

First Joint Conference of Librarians of Color

Historic Gathering Draws Hundreds to Dallas

The seed was planted in 1998 and blossomed into what Steering Committee Co-Chair Kenneth A. Yamashita, division manager at the Stockton–San Joaquin County (Calif.) Public Library, described as “the Emerald City at the end of a multicolored brick road.” The end result: 1,134 librarians and exhibitors, including many library directors and their staff members as well as American Library Association leaders, who gathered October 12–15 in Dallas for the first Joint Conference of Librarians of Color (JCLC), which carried the theme “Gathering at the Waters: Embracing Our Spirits, Telling Our Stories.”

ALA’s five ethnic affiliates—the American Indian Library Association; the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association; the Black Caucus of the American Library Association; the Chinese American Librarians Association; and Reforma, the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking—sponsored the event with support from the Association’s Office for Literacy

and Outreach Services.

“It was a challenging process,” noted Steering Committee Co-Chair Gladys Smiley Bell, director of Hampton (Va.) University’s Harvey Library. Each caucus started the financial ball rolling by contributing \$2,000 apiece in seed money. Major financial support came from the National Library of Medicine, ALA Executive Director Keith Michael Fiels, Demco, the Urban Libraries Council, former ALA presidents Betty J. Turock and Michael Gorman, and Samuel Morrison, retired head of the Broward County (Fla.) Library System.

“This gathering is so crazy wonderful,” said author Bertice Berry (*When Love Calls, You Better Answer*, Random House, 2005) during the Adult Author Luncheon, which also featured Cuban–Puerto Rican writer Mayra Montero (*Son de Almendra/Dancing to Almendra*, Holtzbrinck, 2005). “I can’t believe it took this long for ya’ll to get together,” Berry quipped, adding, “This conference is one of the most powerful conferences that is convening in the world right now.”

A news conference and program focused on the ALA-sponsored first national study of gender, race, and age in the library profession (see p. 4). “The goal of this study,” according to Fiels, “was to gather information which we [ALA] can use to help library schools, libraries, and funding agencies to make the best decisions going forward to improve diversity in all its forms.”

Program sessions, geared to librarians of color as well as others who serve multicultural populations in all types of libraries, covered such topics as “Black Books—Not Just for Black Children”; “The Lines of Color Aren’t Always Clear”; “My Posse Don’t Do Harry Potter”; “Feathers, Headdresses, and Tomahawks: The Portrayal of Native Americans in Literature for Children”; and “After 9/11: Latino and Asian Immigrants and the Public Library.”

ALA Executive Director Fiels invited attendees to an intimate setting in what he called his “living room” as moderator of the Plenary Session of ALA Presidents on the topic of successes and challenges in addressing diversity issues. The panel included



Keynote speakers address various events (from left): Loung Ung, Juan Williams, and Janis F. Kearney.

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current President Leslie Burger, Vice-President/President-Elect Lorlene Roy and past presidents Carla Hayden and Carol Brey-Casiano.

Hayden, the third person of color to serve as president in the Association's 120-year history, said, "The goal posts were sometimes moved" in addressing her yearlong theme of "Equity of Access." "There were moments when I felt anger and there were moments when I had to step back and take the balcony view," she explained. Hayden went on to say that introducing the idea of Spectrum, the Association's scholarship program for minority library school students, wasn't easy. "There were times that we got nasty notes, nasty looks, and even nasty mail about why we were doing this."

Roy, the first Native person elected to the presidency, told the audience that she has been criticized for both talking too much and not talking enough about her culture. "I can say that I'm the first, but I won't be the only. I'm used to being, like most Native people, the only one in the room."

Keynote speakers also included Loung Ung, author of the bestselling memoir *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (HarperCollins, 2000). "Before I could speak English, I started to read books," Ung said. She told the Opening General Session audience that she once received a certificate from her school librarian for checking out the most books. "I believe that books are a map of the human heart. They have the power to heal the hurt, change and save lives."

The Children's Author Luncheon featured Cynthia Leitich Smith (*Indian Shoes*, HarperCollins, 2002), who said that as an American Indian child from an Indian American neighborhood, she longed for Native American heroes. She shared the podium with Lisa Yee (*Stanford Wong Flunks Big-Time*, Arthur A. Levine, 2005). "There is an advantage to writing about your surroundings and who you are," Yee explained, while she expressed the need for more youth titles that showcase varied characters and backgrounds.



Steering Committee members join co-chairs Kenneth A. Yamashita and Gladys Smiley Bell (with scissors) as they cut the ribbon at exhibit hall opening. From left: Lorlene Roy, Liana Zhou, Victor L. Shill, Ganga Dakshinamurti, Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin, and John Ayala.

National Public Radio's Juan Williams said that as a child in Brooklyn, New York, the main library was home. "Librarians of all colors really invested in me as a child to make me a reader," he recalled. Williams discussed his new book *Enough: The Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements, and Culture of Failure That Are Undermining Black America—and What We Can Do About It* (Random House, 2006), which he said "speaks to where the civil rights movement needs to go in the 21st century." He added that the movement "in so many ways is represented by your success in coming together across lines of racial divide to represent the idea and power of libraries in the minority community in America today."

There was no shortage of entertainment, beginning with a multicultural opening reception at Dallas Public Library that featured an array of food and music on three levels. Three individuals from each caucus were presented with author, distinguished service, and advocacy awards at the Awards Reception.

Authors Tim Tingle (*Walking the Choctaw Road*, Cinco Puntos Press, 2003), and Janis F. Kearney (*Conversations: William Jefferson Clinton, From Hope to Harlem* (Writing Our World Press, 2006) served as Closing General Session speakers—both addressing the importance of oral histories and sharing stories. Tingle urged librarians "to begin to select the people in your community who can follow in your footsteps. If we

are really to have power, we need to get working-class people into the library," citing the story of his elderly mother who reads constantly but gets her books from Wal-Mart because "the people are friendlier to me than at the library."

As for the next JCLC, Yamashita all but guaranteed a second event, to be held on dates yet to be determined. —P.A.G.

Stand Up and Sit Down

Stand Up and Sit Down,

We have never done this before. We hear the voice of your spirit.

Open your mouth. Speak for yourself. Tell your own story.

We are the voice of the nation. We will speak for those who cannot, who will not.

Let your heart lead the way. Speak from the depths of your being.

Embrace humility and courage in the face of challenges.

You were chosen for this moment, equipped for battle.

Look into the eyes of our children. See the reflections of grandmother and grandfather.

Fresh winds are blowing. Fresh waters are flowing. It is the dawning of a new day.

In the power of light, in the power of love and unity,

Stand Up and Sit Down.

Written for and presented at JCLC 2006 by Naomi R. Caldwell, Ramapough Lenape, recipient of the American Indian Library Association Advocacy Award and a JCLC scholarship winner.