Reactions by a Retired Leader

From the viewpoint of a beginning librarian who is ten months into a promising career to that of a retired librarian more than ten years beyond a professional lifetime's involvement with library services to children is quite a distance. That decade has involved few contacts with libraries for me. Instead, I have been learning the pleasures and problems of volunteerism, working with the Evanston Historical Society, the League of Women Voters and several conservation projects. This institute has been highly stimulating — an opportunity to see old friends and to become acquainted with a cross-section of currently active children's librarians. Here, as in my children's services days, I find the personal contacts most rewarding.

Because of my years away from library service, I expected the institute to reveal changes in libraries and in services to children. However, I was quite unprepared for the extent of those changes. Let me take library provision of audiovisual materials as an example. In 1942 ALA published a book on educational films and libraries. I was involved in this activity as the ALA staff contact with the Visual Methods Committee, later called the Audio-Visual Committee. We had to search to find the few libraries whose programs were reported. ALA encouraged library involvement with films and recordings, but public library recognition of responsibility for these materials was slow in coming. Present-day librarians can scarcely imagine the lack of library interest in these materials then. School librarians were more responsive because there was more
local pressure on them to use audiovisual materials. Companies selling projectors and other equipment carried on elaborate and successful campaigns to persuade school administrators that the machines, although expensive, were essential. There was no such promotion to introduce to the public library the valuable information and experience in film which these machines would make accessible. Librarians felt threatened by the machines and their introduction to film materials was discouragingly limited. All of this was only twenty-five or thirty years ago; things are very different today. Every talk, every conversation, takes for granted library responsibility for all types of communication materials — not only audiovisual. There is even, I have learned, some extraordinary library provision of toys.

More astonishing to me is the extent of library use of communications technology. Data banks, computers, extensive union catalogs that do or do not include children’s books — these are things which had not touched me a dozen years ago. Of course, some librarians concerned with research were already exploring and using these instruments, but if any children’s librarians were then using them in relation to children’s books and services, they were indeed in the vanguard. Clearly, the products of these technologies can do and are doing marvelous things for libraries, including children’s services. I sense that some librarians feel uncertain, perhaps fearful and ignorant of what those possibilities are. Is it essential to learn about those possibilities? This is an area in which children’s librarians must not permit themselves to be labeled as isolationist. They must become aware of the possibilities and act if children’s services are to benefit.

As far as politics are concerned, I do not know how librarians learn their roles in the political life of the community and state. Early in my career I traveled with two librarians who were masters of the art. The elected officials and the librarians knew each other well and were skillful in working together. Each had respect for the other. At this institute I have heard several comments which indicate a nervousness or uncertainty about the children’s librarian’s relationship to politics. Obviously, the library administrator holds the forefront in this relationship, but surely the entire staff — and especially the children’s librarians — must see themselves as part of a team working together for basic library effectiveness. It is not enough to work at politics only when a library referendum is in the offing.

The references to new, well-planned uses of volunteers delight me. Hospitals have made fine use of volunteers for years. Most hospitals carefully determine appropriate activities for volunteers and have worked out training programs which clarify what volunteers do and what is done
by professionals. Use of young people as volunteers in work with children is an idea which seems to have double value. The idea of volunteers for providing programs has excellent potential and it was good to hear the warning that the library must develop a philosophy for library programs which must be understood and adhered to by the volunteers. Older persons could be used as volunteers in libraries; I have seen news stories about foster grandparents. Some older persons enjoy being with children and, if there are no grandchildren or nearby neighbor children, they might appreciate opportunities to help with children in libraries.

Library services to parents seem to be very well established, especially for parents of preschool children. However, the question has been raised whether parents of school-age children, especially of middle-school children, are served as consistently and well as the parents of preschoolers. That is worth thinking about and examining.

One of the great changes over this 10-year period seems to be in services to handicapped children, and not only to the blind and deaf children who have been served to some extent by libraries for many years. Through government funds to libraries and other organizations in the communities, library services have been greatly and imaginatively extended to large numbers of children unreached before. Serving them is splendid and in doing so, every effort must be made to provide that service in such a way that the children feel themselves to be just children — not handicapped children. As a person considered by some to be handicapped because I use two canes, I know how important it is to feel regular, not special.

Concerning children with severe problems and the value which books may have for them, I would like to mention the article "Cushla," published in Signal, a British magazine on children's books. Cushla is a very ill child whose problem-fraught life is immensely aided by books read to her and shared with her from the age of four months to nearly four years old. The article lists the books and her age when they were used, commenting on her responses as time went on. Among the results was Cushla's quite unusual knowledge of words. Real experiences were necessarily limited, but book experiences had given her a vocabulary which must surely have made her slip into reading herself quite easily. Perhaps we should think about tripling or quadrupling our expenditures for books for infants and very young children, and possibly include funds for toys. Help for parents in the use of books and toys would be important in such a program.

The materials sessions most assuredly brought up ideas that will be around for some time. Much thought, much discussion, some confusion, agreements, disagreements and, gradually, new directions will presum-
ably emerge. It is high time for these discussions, and the discussions along the way are going to be as fruitful as the positions finally reached.

Similarly, the goals presentation did not repeat the past literature on the subject. It will serve as a base for starting discussions locally and at state and national meetings. Best results will come from the rethinking and perhaps remolding by each children’s librarian of her own goals.

Frequent reference has been made to the paragon that children’s librarians are expected to be if they are to accomplish all that is recommended. Problems in working with administrators were referred to often. The facts that children’s services must be recognized as an integral part of the library’s service, and that children’s librarians must involve themselves and be involved by the administrator in the goals and activities of the entire library were also mentioned. A very practical answer to improving relations with administrators is widespread membership and active participation of children’s librarians in the Public Library Association. Perhaps children’s librarians themselves are to blame if they are labeled isolationists. Perhaps it is our fault if we have problems with our administrators. The $15 it costs an ALSC member to join PLA can be the most important investment in success in this profession. I would like to see 50 percent of the children’s librarians in ALSC become PLA members in 1978.

REFERENCES