

“LIBRARIES ARE A VERY RADICAL IDEA, YOU KNOW:”

Observations from ALA Past President, Patricia Glass Schuman

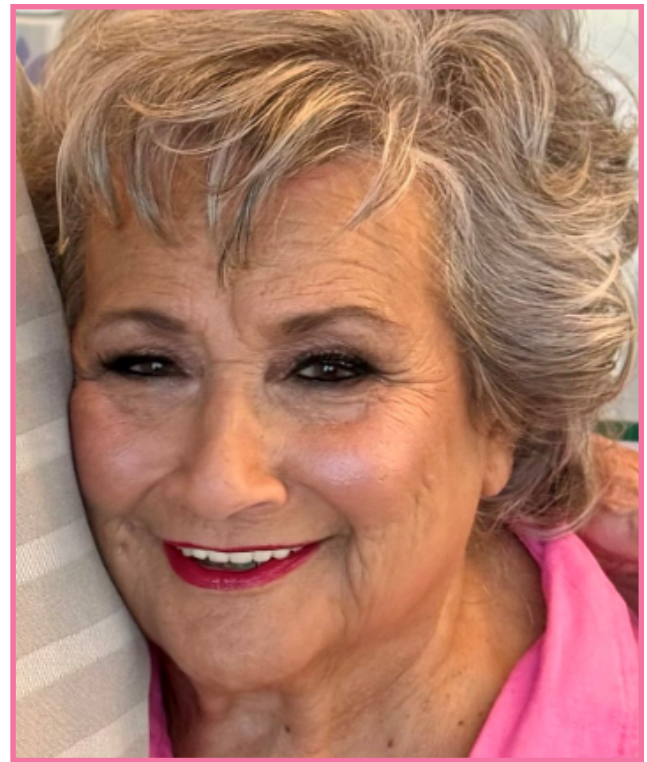
Interviewed by Mary Daniels, Editor-in-Chief of Florida Libraries Journal and Collection Services Librarian at Maitland Public Library

It was suggested to me by a former professor and current colleague of mine, Dr. Kathleen de la Peña McCook (Distinguished Professor at University of South Florida, School of Information) that I might be able to reach out and interview Patricia Glass Schuman, former American Library Association (ALA) President, who is currently a Florida resident. How could I pass up such an opportunity?

Pat Schuman was the President of ALA in 1991-1992, and during that time focused on the public's Right to Know on topics including library funding cuts, censorship, and restricted access to government information. She was the first female Treasurer of the ALA. Additionally, she was among the founders of the ALA's Social Responsibilities Roundtable, including the ALA's Feminist Task Force, as well as the ALA's "Library Advocacy Now!" effort. Her years of experience give her the unique perspective to see how things have changed in the last thirty years, and how, frighteningly, things have stayed the same.

Her wisdom and insight on the importance of advocacy for public libraries, from every level of support, is reassuring in the face of challenges libraries and library workers are facing both state and nationwide. May all of us learn from her experiences, and take away the hope, inspiration, and fire to continue the good work we do.

(To give Pat's responses a more narrative flow, I'll present the questions I asked first, followed by her thoughts and answers.)



Patricia Glass Schuman

How does what's happening in libraries today compare to issues you faced as ALA President in the 90s? What advice can you give library workers who are facing criticism and censorship efforts? What was your major takeaway from your time as ALA President? And if you could share any piece of advice with library workers or librarians, what would it be?

PGS: Sadly, what is happening across the country's libraries today is not all that different than some of the problems we faced in the 90s when I was ALA President.

I had an interesting call from a California reporter the other day. He was covering the Huntington Beach Public Library. Their board was voting on whether or not to solicit a bid to privatize the library. This reporter ran across an article I had written in 1998 — almost a quarter century ago — about the privatization of public libraries. Shockingly this issue is alive and kicking. And the public's right to know is still under attack. Attempts at censorship are happening across the country — more books are being challenged than ever before.



“Libraries are a very radical idea, you know”

Library censorship is frightening. When I was an ALA president (1991-1992), children's access to the Internet faced heavy challenges. It's fascinating to me that people have now gone back to focusing on books. I guess they're easier to challenge. Attempting to restrict the Internet is a much messier proposition.

[While] The library community does not have “megabucks,” what we do have is public support. Our task is to mobilize library advocates to speak out loudly, clearly, and with a unified voice. To turn dedicated library users into active allies, to reach out and tap our great well of support. If libraries and librarians are to win in the public and legislative arenas, we need many more active and articulate advocates.

We founded the Feminist Task Force in the 70s because although women made up over eighty percent of library workers, men held ninety percent of the director positions. And women's salaries for comparable work were still less. It was wonderful to band together to talk about the issues — and to encourage important looks at history, current practices, and future needs.

We used to think that libraries were not political, but we know better today. In the 90s we started the Library Advocacy Now initiative. We trained thousands of librarians and supporters across the country. Our library advocacy campaigns resulted in record-high (though not high enough) federal funding, the establishment of the e-rate, and a new Institute of Museum and Library Services. Advocacy helped to hold the line on Fair Use for libraries and educators in the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. Libraries were designated universal services providers for electronic information by Congress.

Libraries are a very radical idea, you know — the distribution of information to everyone regardless of income, sex, class, or race. It's the one educational institution that's open to everyone. I think that the role of libraries and librarians will be very much the same. Technology is changing our methods and the way we look at things — we're shifting from equal ownership of information to equal access to information. Technology offers us broad ways to access information for people, but it also has a real potential for limiting information if we're not careful. The library is the one agency that is really dedicated to safeguarding the public's right to know.

Libraries have long been considered information gatekeepers, but librarians actually provide information gateways. Librarianship is the one profession dedicated to keeping information affordable, accessible, and available for all people. The very existence of libraries stands in defense of the First Amendment, in defense of equality, in defense of America's right to know.

Successful advocacy means that we must use our personal power individually and collectively, because we have learned that library advocacy — locally, statewide, and nationally — works! That's where library leadership, vision, and advocacy come in. We have here, right now, what comic book character Pogo would call an “insurmountable opportunity,” an opportunity to ensure that the promise of the information age is fulfilled for all Americans. People like us, people who know the value of libraries, must be leaders who fight for libraries.



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