

On My Mind

Support the Cultural Communities Fund

by **Barbara Immroth**

When then-ALA President Carol Brey-Casiano appointed me to the newly established ALA Public and Cultural Programs Advisory Committee, I quickly learned about the many nationwide programs and exhibits available to libraries through the ALA Public Programs Office (PPO). These programs have been used by an estimated 10 million participants since 1990. It was obvious that libraries love to use PPO programs and exhibits to build community in their service areas.

Looking at these offerings from a youth services perspective, I realized that libraries have been holding programs and exhibits for over 100 years. Children flock to story hours, author programs, music and drama groups, creative writing workshops, puppet shows, and art exhibits. I knew that programs were so eagerly attended that sometimes tickets had to be given out for crowd-control purposes. Libraries can target Head Start centers or teen computer users, and can highlight the cultures in the community with their collections in many languages, programming, outreach, performing arts, and exhibits.

Adults also have shared book discussions and exhibits in their local libraries for years and years. Some of us have great-grandparents who helped establish a local library as a cultural center for their community or who benefited from library programs as they integrated into the culture of their new homeland. In the 1980s, ALA perceived the popularity of these activities and began offering grants to libraries for a variety of

programs and exhibits.

Libraries can use the models developed by ALA to offer high-quality local programs. For example, "Let's Talk About It," a reading and book-discussion model developed by ALA, focuses on reading a book or book series chosen by a nationally known expert and discussing it in the context of a larger theme. This approach has proven to be a superb way to engage readers with books and issues.

Over the last 20-plus years it has been adopted and adapted by hundreds of libraries throughout the country. In its most recent incarnation, "Let's Talk About It" focuses on Jewish literature; this book-discussion grant has been awarded to about 100 libraries to date.

ALA has an equally successful track record of stimulating libraries to offer exhibits. Current offerings include "Frankenstein: Penetrating the Secrets of Nature," "Forever Free: Abraham Lincoln's Journey to Emancipation" (see p. 8), and "Alexander Hamilton: The Man Who Made Modern America." To receive regular updates about these and other grant opportunities, you can subscribe to the PPO electronic discussion list by visiting their website at www.ala.org/publicprograms/. PPO programming opportunities are open to public, academic, school, and special libraries.

Getting grants to give grants

I wondered how a member organization supported by dues from librarians could afford to give grants for book discussions and exhibits. To date, these efforts have been possible because staff have been persuasive and persistent in getting larger grants from such groups as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, and

even private foundations such as the Wallace Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. PPO currently receives only about 10% of its \$1-million budget from ALA; the remainder of its work is supported by grants from outside funders.

These efforts will continue, but to give this approach stability ALA has established its own endowment to support programming in libraries across America. This endowment,

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called the Cultural Communities Fund, was immediately recognized for its merit and awarded a

challenge grant from the NEH (AL, May, p. 7). The first endowment of its kind, the Cultural Communities Fund will help libraries nationwide establish community programs in the arts and humanities, and develop and host civic-discussion series.

Under the terms of the NEH matching grant, ALA must raise a total of \$1.05 million by July 31, 2007. There are also annual fundraising goals, and if they are not achieved, a portion of the matching funds will be lost. The most urgent goal is to raise \$300,000 by September 15; as of mid-August, \$110,000 had been raised.

If you and your community love library programs and exhibits, please keep this type of programming available in libraries around the country. Your contribution to the Cultural Communities Fund will be a lasting testimonial to your belief in libraries and especially their importance as places where people come together to learn and share ideas.

Visit www.ala.org/ccf/ and make your contribution today. Join the growing number of donors supporting this important initiative, and help libraries fulfill the essential function of bringing communities together through cultural programming. ❖

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