Annual Report – Conference Committee

Completed 11/23/20 by Philip Shackelford, Conference Chair

The choice of "Charting New Waters" for this year's conference theme remains particularly appropriate as I begin this column, one month to the day since our very first virtual conference came to a close. When President Crystal Gates decided on this uncannily prescient theme, the world had little inkling of the upheaval and tragedy that would come to characterize this past year. Instead, she and the rest of us understood "new waters" to represent the future of this association, the importance of decisions to be made, and the compelling task that remained ahead of us to continue building upon ArLA's progress in the journey to become a more stable, responsible, and sustainable organization.

Now, coming to the end of the year 2020, we have all come to understand this theme as representing so much more. Yes – ArLA continues to grow and strengthen, and notable achievements such as important bylaws revisions and the overhaul of the ArLA handbook stand as examples of the crucial and valuable work being completed to make sure we continue in our mission to serve the needs of all Arkansas library personnel. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, and all that accompanied it, "Charting New Waters" also came to mean navigating the unprecedented new challenges that Arkansas libraries faced as quarantines grew into lockdowns and so on. Back in April, the Board realized that our traditional in-person conference would not be possible, and accordingly, the Conference Committee "pivoted" to begin planning ArLA's first ever virtual conference.

So much should and has been said in praise of the Conference Committee's hard work and dedication to making #ArLA2020 a reality. Please join me in recognizing and celebrating the hard work and dedication that Amy McGohan, Becky Fisher, Britt Anne Murphy, Carol Coffey, David Eckert, Jessica Riedmueller, Lynn Valetutti, Mindy Farley, Nithin Lakshmana, Rebecka Virden, Richard Theilig, Ron Russ, and Susie Kirk brought to the table! Without them and their selfless work on all aspects of the conference, we would not have been able to bring you a conference this year, virtual or otherwise. Well done!

To kick things off, President Crystal Gates provided an inspirational presidential address. She spoke of the incredible job that Arkansas library personnel have been doing for their communities this past year, and she encouraged us all to take this opportunity to truly notice – pay attention to our co-workers, change our perspectives, and find the purpose in the things we already do. Passion and joy were persistent refrains throughout as she encouraged us to notice what brings us joy in the work that we do, and to help those around us find their passions.

Two preconference sessions followed that afternoon – a session on professional service from Crystal Gates, Jil'Lana Heard, Jennifer Wann, and Lacy Wolfe, as well as an overview of the new ALA Libraries Transform Communities Engagement Grant program (http://www.ala.org/tools/programming/LTCEG). These sessions, plus an informal networking hangout and ArLA's first ever virtual trivia night, wrapped up a fantastic first day of the conference!

The conference program over the next two days was filled with a variety of valuable sessions, led by fantastic library folks from all around the state! One of the great things about hosting a virtual conference this year is that the conference sessions were recorded, and remain available for those who registered for the conference to watch again or catch up on a session that they may have missed. Some standout sessions for me included "Online and Ready to Help: Three Libraries, Three Realities" led by Shawna Thorup, Nithin Lakshmana, Tina Bradley, and Ron Russ; "Creating a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan for Your Library" by Leah Frieden; "Libraries Will Save the World! Implementing Sustainability at Your Library" from April Griffith, and "New Life for Old Books," by Susan Baxley and Lauri Wilson. You can find all these sessions and the rest via the conference portal from Amigos.

Of course – one of my very favorite aspects of the conference each year is the awards ceremony – the special time that we set aside to recognize and celebrate the hard work that our dedicated and talented library personnel around the state do each and every day. We are privileged to have such talented and dedicated individuals working in our Arkansas libraries. The Awards Committee was blessed to have such a robust and illustrious slate of nominations to consider this year, and I would like to encourage everyone, always, to consider nominating your colleagues and co-workers to receive these awards. These awards are a way that we have, as an association and as a profession, to recognize the achievements and dedication and leadership that our colleagues bring to their jobs every single day. Libraries in Arkansas are alive and well, dynamic institutions, and that is due to the singular commitment and selflessness displayed by our Arkansas library personnel. Be sure to check out the more detailed celebration of this year's award recipients here in the journal!

Finally, through the ArLA Virtual Scholarship Basket Auction (another first!) over a thousand dollars was raised for the ArLA scholarship! This year's scholarship recipient was Elizabeth Hurtado of the Springdale Public Library. Auction participants had the opportunity to view and bid on a wide variety of items and gift baskets submitted by both individuals and libraries around the state, place their bids in real time via Zoom, and have their prizes hand delivered by Britt Anne Murphy and Lynn Valetutti!

All told, this was a year of many firsts, and I believe that this experience was a valuable one for the association in preparing us for whatever the future may hold, as well as giving us a framework to consider how we might be able to offer additional professional development and support to our members beyond the annual conference itself. I could not be prouder of the Conference Committee and the work that they did, "charting new waters" along with every library staff member across the state this year. It was an unpredictable journey, but we made it, and I believe we are in good shape to continue learning and planning for the future.