programs, and one innovation grant, which provides support to a library for the initiation of a new graphic novel service or program. Recipients receive \$3,000 for programming and collection development, plus a collection of Eisner's works and biographies and a selection

of the winners of the 2026 Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards (to be announced at Comic-Con International in July). The grant also includes a \$1,000 travel stipend for ALA's 2026 Annual Conference and Exhibition in Chicago.

Learn more and apply by January 11 at ala.org/gnrcr/eisner.

Project Outcome for Academic Libraries 2025 Report

On October 1, ACRL announced the publication of the fiscal year 2025 report for the Project Outcome for Academic Libraries toolkit.

Project Outcome is a free online library-assessment toolkit designed to help libraries understand and share the impact of their programs and services by providing simple surveys and an easy-to-use process for measuring and analyzing

CALENDAR

2026

ALA's 150th Anniversary
ala150.org

JAN. 26

Youth Media Awards | Chicago
ala.org/ala-youth-media-awards

FEB. 10

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National Library Legislative Day
ala.org/nlld

MAR. 16

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ala.org/advocacy/FOI-Day

APR.

School Library Month
ala.org/aasl/slm

APR. 1-3

PLA 2026 Conference
Minneapolis
placonference.org

APR. 19-25

National Library Week
bit.ly/ALA-NLW

APR. 26-MAY 2

Preservation Week
preservationweek.org

APR. 30

Día: Children's Day/Book Day
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JUNE

Rainbow Book Month
bit.ly/RBMonth

JUNE 25-29

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SEPT.

Library Card Sign-Up Month
bit.ly/LibCardSU

OCT. 1-3

ALSC National Institute
Buffalo, New York
bit.ly/ALSC-Inst

OCT. 4-10

Banned Books Week
bannedbooksweek.org



Submissions Open for Library Design Showcase

American Libraries is accepting submissions for the 2026 Library Design Showcase, our annual feature celebrating new and newly renovated libraries of all types and sizes. The showcase will appear in the September/October issue.

We are looking for examples of innovative library architecture that address patrons' needs in unique and effective ways. We are especially interested in submissions from libraries that are approaching design with sustainability,

LIBRARY DESIGN SHOWCASE

accessibility, and smaller budgets in mind. Partial renovations, projects under

\$1 million, and school libraries are encouraged to apply.

To be eligible, projects must have been completed between April 1, 2025, and March 31, 2026.

For consideration, send a completed submission form (bit.ly/DesignShowcaseForm26) and at least five high-resolution digital images with photographer credits to americanlibraries@ala.org via Dropbox or another file-sharing service. The deadline to apply is May 1, 2026. Unfortunately, not all submissions can be featured.

View last year's showcase at bit.ly/Design-Showcase-25. For more information, email americanlibraries@ala.org. ●

Photo: Wes Battocletta

outcomes. According to the report, 136 libraries used Project Outcome to create 1,774 surveys to collect data about their programs and services. These surveys received nearly 40,000 responses.

Download the PDF report at bit.ly/ACRL-outcome-FY25. Learn more about Project Outcome for Academic Libraries at acrl.projectoutcome.org.

New Research on Black Female School Librarians

Newly published research in AASL's peer-reviewed online journal, *School Library Research*, analyzes recruitment and retention rates of Black women in the school librarian profession.

In "Perspectives of Black Female School Librarians on Recruitment and Retention," Cynthia Richardson Johnson, assistant teaching professor at University of Rhode Island in Kingston, identifies three key themes in the collected data and interviews: pathways to school librarianship, significance of representation, and workplace challenges for Black women who are school librarians. The report suggests potential actionable steps in recruitment and retention for Black female school librarians and highlights the need for additional research with more participants in future studies.

Read the study at bit.ly/AASL-SLR.

Small and Rural Library Grant Applications Open

Penguin Random House (PRH) and United for Libraries (UFL) are accepting applications through January 21 for a grant program to support Friends groups in rural and small US libraries with priority projects. The grants, administered by UFL and funded by PRH, total \$25,000 and will be given in \$500 or \$1,000 awards. An additional 20 libraries will receive in-kind book donation grants of \$500 to purchase PRH titles.

Libraries interested in applying can attend a January 6 information session and on-demand training sessions from UFL focused on grant writing and how to start a Friends group. Learn more and

register at bit.ly/ALA-PRH-resources.

Awardees will also receive complimentary access to UFL e-learning resources as well as registration for Friends of the Library Day at UFL's virtual conference on July 30 and UFL's Friends virtual retreat in 2027.

Apply at bit.ly/ALA-PRH-apply. Recipients will be notified by March 30.

ALA to Evaluate Services for Older Adults

On September 29, ALA announced the launch of Aging Together: An Evaluation of Library Programming for Older Adults, an initiative to better understand the current state of library programming for older adults and to identify and disseminate best practices and replicable program models. The John A. Hartford Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to improving the care of older adults, provided nearly \$390,000 to support this effort.

Aging Together is designed to equip libraries nationwide with information to strengthen programs that reduce isolation, support health and well-being, provide end-of-life resources, and assist caregivers.

To guide this work, ALA and a project advisory committee will conduct a landscape analysis in February of existing programs, resources, and data, and will produce a final report in early 2027 with insights, program models, and recommendations. ALA will partner with the nonprofit research organization Knology to analyze data and produce the reports.

YMA Announcement Slated for January 26

The 2026 Youth Media Awards (YMA) will be announced at 10 a.m. Central on January 26 at the Hilton Chicago.

The YMAs—including the Caldecott, Coretta Scott King, Newbery, and Printz awards—recognize the top books, digital media, videos, and audiobooks for children and young adults.

The event is free and open to the public, but registration is required for in-person attendance. Learn more and register

at ala.org/ala-youth-media-awards. The event will also stream live at ala.unikron.com and on the ALA Facebook page. No registration is required to view the livestream.

EMIERT Adds Islamic Information Committee

ALA's Ethnic and Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table (EMIERT) announced in September the establishment of the Islamic Information Committee (IIC), expanding its ongoing mission to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in libraries.

The IIC will serve as a resource for library professionals, supporting the development and sharing of programs, materials, and services that reflect the breadth of Islamic cultures and communities.

Visit ala.org/emiert for more information about EMIERT and its committees. 

2026 Carnegie Medals Shortlist

On November 18, ALA named the six books shortlisted for the 2026 Andrew Carnegie Medals for Excellence in Fiction and Nonfiction. Established in 2012, the awards honor the best fiction and nonfiction books written for adult readers and published in the US during the previous year.

The three fiction finalists are *A Guardian and a Thief* (Knopf) by Megha Majumdar, *The Unworthy* (Scribner) by Agustina Bazterrica and translated by Sarah Moses, and *We Do Not Part* (Hogarth) by Han Kang and translated by e. yaewon and Paige Aniyah Morris.

The three nonfiction finalists are *Baldwin, Styron, and Me* (Biblioasis) by Mélikah Abdelmoumen and translated by Catherine Khordoc, *There Is No Place for Us: Working and Homeless in America* (Crown) by Brian Goldstone, and *Things in Nature Merely Grow* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) by Yiyun Li.

The awards were established through a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. They are cosponsored and administered by ALA's Booklist and Reference and User Services Association. Medal winners will be announced on January 27 and a celebratory event will take place at ALA's 2026 Annual Conference in Chicago in June.

For more information on the awards and finalists, visit ala.org/carnegieadult. ●

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TRENDS



The Monkeypuzzlers were one of 47 teams across 10 branches to compete in Mid-Columbia Libraries' inaugural speed puzzling tournament in southeastern Washington last January.

Racing the Clock

Libraries piece together a new kind of competition

BY Rosie Newmark

Hands flew, timers ticked, and tensions ran high. But team Piece Out found success by sticking to a classic strategy: starting its 500-piece jigsaw puzzle with the borders and sorting pieces by color. In the end, the team was the first to complete the puzzle—an illustration of a fantasy library—in 33 minutes and 23 seconds.

It was the winning moment of the inaugural speed puzzling tournament at Mid-Columbia Libraries (MCL) in southeastern Washington last January. Piece Out triumphed over 46 other teams—with names like The Misfits, Separation Anxiety, and Planet Fit This—in the competition, which coincided with National Puzzle Day, January 29.

“People really liked to take [a victory] away from it,” says Programs Specialist Dawn Brooks. “But I think they would have been just as happy if all they took away was a good time.”

Speed puzzling, or the practice of assembling a jigsaw puzzle as fast as possible, has become an unlikely hit at public libraries. What began

as a social media curiosity and niche hobby has turned into a low-cost way to engage patrons of all ages—especially during colder months.

“[Winter] lends itself to cozy puzzling,” Brooks says. By October, she says, patrons had started asking when they could sign up for the 2026 tournament.

MCL's event was open to teens, adults, and families with tweens—up to five people per team—and conditions were standardized, down to table size. Over a period of four weeks, 10 of the library's locations held competitions. Organizers compared the top times across the system to determine the winner. Brooks says some participants even traveled to other branches to compete again.

Across the country, libraries are finding that puzzle tournaments are bringing excitement and camaraderie to their communities.

Getting the pieces to fit

Angela Morris, assistant branch manager and senior librarian for

teen services at DeKalb County (Ga.) Public Library (DCPL), decided to host her own speed puzzling competition after seeing videos of the World Jigsaw Puzzle Championship online. She started small, with a few introductory sessions where people could practice strategies for speedy solving.

“We had one or two people who were very serious about it, who actually do puzzling, and a lot of people came out just for the fun of it,” Morris says. “Some people just got the edges together in two hours, and some would have it done in less than 40 minutes.”

DCPL's January 2025 event was open to tweens and older, and included two divisions: an individual competition, where participants worked on a 350-piece puzzle, and a team round, in which groups tackled a 500-piece version. Both puzzles featured the same design—kittens nestled inside a shoe—and competitors had just two hours to complete them. Winners took home puzzle mats, and the DeKalb Library Foundation sponsored the materials.

Morris says she wanted the program to attract a younger crowd and create a space where people could get away from screens.

“I'm big into introducing kids to stuff that they're not used to, and we're in such a technological age now,” she says. “Puzzling is a STEM activity, and the kids have fun.”

At Madison (Wis.) Public Library (MPL), staff members found similar interest in speed puzzling when the system launched Puzzlepalooza last January. The event maxed out at

13 teams, with a handful of competitors left on the waitlist. A local game store donated gift certificates for prizes and a DJ spun tunes between rounds.

Participants at MPL's event could register as individuals and be placed on teams, a format that encouraged new connections. After the competition, several teams—including some made up of people who'd just met each other that day—stayed to complete another puzzle together.

MPL Community Engagement Librarian Michelle Herbrand recalls one particularly joyful moment: "I saw one of the guys on an individuals team call his wife to tell her he did really well."

Staffers at MPL wanted to create something that emphasized connection over competition, with door prizes from the library and a local radio station and refreshments from a local café. There were even tables for noncompetitive puzzling, where people could piece together a puzzle that interested them at their own pace, individually or in a group.

"The library is one of the few places where people can come and be together in community and not have to pay any money to attend an event," says Community Engagement Librarian Neeyati Shah. "We hope that when they walk through the door, they're also looking at our books and materials, but it's just a way to bring people together."

Completing the picture

DCPL, MCL, and MPL all plan to host future speed puzzling competitions. Staffers say the event is easy to replicate for its simplicity and affordability.

At MCL, for example, each branch used identical \$18 puzzles, totaling just under \$300 for the entire

"Puzzling is a STEM activity."

ANGELA MORRIS, assistant branch manager and senior librarian for teen services at DeKalb County (Ga.) Public Library

system. After the event, puzzles were added to the collection for checkout. The only other associated costs were small door prizes already on hand, like mugs and T-shirts.

In addition to DCPL's foundation covering the cost of puzzles and mats, snacks were donated by the library's Friends group. Because libraries already have tables, chairs, and space for programs, staffers agree that setup was minimal.

"Once you can give somebody any type of library-sponsored event that helps people use their brain more and think outside the box, it's useful," Morris says. "I feel like that's part of what we're here to do."

At MCL, the final moments of the tournament were as tense as any sports final, Brooks says—but the outcomes were what stuck with organizers. One winning team was invited to cut the ribbon at a branch library's grand reopening.

Brooks says one participant wasn't a regular library user, but the puzzle tournament caught her attention because it offered something different from what she normally associates with the library.

"She's going to remember what the library is doing for the community," Brooks says. "And she's going to vote 'yes' if we need something. So, that was one good thing that came out of it." **AL**

ROSIE NEWMARK is a freelance writer for *American Libraries*.

BY THE NUMBERS

Black History

10

Number of Zora Neale Hurston plays—most of which were never published—held by the Library of Congress (LC) in Washington, D.C. The prolific 20th-century writer and anthropologist wrote the plays between 1925 and 1944, but they were not widely known until found in an LC collection in 1997.



15 million

Number of historical documents in the manuscript collection of the Amistad Research Center (ARC) in New Orleans. ARC is the country's oldest and largest archive of African American history, with a collection dating from the 1790s.

5

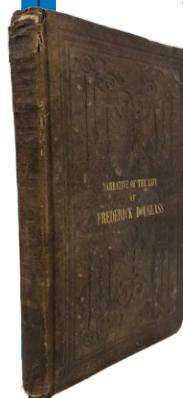
Number of stops on the James Baldwin walking tour produced by New York Public Library (NYPL) in 2024. The tour, which includes a look at Baldwin's Manhattan apartment and childhood library, was part of NYPL's Baldwin centennial, celebrating 100 years since the famed author's birth.

1950

Year that Gwendolyn Brooks became the first Black Pulitzer Prize winner for her book *Annie Allen*. Brooks was also the first Black woman to serve as LC's poetry consultant (1985–1986).

30,000

Number of copies of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* sold between 1845 and 1860. The bestseller was the first of three autobiographies Douglass wrote. ●



Brian Selznick

Noted author-illustrator talks about queer love stories and erasure



Until recently, Caldecott Medal-winning author-illustrator Brian Selznick had never written for young adults, nor written a full-fledged love story. That changed with *Run Away with Me* (Scholastic, 2025), a YA novel about a transformative summer romance between two teenage boys in 1980s Rome that is interwoven with love stories spanning centuries in the Eternal City.

Selznick, known for the children's books *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* and *Wonderstruck*, spoke with the American Library Association's *How I Library* podcast about finding revelatory love, building on cultural history, and why books scare those in power.

BY Phil
Morehart

Where did *Run Away with Me's* setting and story come from? My husband won a fellowship that brought us to Rome at the height of the pandemic, and we had the city to ourselves—the Trevi Fountain, the Pantheon, the Colosseum. I wanted to reflect that feeling of walking around an empty city and living among history, where beauty and ruin coexist. I began to imagine two teenage boys meeting there and falling in love. I didn't know who they were until about a year and a half later, when I started writing.

At its heart, the book is about curiosity and revelation, about uncovering who you are and allowing someone else to see you. I didn't experience that kind of love until I was 30.

Why was it important for you to tell this story, particularly for a young adult audience? I grew up in the Seventies and Eighties, very closeted and knowing nothing about queer history. When I started to come out, that discovery of belonging to a larger history was deeply moving for me. It gave me a sense of stability, that I wasn't alone.

I wanted to create a story where that history is baked into the fabric of the book itself. The interwoven love stories, spanning the 1600s to the 1940s, show that queer love has always found a way to exist, even when it wasn't allowed a name. You can't erase that. You can't make love disappear.

But the homophobia and danger are very real, which is why violence shows up so often in stories about young queer people coming out. When I was writing this, I knew two things about the plot: I didn't want to write a coming-out scene and I didn't want any violence. I wanted the story to exist in a real world that was also a safe world.

Speaking of the real world: What do you make of the current wave of book bans, which have targeted the voices of marginalized communities? When you attack books, you're attacking the people those stories represent. So if you're trying to control people through fear

and ignorance, then yes, books are the enemy. That's why authoritarian regimes burn them.

Walt Whitman wrote about books as living things—about the sensual, physical connection between the reader's body and the book in his pocket. If books are living bodies that can be wounded and burned, then caring for them is an act of resistance.

What gives you hope in this environment? What always amazes me is how powerful books still are and how they continue to terrify people in power. That's because books do what nothing else can: They teach empathy, they open worlds, they make us human.

And that's why libraries have always been essential to me. I used to love seeing the names written on the check-out cards in old library books, knowing who had read them before me, and adding my own name to that list. That sense of connection through shared reading is powerful. Libraries are where stories live, and where we keep finding each other. **AL**



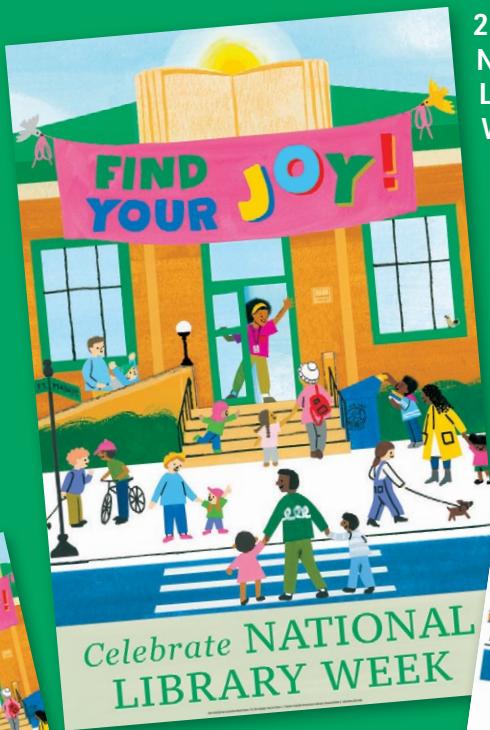
Photo: Brittany Cruz-Fejeran

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APRIL 19-26, 2026

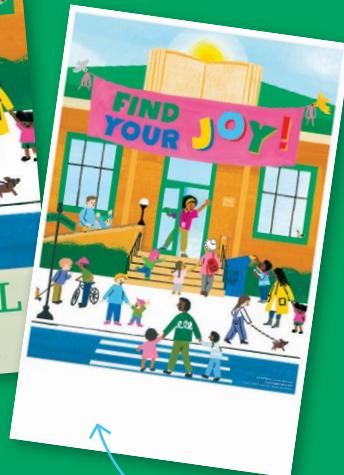
**FIND
YOUR JOY!**

This National Library Week is a celebration of all the ways libraries bring joy to our lives and communities. For some, it's losing track of time in a stack of graphic novels. For others, it's the spark of confidence from a polished résumé, the excitement of a packed author talk, or the simple relief of having free Wi-Fi when it's needed most. Whatever joy looks like to you, you'll find it at the library.



2026
National
Library
Week Poster

Find Your Joy Mini
Poster File

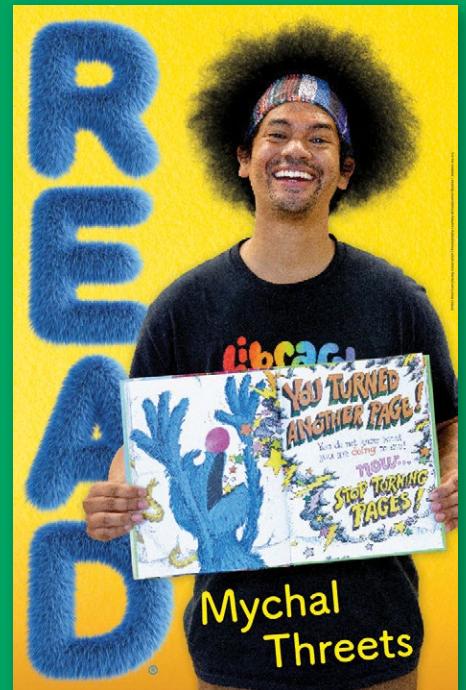


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Walk with a Purpose

Banned books program shifts the focus to freedom



LUCY PODMORE is librarian at Clark High School in the Northside Independent School District in San Antonio. For more details about materials, staffing, and adapting the Freedom Walk program to different libraries and age levels, watch her ALA webinar from 2024 at bit.ly/AL-FW-webinar.

Three years ago, after a difficult state legislative session in Texas marked by efforts to restrict access to books and disparage the work of librarians, I recognized the urgency of helping my community understand how our libraries operate.

I am a school librarian. My community supports the school library, and students are active library users. At the same time, rhetoric from that legislative session and in the years since have shown me that the public has limited knowledge about how we choose books and select programming to make the library a place students want to be.

So in 2023, I created the Freedom Walk, an interactive program that takes place in the courtyard of my high school campus. Students visit during lunch periods to learn about their rights as readers.

Instead of simply highlighting censorship statistics or bringing awareness to banned books, the Freedom Walk explores the ideas behind our freedom to read and the critical role students and the public can play in protecting that freedom. Instead of celebrating what we can't read, we celebrate our right to read.

The Freedom Walk includes five stations, and students learn not just about constitutional rights but also about terms used during censorship

Instead of celebrating what we can't read, we celebrate our right to read.

attempts, the book purchasing process, who makes policies about information access in our libraries, and the importance of being engaged voters. Activities at the stations include a quiz, matching and other games, and reflection activities. Some history and government teachers offer extra credit to students who go to the Freedom Walk and share what they have learned, although many students explore without that incentive.

(See details about each station in the September 2024 issue of *Knowledge Quest*, bit.ly/AL-Freedom-Walk.)

Each year I have conducted our Freedom Walk, I have been impressed with the engagement our students have with each of the five stations presented. They have asked insightful questions and are eager to learn how their voices can be heard on these issues.

Prompted by the enthusiastic response of my students, I have expanded the program to explore how they can participate in the debate around the freedom to read. In 2024, I hosted an evening program, Empowering Voters, that focused on the importance of voting and the process of becoming a registered voter in Texas. It featured two students and author Marc Favreau in a panel discussion about his book, *Represent: The Unfinished Fight for the Vote*. The local League of Women Voters explained the registration process and registered new voters, and the local organization Youth Do Vote explained the process of becoming an election worker and provided a sample voting machine. These

opportunities not only made our students more comfortable with the voting process but also prompted conversations about how they could drive change on issues that matter to them, including the freedom to read. More than 50 students and community members attended.

In 2025, we hosted a One Book, One School initiative using the book *Verify* by Joelle Charbonneau, a dystopian novel that explores potential censorship issues when printed books are no longer available and all information is digital. Students responded to weekly discussion topics posted on social media and participated in an essay contest structured around the censorship ideas raised in this book. We also hosted a panel discussion with local officials who talked about their roles in protecting our community's right to access information.

I firmly believe our communities become even more passionate advocates for our libraries when they recognize libraries are under threat. Educating them on the foundational beliefs and processes behind the way we curate collections and why we design the programs we offer helps them foster thoughtful discussions about their rights as readers. While I recognize the courage required to present this type of program, I respectfully urge my colleagues across the country to embrace our role as information specialists and provide the best information to our patrons. Select the elements of these programs that you are most comfortable presenting and equip your patrons with information they can use in their own discussions and advocacy efforts about the critical role libraries play in safeguarding everyone's freedom to read. **AL**

Considering AI

Books that approach the technology critically

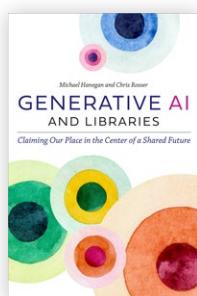


REANNA ESMAIL is lead librarian for instruction at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.



New Horizons in Artificial Intelligence in Libraries EDITED BY Edmund Balnaves, Leda Bultrini, Andrew Cox, and Raymond Uzwyshyn

Born out of recent International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions conferences, this volume examines current and potential directions, implications, and projects for AI in library services. For example, uses of natural language processing for topic modeling and bibliographic projects show promise, but some emphasize that the technology is not yet fully viable. The text argues for transparency and maintenance of professional ethics amid these new advances. In particular, the examination of open source AI shows libraries how they can understand and evaluate new technologies rather than rely on the promises of vendors and technology companies. De Gruyter Brill, 2024. 393 p. \$98.99. 978-3-1113-3571-1. (Also available as an ebook.)



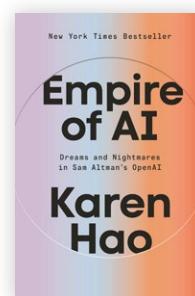
Generative AI and Libraries: Claiming Our Place in the Center of a Shared Future BY Michael Hanegan and Chris Rosser

This title from the American Library Association's Core division argues that libraries should claim a central role in the creation, adoption, and evaluation of generative AI technologies. The authors note the unique opportunity libraries have to lead the integration of AI in their communities ethically and responsibly. The discussions of metaliteracy and the STACKS (strategy, tactics, assembly, curation, knowledge, and solutions) framework—an approach for learning and problem solving with generative AI—make this book worthwhile for library workers looking to understand if there is value to be gained from AI and whether this value outweighs its other impacts. ALA Editions, 2025. 160 p. \$54.99. PBK. 979-8-89255-310-0.



The AI Con: How to Fight Big Tech's Hype and Create the Future We Want BY Emily M. Bender and Alex Hanna

If you read just one book from this list, it should be this one. In approachable and engaging prose, Bender and Hanna dispel notions of AI solving all problems as human-like “thinking machines.” The chapters explore the outsized promises of AI, its impact on labor, and its quotidian use, touching on topics commonly discussed in libraries, such as citational practice, fair use, and authority. Chapters four and five, which study AI usage in social services and creative and academic fields, will especially interest library workers. The book ends with concrete strategies and ways to create better, socially situated technology, including a call to support libraries. HarperCollins, 2025. 288 p. \$25.60. 978-0-0634-1856-1. (Also available as an ebook.)



Empire of AI: Dreams and Nightmares in Sam Altman's OpenAI BY Karen Hao

In this investigation, Hao draws on her years of reporting on OpenAI and its founder, Sam Altman, to examine how the purported mission of the company stacks up against reality. The book features voices of gig workers, content moderators in Kenya, and communities impacted by the environmental cost of generative artificial intelligence—and highlights how, despite its stated goal of innovation for innovation's sake, OpenAI's race to beat competitors often compromises its quality. Beyond being an interesting account, *Empire of AI* can help readers understand the context, goals, and impacts of the technology's growing dominance. Penguin Press, 2025. 496 p. \$32. 978-0-5936-5750-8. (Also available as an ebook.) 

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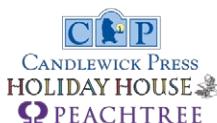
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2025

**YEAR IN
REVIEW**

Illustration: fran_kie/Adobe Stock (books); Svitta/Adobe Stock (numbers)

A recap of news that shaped a tumultuous year for libraries and library workers

FREEDOM TO READ FACES FEDERAL SCRUTINY

Following the **Trump administration's executive orders** targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), the US Naval Academy removed nearly 400 books deemed DEI-related from its Nimitz Library (later returning most of them to circulation). Meanwhile, in April, the Supreme Court heard arguments in *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, a case brought by parents wishing to opt their children out of instruction that incorporates books with LGBTQ+ themes at Montgomery County (Md.) Public Schools. The Court ruled 6–3 in June that the district violated families' First Amendment rights in not allowing such opt-outs.

NEW LEADERSHIP AT ALA

Dan Montgomery joined the American Library Association (ALA) as executive director on November 10, succeeding Leslie Burger, who had served as executive director on an interim basis since November 2023. Montgomery was previously president of the Illinois Federation of Teachers.



A WIN FOR FEDERAL LIBRARY FUNDING

On March 14, President Trump signed an executive order to **dismantle the Institute of Museum and Library Services** (IMLS), leaving many state libraries to cope with staffing and service cuts. Lawsuits to protect IMLS were filed in response, one by a coalition of 21 attorneys general, another from ALA and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. On November 21, in response to the lawsuit filed by the attorneys general, the US District Court for the District of Rhode Island struck down the administration's efforts, ruling that they were unconstitutional. By December 3, IMLS had reinstated all federal grants.

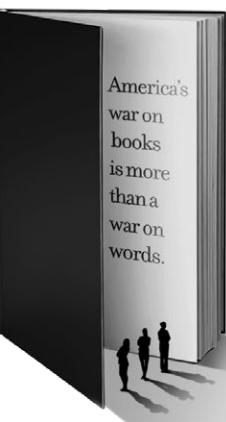
ALA INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT LIBRARIES

ALA kicked off 2025 with **Show Up for Our Libraries**, an advocacy campaign designed to engage elected officials and policymakers to protect libraries, their funding, and the freedom to read. The following month, the Association unveiled a companion public supporter program to invite the general public to contribute donations to the movement (bit.ly/ALA-Public).



LIBRARIANS IN THE PUBLIC EYE

Last year saw the release of a handful of **librarian-focused documentaries**, including *The Librarians*, which hit the big screen in October, and *Free for All: The Public Library*, which aired on PBS. Ionia (Iowa) Public Library Director India May, meanwhile, raised the librarian profile by announcing her candidacy for a seat in the state's House of Representatives, following other librarian candidates in recent years in Indiana, Ohio, and Utah.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS UNDER ATTACK

On May 8, Trump abruptly fired **Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden**, with the White House later claiming that she promoted DEI at the institution. Two days later, Trump fired Register of Copyrights Shira Perlmutter. A federal court reinstated Perlmutter while she challenges the legality of her removal.

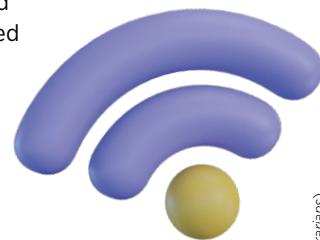


SHUTDOWN LEAVES LIBRARIES IN LIMBO

The longest federal government shutdown in US history, which ended November 12, halted the work—and paychecks—of library workers at IMLS, the Library of Congress, and other agencies. At its outset, ALA warned that some federal and state funding for the 2025 fiscal year that had yet to be drawn down may be impacted and could delay future grants libraries rely on.

A SETBACK FOR BROADBAND ACCESS

In May, the Trump administration cut the \$2.8 billion **Digital Equity Act grant program**, designed to close the nationwide broadband gap. Passed in 2021, the act distributes funds for libraries and other institutions to use toward tech support and equipment upgrades for communities with limited digital access.



THREATS TO E-RATE

It was a mixed year for the federal **E-Rate program**, which provides funding for broadband access to libraries and schools. In June, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Universal Service Fund, which includes the E-Rate program. However, in September, the Federal Communications Commission voted to rescind funding for library and school Wi-Fi hotspot lending programs previously approved in 2024.

ALA FORWARD INTRODUCED

In early 2025, **the Association launched ALA Forward**, an initiative designed to improve member engagement and ensure financial stability. It includes three projects: a new strategic plan; a program assessment (reviewing the impact and value of programs at ALA); and an organizational assessment (reviewing staff operations, structure, and processes). ALA Forward's evaluations concluded last summer, and implementation of its recommendations is ongoing.



Photo: frank/Adobe Stock (map)

Photos: Shawn Miller/wikimedia (Hayden); abhijainmatia/Adobe Stock (Wi-Fi); Lucie Faulkner/PBS (The Librarians)



TRUMP EDITS FEDERAL RECORDS

Shortly after his inauguration, Trump issued a slew of executive orders that affected **federal data and information**. As demanded by Executive Order 14172, the Library of Congress revised 45 subject headings on February 18, notably changing “Mexico, Gulf of” to “America, Gulf of” and “Denali, Mount (Alaska)” to “McKinley, Mount (Alaska).” Archivists scrambled to preserve thousands of federal data sets and web pages that were altered or removed in response to Trump’s orders, including environmental data, signage in national parks, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention findings.

BAKER & TAYLOR ANNOUNCES CLOSURE

On October 6, the nearly 200-year-old book distributor **Baker & Taylor** (B&T) told employees it had begun shutting down business operations. B&T had faced financial difficulties in recent years, and its primary creditor had declared its loans to be in default. B&T was a major provider of books for public libraries, and its closure disrupted supplies as those libraries sought new vendors.



LIBRARIES WEATHER LOS ANGELES FIRES

Multiple **wildfires raged** across Los Angeles in January, destroying tens of thousands of acres across Southern California, including the Los Angeles Public Library’s Palisades branch. Amid the devastation, area libraries acted as hubs for internet access, power, masks, and information about recovering from the disaster.

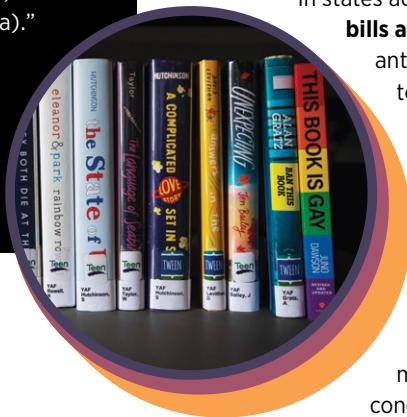


YOUTH DIVISIONS REUNITE

In June, ALA Council voted to dissolve the Young Adult Library Services Association and combine its operations with the Association for Library Service to Children under a new name. This reunification will take effect September 1.

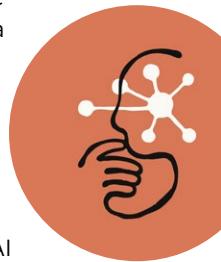
MORE BATTLES FOR AND AGAINST STATE BOOK BANS

In states across the country, **book banning bills and laws** persisted—as did anticensorship efforts and rulings to counter them. In July, New Hampshire Gov. Kelly Ayotte (R) defied her party by vetoing a bill that would make it easier for parents to remove books from school libraries. In August, US District Judge Carlos Mendoza deemed Florida’s efforts to restrict school materials that “describe sexual conduct” vague and unconstitutional. And in September, a law that allows Texas parents to form councils that could flag books for removal from school libraries went into effect.



GRAPPLING WITH AI

Use of artificial intelligence (AI) continued to evolve in 2025. In one major legal decision last summer, a court ruled that it was acceptable for AI company Anthropic to use legally purchased copyrighted materials to train its large language model but not for it to train on pirated works. Meanwhile, libraries grappled with unlabeled AI content in their collections and suffered server disruptions caused by bots scraping the internet for training materials. Librarians also worked with this technology, leveraging AI to improve accessibility of collections and forming committees to ensure ethical AI use.



Photos: CAL FIRE/Wikimedia (wildfire); jachienix/Adobe Stock (books)

MOVING BEYOND

— THE —

ACRONYM

Academic librarians talk about doubling down on DEI efforts and core values in an uncertain climate

The world of college admissions drastically shifted in 2023, when the Supreme Court's landmark rulings in two cases—*Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard* and *SFFA v. University of North Carolina*—rejected race-conscious affirmative action policies. Just two years later, as some schools report declining enrollment of students of color, a flurry of executive orders has threatened diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives at colleges and universities.

Last April, Choice, the publishing unit of the American Library Association's Association of College and Research Libraries, convened the virtual panel "Affirmative Action and the Future of DEI." Moderated by Fatima Mohie-Eldin, social sciences editor for Choice and editor of its Toward Inclusive Excellence blog, the panel explored how these coalescing issues are impacting academic librarians and information scholars.

The panelists were: Sean Burns, associate professor at University of Kentucky's School of Information Science in Lexington; Renate Chancellor, associate professor and associate dean for access, ethics, and belonging at Syracuse (N.Y.) University's School of Information Studies; and Jerome Offord Jr., associate university librarian for community development, belonging, and engagement at Harvard Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The following are edited excerpts of their discussion, which considered how institutions can pursue and reaffirm their commitments to DEI principles, the murky legal and political territory around education and information, and how collaboration can support access and inclusion. View the full program at bit.ly/Choice-DEI.

Higher education institutions are facing increasing pressure to restructure or even eliminate their DEI programs and offices. How can they continue to advance their commitments to DEI in this environment?

Illustration: Antonio Rodriguez/Adobe Stock





“ This administration’s actions have simply revealed what many people already felt about this work, and that just means we have more to do.”

—**JEROME OFFORD JR.**, associate university librarian for community development, belonging, and engagement at Harvard Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts



JEROME OFFORD JR.: One of our biggest challenges around diversity, equity, and inclusion is that, over the years, we’ve talked about DEI in terms of business cases, like diversifying staff and hitting metrics, but we’ve failed to recognize that this is human-behavior work. It’s change work, and change doesn’t happen in a day, a year, or even a few years. It’s about relearning how we live and interact as human beings.

Whatever the acronym, the work itself isn’t going away, whether in academic or public libraries or in LIS programs. We’re still asking: How do you serve the community you’re hired to serve? And if you look at that community, its users bring diverse perspectives and needs, right? So how do we educate ourselves, examine our biases, and ensure that we’re collecting, purchasing, and producing information that meets those needs?

From that foundation, diversity work must always continue. It’s hard, especially when the acronyms become political targets. This administration’s actions have simply revealed what many people already felt about this work, and that just means we have more to do.



SEAN BURNS: It’s important that any strategic response recognizes that these policies operate on two levels. First, there’s the attack on DEI programs under the claim that DEI itself is discriminatory. Then there’s the argument that people should be judged, hired, and promoted purely on “merit.” But decades of research show

how systems of injustice and unequal distributions of capital and property have advantaged certain races and genders over others. This false, zero-sum narrative about merit ignores the reality that many have been rewarded because of their race, gender identity, or inherited wealth.

As for what libraries can do, we’re about access: access to knowledge, to multiple perspectives, to the understanding that no single knowledge domain is supreme. Whether we call it DEI or something else, that’s the core work libraries have always done.



RENATE CHANCELLOR: Until something is actually passed into law, we should continue the work we’ve been doing. We still need to foster inclusion and a sense of belonging for everyone—those who work in libraries as well as across the university. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are for everyone. Universities can’t look away.

As for academic libraries, I've always found librarians to be wonderfully opinionated. We're not afraid to express how we feel, and we should continue doing that. If you have the opportunity to serve on a committee or in a leadership role, take it. Once you're in the room with deans, provosts, and chancellors, you have their ear and can speak up.

A February 2025 article in Bloomberg Law (bit.ly/Bloomberg-DEI) examined the legal ambiguity of these executive orders, noting that the administration does not define DEI or list any specific activities it considers illegal. What effect does this ambiguity have? Does this uncertainty create an opportunity to rethink or strengthen our DEI frameworks?

BURNS: The article was fascinating. The authors make an important distinction between what they call “*lifting* DEI” and “*leveling* DEI.” They argue that lifting DEI, or efforts that give preference to underrepresented groups, is what these anti-DEI measures most directly target. Leveling DEI, by contrast, seeks to remove bias from evaluation processes, aiming for so-called meritocracy.

On the surface, that seems rational. The authors give the example of symphony orchestras. In 1970, women held less than 5% of symphony orchestra positions. Lifting DEI would mean giving women a hiring preference; leveling DEI meant holding blind auditions behind a screen.

While the distinction between lifting and leveling is interesting, it can also be a distraction. Real progress requires both. Sometimes we must lift, as in the example of ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] accommodations for ergonomic chairs. Those don't remove bias; they raise people up—sometimes literally!

CHANCELLOR: The library profession has spent years trying to define diversity. There have been countless articles debating “What is diversity?” That fixation, I think, hurt us. We spent too much time defining it instead of simply recognizing that it exists.

Likewise, the people attacking DEI now don't truly understand it. They don't like the acronym or what they think it represents. Much of the backlash is really aimed at Black and

Brown people, because that's who they believe DEI is for, but diversity is far broader. It includes people with disabilities, those who are neurodivergent, and others whose experiences and trauma led to the very policies we now call DEI.

Even before the recent wave of executive orders targeting DEI, the 2023 Supreme Court decision upended affirmative action in admissions. How can the library profession strategize around these compounding challenges for diversity on campus?

OFFORD: I think these executive orders will give cover to those who were never truly committed to recruiting or supporting diverse populations. They'll say, “See? We don't have to do this anymore.” Unfortunately, that's going to be the outcome in some places.

One of the hardest things I read after the ruling was an article where someone wrote, “See? I told you, these people only got in because they were Black or Brown.” But what those critics missed was that some students may have chosen not to apply to or attend these institutions because of what's happening with DEI. Many are returning to minority-serving institutions, where they feel safer and more supported.

We have to recognize that this new generation of students grew up with DEI as part of their worldview. They've experienced it firsthand. Older generations—boomers, Gen X, even some millennials—see it differently. There's a huge generational gap in understanding. But I think we'll see younger people fighting for this work, as we've already seen on campuses. Students want this. As institutions and as a nation, we need to embrace a diversity of students to prepare for the future.

CHANCELLOR: There's overwhelming data showing that when classrooms are diverse, all students benefit. Each institution will now have to confront an uncomfortable question: Do we truly believe in diversity and inclusion or are we just going to go along with the current political tide?

I remember when college websites would show one Black student, one Asian student, one Latinx student, just enough to check a box. That always bothered me, because it wasn't real representation. I worry we'll move even further backward now to a point where we don't even pretend to include everyone.

There are still legal ways to recruit equitably. For instance, instead of targeting specific demographic groups, institutions can target certain ZIP codes, particularly those with more diverse populations. For graduate programs, they can establish a presence at historically Black colleges and universities.

“Do we truly believe in diversity and inclusion or are we just going to go along with the current political tide?”

—RENATE CHANCELLOR, associate professor and associate dean for access, ethics, and belonging at Syracuse (N.Y.) University's School of Information Studies



Illustration: Antonio Rodriguez/Adobe Stock



“ We need to keep discussing who’s being educated, who’s attending library schools, and how we can diversify our profession to better reflect the composition of the country.”

—SEAN BURNS, associate professor at University of Kentucky’s School of Information Science in Lexington

As you mentioned, institutions are in very different places, each with different leadership and different philosophies around how to proceed. But coming together is the first step toward wrapping our arms around the scale of this challenge.

There’s room for strategy and creativity here. The same applies to hiring faculty and staff. We can still pursue diversity within the bounds of the 2023 affirmative action ruling, but it requires intention and persistence.

BURNS: Libraries, at their best, have always been about access—imperfectly, yes, but that’s been our foundation. We have to keep focusing on those fundamentals and our core values.

Libraries aren’t involved in the admissions process at universities, but we do hire. One thing I’d like to see is more librarians involved in library education programs helping shape the next generation of professionals.

That’s not always easy, because there are structural barriers that make it difficult for people to enroll in library science programs, if programs even exist locally. We need to keep discussing who’s being educated, who’s attending library schools, and how we can diversify our profession to better reflect the composition of the country.

In this environment, how might academic librarians or information scholars at private institutions support their colleagues at public institutions who may be facing greater challenges? What does cross-sector solidarity look like?

CHANCELLOR: Recently, I’ve been in communication with other DEI deans at various institutions to not only commiserate but to build tools we can actually use. I’m also part of a national leadership network where deans and diversity officers have come to build a toolkit that documents what’s happening on each campus, creating a collective resource for how to address specific issues.

OFFORD: We often think of ourselves in silos, as librarians working only within libraries. But we really need to plug into the broader community. We need to connect beyond the library world to see how institutions as a whole are grappling with these issues.

Frankly, we knew this was coming. President Trump promised during his campaign that he’d take action against DEI. I was surprised that so many people seemed shocked when he actually followed through. Before winter break, I asked on my campus, “What are we going to do if he signs an executive order banning DEI on January 20?” People said, “That’s not going to happen, it’s too soon.” And then it did.

I read every executive order, take notes, track deadlines and outcomes, and watch who’s involved. Doing that collectively helps us manage the emotional toll and stay focused on strategy. That’s how we’ll be prepared for whatever comes next.

BURNS: Developing networks is essential—that’s the through-line here. We already know what’s coming. The administration literally published its road map in Project 2025. We need our own road maps, toolkits, and frameworks to stay the course and push back.

We should share organizational knowledge, what works, what doesn’t, and how institutions are navigating these challenges. Even though states differ in their laws and restrictions, there’s still a lot we can learn from one another. That’s what being a profession is about: sharing knowledge, sharing case studies, and building collective strategy.

Libraries may be subunits within larger institutions, but we can lead in this space. We can model what courage looks like. Institutions need to create space for bravery, for people willing to step out and say, “We’re going to keep pushing this forward.” **AL**

Unlocking Possibilities



United Virtual mobilizes library advocates to build relationships through authentic stories

BY Sallyann Price

AT A TIME WHEN LIBRARIES ARE FACING IMMENSE, unprecedented challenges—fiscal, logistical, institutional, existential—the role of library supporters has never been more critical.

These types of challenges were top of mind at United for Libraries (UFL) Virtual 2025, held in late July. Every year, UFL brings together trustees, foundation and Friends members, and those who work with them for a virtual conference to discuss the library advocacy landscape. It's also a space to brainstorm practical solutions for rallying communities around key issues, such as intellectual freedom, equitable access, and sustainable business practices that contribute to a vibrant, sturdy future.

July's event featured programs on governance, fundraising, relationship building, and storytelling. Many sessions focused on cultivating the library advocate, from preparing trustees to lead and communicating impact to funders to shaping the public narrative about why the library matters.

Relationships are everything

Trustees, as both governing officials and community representatives, can be powerful library advocates. They ensure that facilities are well run, are funded fairly, and align with community needs. But the trustee-library relationship is not immune from dysfunction, particularly when boards aren't reflective of the communities they serve.

In the session "Why Is It Always a Battle? Concerns of Public Library Trustees in the United States," Shannon Crawford Barniskis, assistant professor at University of Kentucky's School of Information Science in Lexington and a former public librarian, presented the findings of her ongoing survey of public library trustees and the administrators who work with them.

The program's title, Crawford Barniskis said, comes from an interview with an administrator who decried mutual distrust in



Shannon Crawford Barniskis

the trustee-library relationship—an issue that pops up over and over in survey results.

“Why is that? Where are these gaps, and how can we fix them? That’s what this study is hoping to answer,” she said.

Crawford Barniskis noted that building trust and collaborating effectively don’t happen automatically; it’s a process that requires structured support on all sides. “What I’ve heard in these interviews is that those library directors who take time to meet trustees individually, take them to lunch, get to know them as people—those relationships do better. It’s really that simple.”

She encouraged libraries to consider their communities when selecting and working with boards. Demographically, surveyed trustees have skewed older, whiter, wealthier, and more female than national medians, leaving entire sectors without representation.

“People’s experiences aren’t interchangeable,” Crawford Barniskis said. “We want a diversity of voices to strengthen those community bonds, and we want them all tuned to the same station, serving the library and the community.”

Funders are listening

At “Let Your Impact Ring: Sharing Your Library’s Successes so Funders Will Listen,” a panel of library fundraising experts spoke about how to communicate with those who give—whether it’s foundations, corporations, Friends groups, or individuals—in a way that articulates the library’s value on a human level.

Tywanda L. Cuffy, director of external relations, communications, and development initiatives at University of Delaware’s Library, Museums, and Press office in Newark, offered practical tips for reaching and nurturing funders, from newsletters and social media marketing to annual impact reports and personalized outreach.

“It doesn’t have to be perfect or expensive,” Cuffy said. “You can take your phone and capture candid photos of something happening in real time, and sometimes those moments, without being so strategic, get amplified the most.”

She also highlighted the importance of intentional follow-up, after the money has been raised or the purchase has been made. A few years ago, for example, when Cuffy’s library was fundraising for new furniture, she shared photos of the furniture being delivered. These images visually communicated the gift’s importance beyond the dollar amount or number of users.

Skip Dye, senior vice president for library sales and digital strategy at Penguin Random House and 2018–2019 UFL president, underscored that storytelling shouldn’t start or end with data.

“The real reason we’re here, the reason that people donate or want to be part of your library, the reasons we fight so hard for funding is because fundamentally, we believe that libraries make lives much better,” Dye said. “So we need to be answering the question, not just what did we do, but who was changed? What barriers did we remove?”



Skip Dye



“People tune out push promotions because they’re transactional, whereas storytelling is about authenticity.”

ANGELA HURSH, manager of engagement and marketing at NovelList

What possibilities were unlocked? Because that’s what today’s funders are looking for.”

Good marketing feels personal

Before she joined the marketing team at Cincinnati and Hamilton County (Ohio) Public Library and later became a marketing and training consultant and blogger, Angela Hursh was an Emmy Award-winning TV journalist with a nose for what would capture public attention. She shared some of the qualities of a compelling narrative and the importance of emotional connection in “Library Storytelling: How to Find Memorable Library Stories to Use for Marketing and Promotion.”

First, put yourself in the shoes of the person you’re trying to reach, whether it’s a current or prospective patron, a journalist, or an elected official. “Think about how you personally interact with ads and signs and social media during the day,” Hursh said. “People tune out push promotions because they’re transactional, whereas storytelling is about authenticity.”

Every story should be timely, have a purpose, and, most importantly, involve real people with real experiences, Hursh said, such as a reluctant reader engaging with a summer reading program or someone taking advantage of library resources to land a job.

“That’s my favorite part of writing a story, because you’re connecting the character to the solution at the library,” she said.

Hursh talked about the first library story she shared as a marketer, about a 12-year-old who was giving a speech at school about public library funding. When he came to the library to research it and she heard him advocating for the library in his own words, she grabbed her camera and microphone and asked to record him.

“We showed the video at library board and staff meetings. We did a print version for our quarterly newsletter and shared sound bites on social media,” Hursh said. “After that, it was an avalanche of stories—all we needed was one good one under our belt.” **AL**

For more *United for Libraries* resources on advocacy, visit ala.org/united.



SALLYANN PRICE is a freelance writer and editor in Seattle and a former associate editor of *American Libraries*.

PEOPLE

Announcements

ON THE MOVE

August 27 **Elizabeth Barter** became library media specialist at Forestville (N.Y.) Central School District.

Jon Mark Bolthouse joined North Suburban Library District in Illinois as director September 2.

Kayla Charlonne became youth services librarian at Jaffrey (N.H.) Public Library September 16.

October 1 **Julie Creaser** became general manager of library services at Thompson-Nicola Regional Library in Kamloops, British Columbia.

In August **Emily Finch** became librarian assistant professor at University of Miami Law Library in Coral Gables, Florida.



July 1 **Todd Grappone** became university librarian at University of California, Santa Barbara.

Margo Gustina was appointed research and data services librarian at University of New Mexico Libraries in Albuquerque in July.



March 18 **Janna Hognlund** joined Montgomery County (Tex.) Memorial Library System as executive director.

In October **Mihoko Hosoi** became university librarian at University of California, Riverside.



Springfield (Vt.) Town Library hired **Micah Kelly** as youth services librarian May 1.

September 2 **Tess Mayer** became library director for Pima County (Ariz.) Public Library.



Kudos

Neyda Gilman, assistant head of sustainability and STEM engagement and sciences librarian at Binghamton (N.Y.) University Libraries, was announced as one of SUNY's inaugural Sustainability Faculty Fellows September 23.

Justin Hamm, librarian at Eugene Field Elementary School in Mexico, Missouri, was named 2025–2027 Missouri Poet Laureate October 1. ●

Federico Salas became librarian assistant professor at University of Miami Law Library in Coral Gables, Florida, in August.

June 16 **Manya Shorr** became director of the Dallas Public Library.

July 1 **William H. Walters** was appointed professor and dean of library affairs at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

PROMOTIONS

In September **Jennifer Betts** became director of John Hay Library at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

June 23 **Alysia Boysen** started as director of Siouland Libraries in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

October 13 **Brandi Canter** became executive director of Great River Regional Library in central Minnesota.

June 23 **Nadine Cousineau** became CEO of Fort Frances (Ont.) Public Library Technology Centre.

September 1 **Christina H. Gola** became dean of University of Houston Libraries.

In June **Bill Hastings** was appointed director of Northern Onondaga Public Library in Onondaga County, New York.

August 24 **Tamara King** became executive director of Richland Library in Columbia, South Carolina.



Edwin B. Maxwell became Brooklyn (N.Y.) Public Library's chief librarian October 1.



September 2 **Jamie Morris** was promoted to associate director of Clinton-Macomb (Mich.) Public Library.

Denise O'Shea became dean of Montclair (N.J.) State University Libraries October 20.



July 29 **Tanya Russell** was appointed director of Kings County (Calif.) Library.

Dawn Wacek became director of La Crosse (Wis.) Public Library June 3.

RETIREMENTS

September 26 **Patti Arkwright** retired as head librarian at Maury Loontjens Memorial Library in Narragansett, Rhode Island.

Deidre Crichton retired as CEO and head librarian of Gananoque (Ont.) Public Library in November.

Milford (Ind.) Public Library Director **Julie Frew** retired September 30.

Alexandra Giamb Bruno retired as head of children's services at East Hampton (N.Y.) Library July 3.

August 29 **Holly Lynn** retired from Huron (Ohio) Public Library as head of adult services.

Mary Petro, executive director of North Suburban Library District in Illinois, retired September 1.

In Memory

Thomas E. Alford, 90, died July 14. Alford began his career in 1961 at Flint (Mich.) Public Library, working as a trainee, branch manager, and head of the young adult department. He later became the first African American director of Benton Harbor (Mich.) Public Library; Macomb County (Mich.) Library; and the Library Cooperative of Macomb in Mt. Clemens, Michigan. Alford also worked as assistant city librarian for Los Angeles Public Library (1980–1992), assistant county librarian of San Bernardino County (Calif.) Library, and starting in 1996, deputy director of customer service at Queens (N.Y.) Public Library. He retired from librarianship in 2006. Alford was a founder of the Black Caucus of the ALA (BCALA) and was active in the Association, including serving on ALA Council, as chair of ALA's Committee on Constitution and Bylaws, and as president of the Young Adult Services Division. He received the 1999 BCALA Distinguished Service Award and the 2015 BCALA Trailblazer Award, the caucus's highest honor.



Laura H. Kracke, 83, died August 17. Kracke worked as a children's librarian at Chicago Public Library from 1993 until her retirement in 2011.

Wei Chi Poon, 91, died June 29. In the mid-1970s, Poon established the Asian American Studies Library at University of California (UC), Berkeley, as a worldwide center for Asian American archival research. She later cofounded the Ethnic Studies Library at UC Berkeley in 1997. Her book, *A Guide for Establishing Asian American Core Collections* (1989), was the first of its kind and guided librarians and scholars in collection development. In 1998, she received a Distinguished Lifetime Service Award from the Association for Asian American Studies. Poon retired in 2014. She was an active member of the Chinese American Librarians Association.

Ward Shaw, 79, died July 2. Shaw worked as associate director of technical services at University of Denver, where he collaborated on a shared computer system for libraries. He served as the first executive director of the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries (CARL) starting in 1978. Shortly after, he began work on the CARL integrated library system (ILS), which launched in the early 1980s. Shaw was known as a library automation innovator, having developed an advanced keyword search system for the CARL ILS that predated Google. When CARL split in 1988, he became CEO of the for-profit side of the business, CARL Corporation, which was later purchased by The Library Corporation in 2000.

Roger D. Sween, 85, died August 24. Sween started his career as a high school librarian and later worked as head of reference services at University of Wisconsin–Platteville, head librarian at Red Wing (Minn.) Public Library, and a reference instructor at St. Cloud (Minn.) State University. In 1984, Sween became grant administrator for the multi-county, multitype library systems of Minnesota, administered through the Minnesota Office of Library Development and Services, and served in that position until his retirement in 2000. He was instrumental in developing and sustaining the Minnesota Book Awards. ●

Alma Dawson, 82, died September 11. Dawson worked as head serials librarian in the W. R. Banks Library at Prairie View (Tex.) A&M University. In 1982, she joined Louisiana State University (LSU) Libraries in Baton Rouge as a librarian and, after earning her PhD in 1996, joined the faculty of LSU's School of Library and Information Science. Dawson wrote and edited numerous articles, chapters, and books, including *African American Literature: A Guide to Reading Interests* (2004). She established a program of mentorship for minority and international students at LSU in 1995, in collaboration with the Louisiana Library Association (LLA). She was awarded an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant in 2009 for Project Recovery, which provided scholarships for master's students who would work in libraries affected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. She retired from LSU in 2014 and was awarded emeritus status in 2015. Dawson was the recipient of several awards, including ALA's Equality Award (2005), the LLA Meritorious Service Award (2012), and LLA's Essae M. Culver Distinguished Service Award (2019).

AT ALA

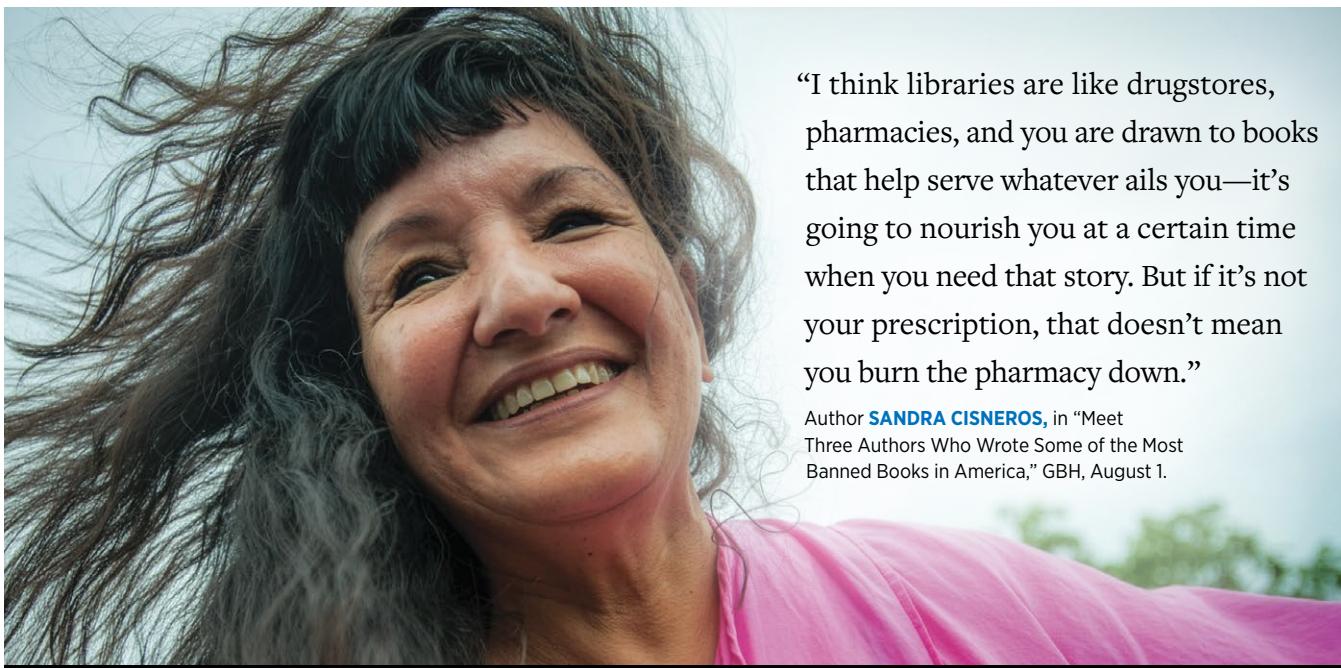
Michael Dowling retired as director of the International Relations and Chapter Relations offices August 31.

Mary Hirsh left her role as deputy director of the Public Library Association (PLA) August 29.

August 12 **Jean Hodges** left her position

as director of ALA's Communications, Marketing, and Media Relations Office.

In October **Angela Maycock** was promoted to deputy director at PLA. 



“I think libraries are like drugstores, pharmacies, and you are drawn to books that help serve whatever ails you—it’s going to nourish you at a certain time when you need that story. But if it’s not your prescription, that doesn’t mean you burn the pharmacy down.”

Author **SANDRA CISNEROS**, in “Meet Three Authors Who Wrote Some of the Most Banned Books in America,” GBH, August 1.

“My queen-size bed is divided into quadrants; I sleep in one, my two cats get one each, and one is for books. The cats tell me this is a fair arrangement.”

RABIH ALAMEDDINE, author and 2025 National Book Award for Fiction winner, in “Rabih Alameddine Is Done with Dostoyevsky,” *The New York Times*, September 25.

“Four days before the event, I was told it violated the administration’s executive order restricting so-called ‘radical’ diversity, equity, and inclusion programs across federal institutions. Someone complained when they saw my storytime being promoted. Museum higher-ups appealed to military attorneys, who ruled that the program about a pioneering cyclist was out of bounds. Let that sink in: The commander-in-chief of the US military had effectively declared a woman on a bike too threatening for children.”

Picture book author **MARY BOONE**, “Washington Author: My Book about a Cyclist Was Too Radical for Storytime,” *The Seattle Times*, October 11.

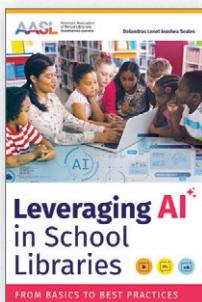
“READING MANGA COUNTS. LISTENING TO AUDIOBOOKS COUNTS. PICKING UP A STACK OF PICTURE BOOKS IN HIGH SCHOOL COUNTS. TAKING THREE MONTHS TO FINISH ONE FANTASY NOVEL COUNTS. EVERY WAY OF ENGAGING WITH STORIES IS REAL AND VALUABLE, WHETHER IT LOOKS LIKE THE STEREOTYPE OR NOT.”

Librarian and writer **NIKKI DEMARCO**, “Reading While Neurodivergent: A Librarian’s Guide to Loving Books on Your Own Terms,” *Book Riot*, October 31.

“Recordkeepers, librarians, archivists, genealogists, teachers, artists, and elders carry a heavy responsibility, but this work is also neighborly, teachable, and doable at kitchen tables, barbershops, churches, community centers, and school hallways.”

Librarian and documentarian **RODNEY FREEMAN JR.**, “The Librarian’s Call: Documenting Is Resistance,” *Common Dreams*, November 2.

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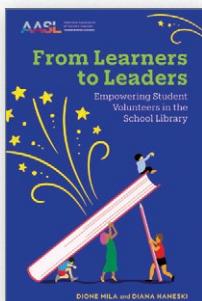
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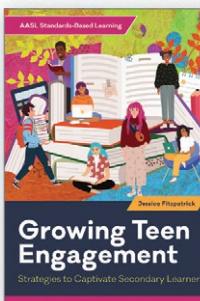
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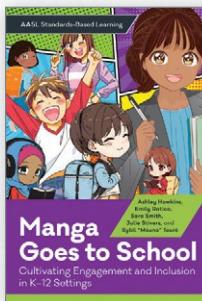
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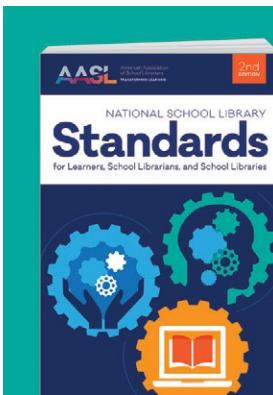
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