

NEWS

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African-American Librarians Meet as "Culture Keepers"

Almost a thousand African-American librarians met in Columbus, Ohio, over the Labor Day weekend for the first conference held by the Black Caucus of the American Library Association. The Black Caucus, founded in 1970 but only recently an official affiliate of ALA, held a series of meetings and programs September 4-6 both very like and very different from a standard professional conference.

In keeping with its theme, "Culture Keepers, Enlightening and Empowering Our Communities," the range of presentations was broad: programming for children and the Internet; recruitment and cultural diversity; image and political savvy. But the tone of the conference also carried an almost religious edge. Participants, many of whom clearly knew each other, were enthusiastic and delighted to be there. The name of God was invoked far more often than is usual at such an event. Audiences were comfortable with a kind of call-and-response relationship with speakers that did not resemble the standard I-talk-you-listen format of conference programs. Sessions

tended to be small, from 30-50 in larger meetings, less than a dozen in some of the smaller ones. The presenters tended to accentuate progress in race relations, but the question and answer periods produced exchanges on how far there is still to go for true equality—nationally and professionally.

Rep. Major Owens (D-NY) gave the keynote address. While his message was wrapped in a standard stump speech, he highlighted some crucial points. "Multicultural education will not solve all our problems, but to leave that out invites disaster," he told his audience, "Enlightenment and empowerment go together." In a pointed reference to the Presidential race, Owens stated, "Our economy is in trouble, and we're going to get revenge."

He closed with a plea for rap music. "Make that connection with the living culture from the street." Owens reminded listeners how jazz was feared and denigrated when it first appeared, and now is an international and vital musical language. He expects the same of rap.

A luncheon attended by about 250 conference goers examined the history of African Americans in the American Library Association. Immediate past president Patricia Glass Schuman was widely praised for her advocacy of diversity within both ALA staff and committees, and for her work in facilitating the affiliation of the Black Caucus with ALA. Schuman described ALA as needing a "cultural transplant," and urged her audience to participate. Her quick head count revealed that about one third of those present already serve on ALA committees.

A graceful tribute to E.J. Josey, one of the founders of the Black Caucus, was offered by John Tyson, state librarian of Virginia and immediate past president of the Black Caucus. Tyson leaves soon for South Africa on a Ford Foundation grant.

In the same program, Josey gave a

brief history of blacks in ALA ending with, "We are going to be involved—whether they want us or not!" Speaker Estelle Black, assistant director of Rockford (IL) Public Library urged participants to "find a mentor!" Alex Boyd, current Black Caucus president and director of Newark Public Library (NJ), called for "fresh blood" and "new vision." Bring pressure to ALA, he asserted. Remind them, "We are here."

There was anger and impatience

Overheard at the the National Conference of African-American Librarians

A local Baptist minister prayed "that we do not weary of well-doing."

"The success of a conference can be measured when the women say, 'I am going out to buy a new outfit.'"

—ALA President Elect Hardy Franklin

"It just touches you right here (hand on heart) when you see those kindergartners in the library."

—Keia Johnson, Louisiana Teenage Librarians Association

"The purpose of art is to make order out of chaos—and that includes telling all of the truth. Children can take it better than adults."

—Artist/Illustrator Tom Feelings

"Systems are the same; it's people who make the difference."

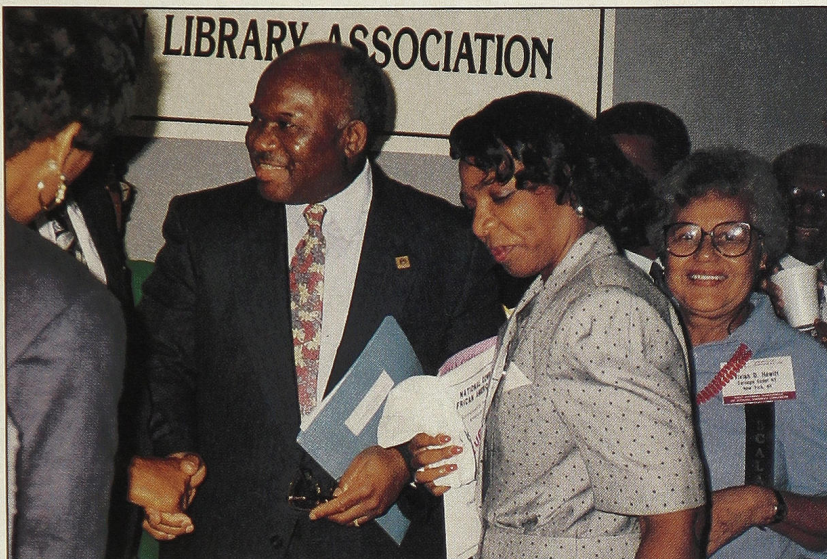
—Member of the audience in session on African-Americans and library schools.

"For once, we are all together. For once, we are not a minority."

—Ben Igwe, Frances Gregory Regional Library, Washington, DC

IN SLJ NEWS

International School Librarians Conference in Belfast	14
Miami-Dade Library after Hurricane Andrew	18
Libraries & Head Start in New Partnership	18
State Board Threatens NH School Libraries	20
Focus on Programs	20
Test Scores Drop in Schools Managed by Boston Univ.	22
Resource Update	24
News in Brief	25
Awards & People	26



Congressional Representative Major Owens (D-NY), who gave the keynote address at the Black Caucus conference, greets well-wishers.

that after so much time, ALA is not so diverse as it might be, in everything from committee appointments to members of Council. The state of the economy was a constant bitter note. But the emphasis was definitely on what had been accomplished, and the overall spirit was joyous.

Evet Mouton and Keia Johnson of Patterson (LA) High School are members of the Louisiana Teenage Librarians Association, an affiliate of the Louisiana Association of School Librarians. These poised and beguiling young women gave a tandem presentation and fielded questions from the audience on what they had learned from their mentor, Golda Jordan, Patterson librarian. "A good teacher makes good students," Keia Johnson explained. "Ms. Jordan makes us work from bell to bell," but they praised her use of library skills to teach discipline and responsibility.

Pauletta Bracy (North Carolina Central University SLIS, Durham) led a multifaceted discussion on censorship and stereotyping in literature for children. Lively argument centered on the question, "What makes a stereotype?" Context is critical, many argued. Bracy's final comment: "What you have to do is balance your pickiness."

Olivia Rusher, media specialist from the Cleveland (OH) public schools, talked about teaching dialect poetry as a key to teaching poetry in general. She uses the work of Paul Dunbar and tapes by such writers as Margaret Walker Alexander to introduce students to cadence, language variants, and rhythm in poetry.

A session on African-Americans in library schools, led by William D.

Cunningham of University of Maryland LIS, College Park, brought a reminder that "everything is political," as one participant said. One black administrator reminded his audience that "We do not see the situation the way the white administrator does," stressing that his concerns for diversity in his staff have a deeply personal base.

Artist Tom Feelings talked with great passion about the place and function of art: "If everybody tells their own story, we'll get the whole story . . . Black people can take it—as long as you sing it to them beautifully." He showed powerful illustrations from his forthcoming wordless picture book for adults depicting the history of American slavery, called *The Middle Passage*.

Frances Bradburn, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, gave an impassioned presenta-

tion on AIDS material for children and teenagers. "No one ever died of information," she announced. "Kids die from ignorance." She believes librarians are in the best position to disseminate information "to keep kids safe." "Librarians have an obligation to change the atmosphere," she asserted. Girls need to feel valued, she said, and to insist on being protected if they are going to be sexually active. Boys, on the other hand, need to learn that they are not invulnerable, and that AIDS can happen to them. "We need to save *all* our kids," she emphasized.

ALA President Marilyn Miller, who completed a marathon 42-hour trip from India in order to be present at the last session, praised the diversity she found in Delhi for the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and that she saw reflected in the conference participants before her. Robert Wedgeworth, the African American president of IFLA, sent greetings via videotape.

The librarians present came from all types of libraries—public, school, academic, corporate, and special. While the average age was probably about 40, there was a sprinkling of younger librarians and students, as well as some retirees.

A large number of participants accepted the invitation in the conference program to attend in native dress. Both men and women appeared at parties and programs in African-style cut and cloth. The 115 vendors at the exhibits included some who specialized in African-inspired clothing and jewelry. A tentative date and location for the next conference of the Black Caucus of ALA was set for two years hence in Milwaukee, WI. Many of those who attended seemed eager for another.—G.A.D. ■



Hardy Franklin, ALA president-elect (center), with School Librarian Golda Jordan (l.) Keia Johnson, and Evet Mouton. Johnson and Mouton are members of the Louisiana Teenage Librarians Association; Jordan is their mentor.