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A Commitment to Human Rights Let's Honor the Qualities Required of a Librarian Dedicated to Human Rights

Katharine J. Phenix

Kathleen de la Peña McCook
University of South Florida, kmccook@usf.edu

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A Commitment to Human Rights

Let's Honor the Qualities Required of a Librarian Dedicated to Human Rights

Katharine J. Phenix
Kathleen de la Peña McCook

Introduction

The two of us have been writing partners for many years. It began with our support for the Equal Rights Amendment in solidarity with the Illinois Women Library Workers in the early 1980s. We marched at the state capitol and we brought original copies of Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party's *Equal Rights* to hunger strikers; we sat in on protests; we developed research papers with data to use in political debate and more recently, we are studying the innate (integrated, essential, core) values of librarianship and their connection to human rights (McCook and Phenix 2007; Phenix and McCook 2005).

We have spent many hours thinking, talking and writing each other about how library workers can make a difference beyond our daily work. What we decided to do as our contribution to this important issue of ISC is to provide a list of some of the librarians in the United States who as political actors in our times provide examples of a commitment to equality, the right to know or social justice. In some cases if the individual has received an award we use that as an indicator to lay down a marker that brings their actions to attention.

Our list changed as we expanded our research into human rights and libraries. Some days we wanted to include the writers and the researchers: Anita Schiller for groundbreaking work on unequal treatment of women in librarianship; Eric Moon for many reasons, but at the very least for his editorial "Silent Subject" on civil rights in 1960; John Berry for his focus on unions, ethics, responsibilities of library workers; Mark Rosensweig for, among many other thoughtful commentaries, his composition of the ALA Resolution Against the Use of Torture as a Violation of Our Basic Values as Librarians (ALA SRRT 2004).

We also note that there are, and have been, many librarians who develop gardens of literacy in weedy neighborhoods; who bring bibliotherapy to wounded populations; who provide access to the world of published ideas where before there was no track or trail. We salute them, but excluded most of them from the list because a hero risks something personal in the passionate work of a higher cause. For now, we offer this rough, bibliographic map to some of the political actors in U.S. libraries because they are people who have been brave, committed, and daring in their library work and writings.

The Heroes

Note: Citations in parenthesis provide documentation source.

1924. **Agnes Inglis** collected and organized the Labadie Collection of labor and anarchist materials at the University of Michigan (Herrada and Hyry, 1999).

1935. **Lucy Randolph Mason and Hilda Hulbert**, librarians at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee could not help seeing the connections between libraries, information, and social justice. Hulbert, who was shot in the ankle while walking with striking textile workers, wrote these words to the Southern Field Director of ALA

"Crying for education and information and contact with the great army of workers in the same situation, the southern worker needs books as never before, and this is a great challenge to me" (Loveland 1998).

1937-1939. **Philip Keeney**. Founder of the Progressive Librarians Council, Keeney chartered this group with the purpose

"to support and strengthen the efforts of the Third Activities Committee in bringing more democracy into the structure and functioning of the American Library Association; to promote federal and state aid for libraries by supporting the Thomas-Harrison Bill and strengthening state library agencies; to unite all progressive librarians whose single voices are inaudible into a group which will be heard" (McReynolds 1990/91).

1938-39. **Stanley Kunitz, Forrest Spaulding**. Des Moines, (Iowa) librarian, Spaulding, drafted the Library Bill of Rights in response to concern about freedom to read during a time of national political distress. A revised version was adopted by the American Library Association in 1939. Agricultural Kern County California's county commissioners banned *The Grapes of Wrath* (as did other communities in the U.S.), an action condemned by Kunitz (who was to become Poet Laureate of the U.S.) in his capacity as editor of *Wilson Library Bulletin* (Robbins 1996).

1942-1945. **Clara Estelle Breed**. San Diego Public Library children's librarian, Breed, visited Japanese-American children in internment camps, sent them books and corresponded. Her collection of letters from children is part of the Japanese American National Museum (Japanese American National Museum 2007).

1950. **Ruth W. Brown**, of the Bartlesville, Oklahoma Public library, was fired after 30 years, ostensibly because the library owned *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *Soviet Russia Today*, but actually because of her work with the Congress of Racial Equality (Robbins 2001).

1957. **Juliette Hampton Morgan** had long been an advocate of civil rights. She allowed a private letter she wrote to be published in *The Tuscaloosa News*, although she had been asked not to publish any more on racism and the need to change "the Southern way of life." A victim of hate mail and obscene phone calls, she resigned from her job as librarian at the Montgomery (Alabama) Public Library and took her own life (Graham 2002; Tolerance.org 2006).

1959. **Emily Wheelock Reed** was asked to remove *A Rabbit's Wedding* from the Alabama state library collection by state senator Big Ed Eddins because of

the intermarriage of black and white rabbits. The library budget came under attack when she refused (Graham 2002).

1960s **Patricia Blalock** helped integrate Selma's public library one chair at a time. She convinced her board that integration in Selma was a forgone conclusion, and gradually convinced them, removing chairs and then adding them back gradually, that it could be done peacefully and without violent intervention (Graham 2002).

1964. **E.J. Josey** offered the resolution at the 1964 Conference which prevented American Library Association officers and staff members from attending segregated state chapter meetings (ALA 2007).

1965. **Blanche Collins** faced down community pressure at the Long Beach Public Library when called to ban *The Last Temptation of Christ*. (Blanche Collins interview 1979.)

1966. **Marvin Scilkin**, noted as an activist librarian and publisher of *The U*N*A*B*A*S*H*E*D L*IB*R*A*R*I*A*N* testified in the US Senate to expose price fixing for library books. In 1996 he successfully campaigned to stop Bell Atlantic from charging libraries for other phone company directories (Roy 2002; Samek 2007).

1967. **Gordon McShean** resigned his from his librarian job in Roswell, New Mexico, over censorship involving "hippie" poets (Robbins 1996, p. 140).

1968. **Joan Bodger**. While working for the Missouri State Library wrote, with the permission of her superiors, a letter to the Columbia (Missouri) *Daily Tribune* against police action in the selling of political newspapers near a college campus. She lost her job though a series of actions and the American Library Association stepped in to investigate (Proceedings 1970).

1969. **T. Ellis Hodgkin** lost his job as city librarian in Martinsville, Virginia. He was already active in the civil rights movement, but he was fired when he joined a lawsuit against religious education in his daughter's school. He was also active in civil rights issues (Hodgin 1971).

1960s **Daniel Gore**, at MacMurray College, Abilene, Texas struggled over issues regarding *The Evergreen Review* (Robbins 1996, p. 140).

1969-1970. **John Forsman**. Risked his job as City librarian in Richmond California over a censorship issue. Carolyn Forsman, his wife at the time, still contributes profits from her jewelry at ALA conferences to raise money for the Freedom to Read Foundation (Robbins 1996, p. 140).

1969-1995. **Jackie Eubanks** was an early SRRT Action Council member, much loved librarian of the New York bookfair and tireless supporter of alternative presses. The ALA Alternatives in Publication Task Force of the Social Responsibilities Round Table presents an award in her name (SRRT Jackie Eubanks Memorial Award 2007).

1971-1986. **Barbara Gittings**. New York founder of Daughters of Bilitis, Honorary ALA Lifetime member Barbara Gittings pioneered efforts regarding gay and lesbian librarianship. Other librarians with similar accomplishments are honored with the ALA Stonewall Barbara Gittings Book Award (Barbara Gittings 2007).

1972. **Zoia Horn**, winner of Jackie Eubanks Memorial Award (2002), Downs Intellectual Freedom Award (2002) The "first librarian who spent time in jail for a value of our profession" says Judith Krug of the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, Horn refused to testify in the trial of the Harrisburg Seven and was jailed for the duration (Egelko 2002; Horn 1995).

1979. **Jeanne Layton**. She was the library director in Utah's Davis County and she refused to remove Don DeLillo's *Americana* from the library. The Utah Library Association and the American Library Association raised money and supported her attempt to regain her job (Intellectual freedom and ALA).

1981-1998. Washington Office. published *Less Access to Less Information by and about the U.S. Government*, a selective chronology of efforts to restrict and privatize government information. (American Library Association, Washington Office).

1990-. American Library Association. Taking on Poverty. In 1990 the American Library Association passed a "Policy on Library Services to Poor People." It still has not been fully implemented (Berman 1998).

1991-1992. **Pat Schuman**. Her presidential theme, "The Right to Know: Librarians Make It Happen," continued work chairing the ALA's Advocacy Committee and founding the Library Advocacy NOW! campaign of training and influencing tens of thousands of librarians and trustees. She was honored with the 2007 Eileen Cooke State and Local Madison Award, for those who, at the state and local levels, have championed, protected, and promoted public access to government information and the public's "right to know" (ALA Honors Schuman 2007).

1996. **Deloris Wilson** won the Downs Intellectual Freedom Award in 2001 because in May, 1996 her school principal in West Monroe (LA) High School asked her to remove four books from the library shelves. When she refused she was ordered to remove all books with sexual content. After pulling 200 books, including several Bibles, she became a plaintiff in an ACLU complaint against Ouachita Parish (ACLU 2001).

1999. **Sanford Berman**, "one of the profession's most valued and significant contributors to the advances made in cataloging classifications in the 20th century" was forced to resign or face demotion by the Hennepin County Library (HCL). Berman believes he is a target because spoke out against HCL cataloging policy and not because of job performance. He is also a recipient of the 1996 Robert B. Downs Intellectual Freedom Award (Berry).

2000. **Song Yongyi**, Catalog and reference librarian at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, was held in China for six months on charges of spying. He was released on January 28, 2000. Song had

gone to China to research the Cultural Revolution. He received the Paul Howard Award for Courage in 2005 (Yongyi Song 2006).

2002. **Ann Sparanese.** When publication of Michael Moore's book, *Stupid White Men: And Other Excuses for the State of the Nation*, was held from distribution after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Sparanese wrote to librarians all over the U.S. and HarperCollins felt compelled to publish on time. It became a best seller (Bolonick 2002).

2002. **Jerilynn Adams Williams**, a library director in Montgomery County, Texas, winner of the 2003 Pen/Newman's Own First Amendment Award for successfully retaining sex education titles on the library shelves in the face of personal attacks by Reverend Bill Craft and others (Pen American Center 2007).

2003-2004. **Chris Gaunt.** Librarian Gaunt describes peace actions including arrest and jail for her protests against the USAPATRIOT Act and the War in Iraq (Gaunt 2004).

2004. **Joan Airoidi**, Pen/Newman Award Winner because on June 8th the FBI visits the Deming branch of the Whatcom County Library System and asks library staff to provide the names of all persons who'd borrowed a copy of Bin Ladin: The Man Who Declared War on America, by Yossef Bodansky. Joan Airoidi, library director, challenged this. She and her library board asserted that libraries have the right to protect the confidentiality of their patrons (Airoidi 2006).

2006. **Peter Chase, George Christian, Janet Nocek, Barbara Bailey.** Actors in the Doe v. Gonzales case, these librarians challenged the constitutionality of the nondisclosure provisions of the National Security Letters issued by the government under the USA Patriot Act in terrorist or other investigations. The four received the Roger Baldwin Medal of Liberty from the American Civil Liberties Union in June 2007 (American Civil Liberties Union, 6.15.2007).

2006. **Michele Reutty** Winner of the 2006 Robert B. Downs Intellectual Freedom Award was the 17-year director of the Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey, public library was "under fire" in May 2006 by her own library board for following library protocol and refusing to give library circulation records to the police without a subpoena. She resigned from that position in October 2006 (GSLIS 2007).

2007. **Dana Lubow and Rhonda Neugebauer.** Organized taking a Bookmobile to Granma province in Cuba where it will be used by librarians to provide library outreach services to rural areas (Lubow 2007).

2007. (May 14th) Illinois Librarians in "A Day of Unity" several Illinois librarians took down internet connections, or filtered almost everything in their libraries to protest the Illinois House of Representatives internet filtering bill (In Protest 2007).

Conclusion

"It's always one individual that sparks change; history has proven this time and again," Moore said in thanking Sparanese for completely ignoring his plea to keep his publishing squabble hushed. He noted that the day Sparanese sent her letter to the email lists, was an important day in American history, December 1st. On this day in 1955 a black seamstress boarded a bus in Birmingham, Alabama. When she was told to move to the back of the bus, she remained in her seat. She had made her stand by sitting. Her name is Rosa Parks. (Librarian Makes a Difference for Stupid White Men Author Michael Moore 2002).

Librarians make an impact on lives every day. It is time we made, collectively and individually, an impact on policy. We know there are many more librarians world-wide who belong on this list and we encourage that they be written about and honored as examples to us all. Our list is our own idiosyncratic list of librarians in the United States who have been courageous political actors. We share it with you, the reader, so you can develop your own list and soon librarians everywhere will see that all actions are political and all librarian work should be in service of the freedom of information and development of human capabilities.

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1941 **Ona Simate** was a university librarian in Vilna, Lithuania when the Germans invaded and sent the Jews to the ghetto. Simate smuggled food and

supplies in, and people and materials out using her librarian role to save valuables (Gilbert 2003).

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