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A Conversation with Incoming ALA President, Maureen Sullivan

Leo S. Lo

Two years ago, Maureen Sullivan spoke to a group of one hundred eager and ambitious new library professionals in Boston. She talked to them about the key principles of effective leadership and gently introduced them to the enormous and often intimidating organization otherwise known as the American Library Association (ALA). The venue was the 2010 ALA Midwinter Conference, and the occasion was the ALA Emerging Leaders workshop. I was one of the attendees.

About a year into my first professional librarian job, I was sponsored by LLAMA to attend the 2010 Emerging Leaders program. It was my first involvement with LLAMA. The day was intense, with an overwhelming amount of information to absorb. With Maureen imparting her knowledge to us, I felt that I had all these questions that I wanted to ask her. I wanted to seek her advice on how to make an impact on my new profession. I wanted to ask her about her professional journey, hoping that I might perhaps find some parallels with my path, and thus gain some optimism for my own career. Except I, being a novice and a bit nervous, couldn't combine these broad and abstract notions into an insightful question. In the end, I didn't ask her anything.

Two years later, Maureen is now ALA President-Elect and she has a great opportunity to make a significant impact on the profession. I am now serving on the LLAMA Board of Directors as the association's very first New Leaders Representative - a position designed to provide LLAMA leadership with a new professional's perspective. Having some professional organization and leadership experience under my belt, and with Maureen's exciting year ahead, this is now a great time to ask those questions that I wanted to ask her two years ago.

"I'd really like to talk to you about your LLAMA experience, and some of the things you did with the association," I said at the beginning of our phone conversation. "That was a long time ago,"

she laughed. "I may have to look at my old notes." Maureen first became interested in LLAMA when she was working at University of Maryland Libraries, as the Assistant Personnel Librarian. A colleague was active in the then Personnel Administration Section of the association. Maureen simply attended committee meetings and found one that interested her. "Just volunteer to help," Maureen advised people who want to get on committees. Maureen would later chair the section and then became the president of LLAMA in 1989.

Maureen cited "an effective board" that she got to work with as a major positive during her LLAMA presidency. She noted that it was a wonderful organization to network and form relationships with colleagues of different types of libraries. Since her time, she has noticed that people involved with LLAMA see the organization as a whole, rather than the separate sections or divisions. She was also pleased to see that more people who are not in management positions getting involved in LLAMA. We want more leaders "at the point of opportunity of need". Maureen explained that "because of the complexity of work and continuous changes, it calls for much more exercise of initiative and creativity". Leaders in an organization should not be just those in management positions. We want "leadership by opportunity taken, as well as leadership of position you hold".

"How do you see the new generation of leaders? What kind of qualities should they possess?" I inquired. "Emotional intelligence," Maureen answered quickly. "The ability to be aware of your own emotions, and of others' emotions is key to managing one's self and others." For example, "someone with a high emotional intelligence can deal with conflict and disagreement effectively, while recognizing their value. We want deep learning". But how do we develop a high emotional intelligence? "Leadership development must begin early. At the MLIS level," Maureen replied. "The best way is to go through and identify your strengths, and then further develop them."

Following an increasingly long line of LLAMA past-presidents who run for ALA presidency, Maureen will be the President of ALA after the 2012 Annual Conference. I asked her about her plans for the year. She was very excited to talk about the civic engagement initiative. The concept is for libraries to take on a greater role in their communities. Maureen believes that the library is the central facility of a community, and librarians are skillful in getting relevant information. They are trusted by the community, and they support all kinds of literacies. As the community anchor, the library is best positioned to be the convener of community conversations and collaboration to address the community's issues, needs and problems. During her presidency, ALA will partner with the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation to develop a strategy that libraries can employ in their communities to do this work.

Another initiative that Maureen is working on is a new ALA-wide leadership development program. The target participants are librarians in all types of libraries who have been in the profession for three to five years. It seems like a very natural next step for ALA Emerging Leaders and many our aspiring LLAMA members. The program is anticipated to be four to five days of immersion to increase their knowledge of effective leadership practices and to prepare them to strengthen their leadership abilities. This program will build upon the many leadership development program and activities already offered by the divisions and chapters.

As a well-known organizational development consultant, Maureen has helped many library leaders with their strategic planning. Naturally, she sees the need to take a close look at the present ALA working structure to see if it is the best system for its members. “Can we improve it?” Maureen wants to find out. Retaining members is a concern for the association, and there are financial challenges. She realizes that it is an ambitious task, and it is important to engage the board, ALA Council, members and ALA units on this matter.

Finally, Maureen would like to see ALA strengthen its international effort. “Everything is increasingly global,” she said. “Cultural differences are a spark for innovation. We can learn from each other.” She plans to work with the Sister Libraries program. “Libraries are well positioned to help people in a global community and to solve problems,” she added.

It was both inspiring and aspiring to speak with someone who has such drive to make a difference. After the conversation, I reflected back to how I began my own involvement in professional associations. I thought about my Emerging Leaders program. I thought about my role in LLAMA. For someone relatively new in the library profession, it is almost unimaginable to even think about leading a huge organization such as ALA or LLAMA. However, when I look at Maureen’s career progression, it makes sense. She was once someone who just wanted to volunteer for a LLAMA committee. Instead of looking for parallels in each specific of her career steps to boost my own hope, now I see the drive and passion as the commonality that a highly accomplished person such as Maureen Sullivan shares with the new generation of leaders, including many of my Emerging Leaders colleagues. With that thought, my conversation with Maureen Sullivan answers that abstract question that I could not formulate two years ago.

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