

## Culture keepers: Enlightening & empowering communities

By Sheila Delacroix

### *A report from the Black Caucus of ALA's conference*

**R**osa Burnett (library director, Georgia State Technical Institute) spoke of a legend about a people who disappeared. "What happened to these people?" an old man is asked. "They lost their history, so they died," he replied. Members of ALA's Black Caucus (BCALA) gathered in Columbus, Ohio, September 4-6 to be sure that African Americans and African American librarians in particular do not meet the same fate. For this first-ever conference of BCALA, the theme was "Culture Keepers: Enlightening and Empowering Our Communities."

The 952 registrants heard 90 presenters explore the conference theme from a wide variety of angles. They visited the booths of over one hundred vendors—from the smallest, one-person operation to international publishers—each keeping a piece of the culture alive. If numbers alone were left to tell the story, this conference would automatically be hailed a success. But numbers do not capture the excitement and emotion evident in Columbus. The four keynoters—Rep. Major Owens (D-N.Y.), Gloria Naylor (author), Augusta Alexander Clark (librarian, lawyer, councilwoman), and Randall Robinson (executive director, TransAfrica, Inc.)—congratulated, inspired, and challenged the group to stress information and education in the present in order to guarantee survival in the future. Robinson told the crowd, "We are a poorly educated nation. If the majority can afford this, the minority cannot."

More than 25 authors, illustrators, and filmmakers who have contributed positively to the African American literary experience came to the all-conference reception at the Columbus

Metropolitan Library to be honored by BCALA for their work. The conference drew a small but enthusiastic contingent of Canadian librarians who promised to be back and bring others with them next time. A very impressive group of teenagers from Louisiana were genuinely thrilled to share their experience as "teen librarians" in a high school media center. Many conference goers wore stunningly beautiful African print clothing, lending an almost royal feel to some events. Words like "momentous" and "historic" were heard with great frequency.

Recruitment and retention of minority librarians was a major concern of many attendees. Some sessions like "African American students in white library schools," "Recruiting minorities for librarianship: Issues and strategies revisited," "Recruiters, retainers and renegades: Recruitment and retention of African American academic librarians," and "Wanted: More African American Ph.D.s: We're calling your name" addressed the concerns directly.

Other sessions started with the belief that there will be sufficient numbers of African American librarians in the future: "Incorporating black dialect and poetry into the library curriculum," "Cataloging the Afrocentric way," "Building a library in a predominantly African American community in the 1990's," and "Educating the black librarian and information professional for leadership in the twenty-first century."

From whatever perspective, the subject came up early and often; the need for guaranteeing a future generation of culture keepers was acutely felt. Hiram L. Davis (director of libraries, Michigan State University) urged all attending the session "Academic and research librarianship: African American directors' outlook" to go out and replace themselves in the profession, to recruit at least one African American person into the profession. "If we do not re-

place ourselves, we will have made a passage, but will we have made an impact?" Davis asked.

Both Marilyn Miller (president, ALA) and Robert Wedgeworth (president, International Federation of Library Associations) had greetings for the conference at its closing session. Miller delivered hers in person, fresh from her trip to India, and Wedgeworth delivered his via videotape as he was still in India presiding over the IFLA conference. Both spoke of the sights and sounds of India and of the universality of librarianship. And both warned against being overwhelmed by the responsibilities of our position, the immensity of our task of bringing knowledge and information to all people on the globe. "I have seen," Wedgeworth said, "how people die from lack of routine information."

In his final, emotion-filled remarks to the culture keepers attending the conference, Dr. Axel Boyd (BCALA president) spoke of the "family" that had gathered in Columbus. He said, "This is a defining moment in the history of African American librarianship, but it is only a point of departure. We have been empowered here to move into the future." Boyd closed by announcing that the next BCALA national conference will be held in two years on Labor Day weekend in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. ■

## Letters

### The importance of acting

To the Editor:

As a former librarian turned investigator, I often peruse the professional literature of both fields. Thus, I read with considerable interest Trudi E. Jacobson's excellent report on "Good acting secret of successful BI" in the July/August issue. By citing Dean William E. Connor's contention that teaching is theater, Ms. Jacobson is quite correct. However, I would add that an important, but sometimes overlooked, part of investigative work is also theater or acting. The intent, goals, and results of the theatrics in my field and in Ms. Jacobson's may differ, but the techniques, such as focusing on your subjects and role playing, are similar. In more than 15 years as an investigator I have learned that acting, especially spur-of-the-moment improvisation when needed, is a handy skill to possess, and if one is good at it, the results can be satisfying. After all, what's the old good guy/bad guy routine but acting?—*Mark H. Winnegrad, associate investigator, N.Y.C. Dept. of Transportation*

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