

Culture keepers: Today's African American librarians

By Gladys Smiley Bell

BCALA's Second National Conference, August 1994

Jambo (hello) was the greeting spoken by Stanton F. Biddle, president of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA), when he officially opened the Second National Conference of African American Librarians.

Sponsored by the BCALA, the conference was held on August 5-7, 1994. More than 1,000 librarians, exhibitors, and friends/supporters attended the conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The conference theme, "Culture Keepers II: Unity through Diversity," was addressed with about 90 programs that inspired, enlightened, informed, and entertained. More than 200 vendors displayed their products in the exhibit area.

The conference opened with a keynote address by the editor-in-chief of *Essence* magazine, Susan Taylor. Considered the most "influential black woman in journalism today," Taylor engaged the audience with an inspirational speech that was like music to all ears. She said, "Once you achieve comfort within yourself, then other goals will become attainable." She impressed upon the audience that as culture keepers, we should continue to focus on informing, providing, and instilling proudly our history and our stories in our communities; it is our responsibility.

Highlights of the programs

The ACRL Afro American Studies Librarians Section (AFAS) participated in the conference with a program entitled "Using Internet Resource Location Tools to Find African American Studies Resources on the Internet." The presenta-

tion provided the audience with strategies on how to mainstream the Internet into traditional reference service and be conducive to a technologically intensive environment. The finding tools that exist for print also exist for networked information. Information was provided on how to access resources on the Internet as well as using the Internet as a reference tool for African American studies and cross-cultural scholarly research. The Internet navigation tools covered included e-mail, WAIS (Wide Area Information Servers), WWW (World Wide Web), HyTelnet, anonymous ftp, gophers, Veronica, Archie, and Jughead.

Academic librarians with ambitions to climb the career ladder filled the room for the "Leadership in the 90s: Research Librarians Speak Part I & II" sessions. Their primary focus was on the development of the leadership potential of African American librarians, on exploring the issues African American librarians need to address in advancing their careers toward academic library management, and on promoting career opportunities in the research library environment. Four African American library directors from ARL libraries discussed and shared insights on institutional politics; positioning as preparation for a leadership position; risk taking; and achieving success in the majority world.

"Organizing African American Studies Resources for Cultural Relevance: A Cataloger's Dilemma" was presented by several AFAS members. It addressed the issue of assuring that the bibliographic organization process results in retrieval tools and indexes that support and facilitate research in the study of African American heritage. It illustrated the need for catalogers to be sensitive to users of African American collections by assigning subject headings that ensure effective and efficient retrieval.

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of documents in Cuban academic libraries were presented. The Science and Technology Libraries Section's theme was Social Barriers to Access of Scientific Information. Information literacy, linguistic obstructions, and underuse of scientific information were discussed as barriers. The newly established User Education Section's program focused on User Education and Information Skills Development in Public and School Libraries.

Technological developments affecting libraries were very much in evidence at the conference. A listserv computer connection provided conference delegates with information before the conference and provided opportunities to communicate with colleagues while at the conference. All of the documents from the General Conference were available in WordPerfect 5.1 on disks in English, Spanish, and French. Mundo Latino filmed a documentary of highlights of the conference and a copy in any video format was available. Video copies of individual speeches by participants, the closing ceremony, and lectures were also available.

The exhibition area included, among other options, product presentations, book signings, fashion shows, and Cuban films. Over 50 Cuban exhibitors provided an overview of the products available in the country. Books and software of interest to libraries were highlighted at various times.

Poster sessions provided examples of the excellent library programs being implemented in a number of countries with Cuban posters predominating. Cuban posters covered many topics, including training library technicians, computer-aided cataloging, updated information with lower costs, and games to promote reading. The posters illustrated that Cuba clearly has well-developed libraries and library programs offering services for a wide range of users. A statement about conservation at the Jose Marti National Library summarizes the challenges facing libraries in Cuba today: "In spite of economic limitations in the '90s, there has been a growth of human potential in Cuba, and we have continued working with slender resources and material shortage for preservation of our national bibliographic resources."

The 60th General IFLA conference was a very useful event filled with valuable exchanges of information and professional experiences. Delegates learned about Cuban culture as well as libraries and came away with great respect for the dedicated Cuban librarians. ■

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Problems encountered with subject access (i.e., appropriateness of heading, needed subject cross references, etc.) were the primary focus for librarians who assist users interested in information about African Americans.

"The Dynamics of Information Apartheid" explored information access and African world community empowerment using Afrocentric ideas to address information apartheid and post-modern communication consciousness. Information apartheid, defined "as a society in which one group has access to information and the others do not," was positively presented for the creation of building alliances and sharing knowledge for "interconnecting" diversity in our national and international communities.

Tony Brown, host of *Tony Brown's Journal*, was the keynote speaker at the Closing Session. "Telling it to us straight," Brown spoke about the issues affecting the black community today and challenged the audience with solutions of education and economic self-sufficiency for full participation in this struggle. Librarians were, again, empowered with adamant words of strength on their roles as culture keepers in their communities. Brown said, "And the world is a world of people from all groups, people with all languages and different cultures. And we, as Americans, not just African Americans, are going to have to confront diversity and its true meaning and fit into a world in which we all will have to contribute."

There were also two preconferences held in Milwaukee. "Diversity: From Rhetoric to Realities," led by Edith Fisher (Tenge Enterprises), provided a clear and dynamic understanding of the unique characteristics of individuals, enabling people to achieve positive outcomes from interactions. "Team Building for Librarians" by John Tyson (John Tyson Associates), provided an avenue for involving all librarians in the decision-making process, improving morale and product/service quality. Both were educational and applicable to all work settings.

Overall, the national participation of librarians of color at the conference was exciting. It was another historic event and celebration of African American contributions to librarianship and our commitment to the profession.

BCALA is planning to hold the Third National Conference of African American Librarians in Winston Salem, North Carolina, in 1997. Kwaheri (goodbye). ■