

# African Americans "stretch the envelope" at the first Black Caucus conference

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BEVERLY GOLDBERG

*BCALA puts on a show full of frank talk, political savvy, and positive images that leaves librarians hungry for more.*

In any equation, the first independent conference of ALA's newest affiliate (AL, Mar., p. 252), the Black Caucus of ALA, would be, in the words of its president, Alex Boyd, "a defining moment." Factor in a turnout for the Labor Day weekend meeting in Columbus, Ohio, of 952 people—which exceeds the 22-year-old caucus's preconference membership. Then consider that this calendar year four ALA divisions vied for librarians' attention and finite travel funds with conferences of their own, and you have a watershed.

"This conference complements ALA, stretches the envelope a bit further," declared BCALA President Boyd. For him, the unexpectedly large turnout for the Sept. 4-6 conference proves that black librarians "don't have to protest anymore to have our needs met." For ALA President Marilyn Miller, the BCALA meeting "gives ALA a message. We're not totally meeting the needs of everyone, nor can we."

Three years in the making, the first National Conference of African-American

librarians originated as the vision of Immediate Past President John Tyson, who saw an independent caucus meeting as a means to reach black librarians outside the ALA fold. Tyson got his wish, and then some. The deluge of conferees, which spilled over into two extra downtown hotels, included individuals who had never joined either ALA or BCALA, and those who happily confessed that this was their first national library conference. The only letdown was the cancellation of both pre-conferences due to insufficient registration.

What drew the capacity crowd was a collective sentiment implicit in the conference theme, "Culture Keepers: Enlightening and Empowering Our Communities": that African-American librarians need to draw professional strength from each other. Emphasizing the "importance of bringing together librarians from a common culture to solve the problems of a community unique in the U.S.," Tyson believes such focused meetings are a stepping-stone to approaching ALA "with the common voice of the ethnic caucuses. If anything will happen, it will happen through ALA."

Prominent ALAers were already taking note, much to the delight of the caucus. Among the attendees were President-elect Hardy Franklin, Immediate Past President Patricia Glass Schuman, Executive Board member Betty Blackman, 1993-94 ALA presidential candidate Sharon Hogan, and Marilyn Miller, who flew in from the IFLA meeting in New Delhi, India, to greet BCALA conferees (see p. 886).

Far more than any specialized ALA di-

vision meeting could be, BCALA's ambitious debut was a mini-ALA conference, both in scope and pace. Some 70 programs and 115 exhibits—all conveniently housed in the Ohio Convention Center attached to the main conference hotel—reflected every conceivable aspect of librarianship. Topics ranged from accessing medical information for minority populations to securing the future of historically black library schools. The breadth of subjects surprised even BCALA President Boyd, who admitted to astonishment at the number of responses organizers got to their call for papers. "People may have had things to say but felt they didn't have a forum [in ALA]," he speculated.

Exhibitors clearly sensed a forum at BCALA, too. "It's nice to be in a targeted show," Melissa Henderson of Chadwyck-Healey remarked. "People know why they're here." Sharing the aisles with familiar names such as Demco, OCLC, Baker & Taylor, Macmillan, and CLSI were African-American-interest small press publishers, booksellers, and video distributors that had never before exhibited at a library conference. Other first-timers proudly displayed African-American artwork, jewelry, Ghanaian cloth, and women's formal wear. One artist, Lavon Williams, designed the conference's logo of a storyteller holding a book (see cover photo).

Though traffic ebbed and flowed around peak programming hours, most exhibitors seemed pleased at the number of contacts they made, no doubt facilitated by



BCALA celebs (from left): Philadelphia official Augusta Clark; Alex Boyd with foreign-affairs lobbyist Randall Robinson; Mary Lenox giving a BCALA award to author Gloria Naylor; and E.J. Josey, U.S. Rep. Major Owens, Patricia Glass Schuman, and Stanton Biddle.

the three no-conflict time slots built into the schedule. "I hope ALA will take the hint," Exhibits Committee Co-Chair and Gaylord representative Jewel Harris said.

Conference organizers scored another coup with a Friday night Kuumba, or creativity, celebration of theater and African cuisine, for which many attendees donned African attire. Other noteworthy events included an informal breakfast-room "gathering place" where attendees could network; three "speakout" sessions that gave individuals the opportunity to share professional concerns with a BCALA executive board member; and an ecumenical Sunday morning service, complete with minister and choir.

The conference program was also replete with authors, illustrators, and filmmakers. A veritable who's who of African-American arts and letters, the list of 29 included Gloria Naylor, Eloise Greenfield, Walter Dean Myers, Leo and Diane Dillon, Tom Feelings, Eleanora E. Tate, and Clifford Taubert. Eager to mingle, the artists made themselves accessible at exhibit booths, conference programs, and an elegant Saturday night gala held in their honor at Columbus Metropolitan Library's impressive Main Library.

#### Enlightening the electorate

"I'm glad to see African-American librarians aren't an endangered species," U.S. Rep. Major Owens (D-N.Y.) told a sea of attentive faces at the opening session. Putting a decidedly global spin on the conference theme, Owens counseled attendees that their culture-keeper role put them "in a pivotal position to affect all people of African descent." He likened U.S. librarians' potential educational muscle to the political one the congressional black caucus had recently flexed to win U.S. food airlifts to starving Somalians.

Decrying an educational system that fails to "tell young people who they are,"

Owens challenged black librarians to make up for its deficiencies. "Find an Afrocentric way to promote self-worth" and liberate blacks from their relegation to the 300s as a social problem, he urged.

#### Games professionals play

Other programs were just as notable for their frank presentations. In fact, the grim reaction of conferees to a panel discussion by urban library directors of their management challenges prompted presenter Hardy Franklin to cajole, "Don't look so somber."

Admitting to being dubbed "the Queen of Grim" for her bottom-line style, Detroit Public Library Director Jean Curtis told of a multipronged strategic plan in the works to bolster DPL and inspire a staff disheartened by perennial budget crises and bad-news press about Detroit's disintegration. Recounting his experiences as District of Columbia Public Library director, Franklin described how a fiscal showdown he had with former mayor Marion Barry led to the formation of a powerful systemwide Friends advocacy group. Carla Hayden, chief librarian of financially fragile Chicago PL, recounted her ongoing efforts to jumpstart a notoriously sluggish delivery system with total quality management and open communication. Only Sam Morrison, director of economically unscathed Broward County (Fla.) Library, could speak of forging community partnerships not just for political expediency, but to further the library's educational mission.

At a focus session on forging partnerships with elected officials, Philadelphia Councilwoman Augusta Clark provided a political reality check. Blasting African Americans who detach themselves from politics, Clark, a former librarian, declared "there is a direct correlation between who you elect and who gets services, and even by what margin you elect them"; therefore, it is "no coincidence that good libraries are located in areas where there is a heavy voter turnout." Clark admonished, "goodness is its own reward in heaven. On earth you have to lobby."

Reactors amplified Clark's message. "Run for office," suggested Ohio state representative I. Ray Miller. "Invest to influence" because "politics is power and business is the mechanism," insisted Joshua I. Smith, CEO of the Maxima Corporation and an active supporter of President Bush. To ribbing about his politics from Democratic co-panelists, Smith good-



*Columbus Metropolitan Library's sumptuous Central Library was the perfect venue for BCALA's elegant reception.*

naturally retorted, "No coup ever happened from the outside."

"Recognize the political power of your board of trustees," advised William Gordon, director of Prince George's County (Md.) Memorial Library. Lobby to restore categorical aid for school libraries, ALA President Marilyn Miller urged, among

*Ever the networker, BCALA Immediate Past President John Tyson introduced teen librarians Evet Mouton (second from left) and Keia Johnson to ALA Pres. Marilyn Miller after the last session, saying "You should meet her; she's a library school dean."*





The Ghanaian cloth displayed by first-time library conference exhibitor LFS for Wonoo Ventures attracted an admiring crowd.

other specific action items. Even academic librarians must show interest in the Youth Omnibus bill, she insisted, because "those are our students tomorrow."

In other sessions, presenters discussed how librarians can best help African Americans access the information they need. Kathleen Bethel, African-American studies librarian at Northwestern Univer-

sity Library, called for an Afrocentric cataloging scheme for black-interest collections that places Africans at the center historically and philosophically, just as DDC and LC systems do for Europeans. The state librarians of Missouri, New Jersey, and Virginia shared ideas on how state libraries can enrich local services via resource sharing, grantsmanship training, and coalition building.

Louisiana Teen Library Association members Keia Manika Johnson and Evet Pecola Mouton explained their roles as classroom librarians. Offering her career as motivation, audience member Rebecca Bingham told how, after a similar introduction to library science, she eventually became director of library media services for Jefferson County (Ky.) Public Schools.

Other program topics included preservation of historically black college archives, breaking down employment barriers, censorship issues in selecting African-American literature, library automation, and recruitment to the profession.

The "pipeline into the profession" is a particular worry of BCALA President-elect Stanton Biddle, who mused that all the strides black librarians have achieved to

date "are for naught if no one is coming into the profession." Among the grim reminders of just how that pipeline had narrowed was Curley Jones's announcement at one session that he was the only black librarian working in Utah, and Missouri State Librarian Monteria Hightower's admission that her state employed only 16 African-American professionals in its public libraries.

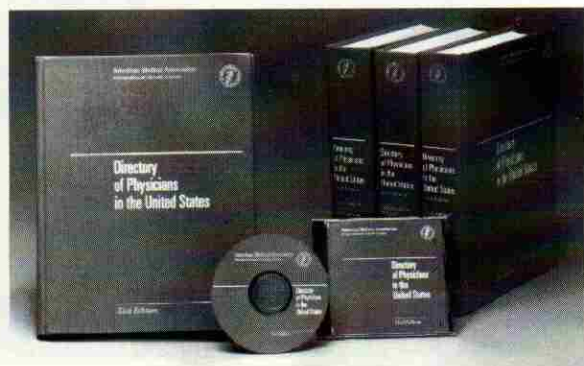
#### Full circle

No self-respecting conference celebrating librarians as culture keepers could neglect the professional pioneers who laid the groundwork. The caucus did that handily, with an intimate breakfast reunion for retired librarians. Among the speakers there was A.P. Marshall, who was celebrating his 78th birthday that day. Describing himself and E.J. Josey as "the bad boys of the Association" for continually insisting in the 1950s and 1960s that segregated state affiliates were indeed a library issue, Marshall told of being denied housing and meals at ALA's 1936 conference hotel in Richmond, Va., and having to ride the freight elevator to attend programs in the building.

At a luncheon forum on facilitating

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## BLACK CAUCUS

African-American involvement in ALA, panelists weighed how far black librarians had come. "You can take power. It's there for the taking," ALA Immediate Past President Patricia Glass Schuman said, encouraging ALA committee-member wannabes to write letters of application and "use the contacts you have" within BCALA.

"Pat, often times it just don't happen that way," Althea Jenkins, executive director of ALA's Association of College and Research Libraries, teased. Jenkins urged aspirants to make themselves known within the caucus, and BCALA to monitor ALA's minority recruitment efforts.

Respondents John Tyson and Charles Brown offered proof that networking and hard work can pay off. Tyson announced that, thanks to a recommendation from an ALA colleague, he had just won a Ford Foundation grant to assist five black universities in South Africa, and Brown credited "being a worker bee" with his recent Public Library Association presidency. Characterizing himself as "more radical," Alex Boyd served ALA notice that BCALA and other minority caucuses "want to broaden our vision."



*Program Chair Satia Marshall Orange (right) got "a special treat" out of having her parents, retired librarians Ruthe and A.P. Marshall, attend BCALA's conference debut.*

With missionary zeal, closing keynoter Randall Robinson, executive director of the American lobbying group TransAfrica, argued that African Americans can no longer afford to think of themselves as "disconnected from the fountainhead" of Africa. Contending that black Americans "cannot afford to be supplicants anymore," Robinson asserted that information is the key to forging mutually beneficial alliances throughout the African world. An early advocate of sanctions against South

Africa, Robinson announced TransAfrica would soon open the Arthur Ashe Library for Foreign Policy in Washington, D.C., as part of its educational mission.

Even before the conference convened, enthused participants were speculating about BCALA's next meeting. To everyone's delight, an emotional Alex Boyd ("this isn't an ending but a departure point") closed BCALA's historic gathering with a welcome announcement: Milwaukee, Labor Day weekend, 1994. □

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