

# President's Column

*by Kevin Smith*

I have just returned from the American Library Association's 2014 National Library Legislative Day in Washington, D.C., and I give a big thanks to Martha Hutzel of Central Rappahannock Regional Library who bravely took up the mantle this year as Virginia's Federal Legislative Coordinator. I also very much appreciate the delegation of Virginia librarians who assisted Martha in her lobbying efforts, including delegates Christie Hoerneman, Mutahara Mobshar, Margaret Howard, Jacqueline Sullivan, James Sanderson, Katie Hoskins, Alan Sonner, Suzanna Panter, Lisa Varga, Laura Horne-Popp, and Tina McPherson. The ALA legislative agenda not only consisted of budget appropriations such as Innovative Approaches to Literacy (IAL) and the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), but also involved legislation about early learning, E-Rate discounts, school libraries, cyber privacy and surveillance, network neutrality, workforce investment, and open access to research and information.

These visits to Capitol Hill always make me realize that we as library advocates are constantly having to sell our "product," which is the fact that libraries and librarians are essential to the vitality of the communities we serve. We are part of the educational infrastructure and facilitators of the democratic process. We are forums for intellectual pursuits and public discussions.

Recently I was distressed by two comments I heard from people who were unaware of what

twenty-first century libraries are actually all about. The first came from a wealthy retired septuagenarian businessman who thought libraries were obsolete and that the Lancaster County community he recently moved into should not waste their money and should simply let the local library die. Thankfully he went on to tell me that he had a change of heart when he saw how vital the Lancaster

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Community Library is to his new home. The second was a comment I heard from a thirty-something young urban professional who, when told about the new Henrico County Public Library that is being built off of Staples Mill Road in Richmond, said "What do public libraries have to offer, do they have computers or Wi-Fi, do they offer technology classes, can you download books?" I was thankful for the young mother who actually uses the library who informed him that they did have all that and more.


Apparently neither one of these gentlemen, with a forty-year age difference, had actually been in a public library for a very long while. Both are tax-paying voters and influential members of their

communities, but neither one at first knew the value of their local libraries. Somewhere along the line they had failed to learn the value of modern libraries or, if they did, the lesson had not resonated with them. Perhaps they saw libraries as merely a warehouse for donated books or an antiquated form of social service. Either way, both scenarios stress the importance of getting our message out to our community stakeholders and policy makers in a way that is understood and actually means something. We must sell the product that is Library and Information Services.

By the time this article is written we may still be waiting for the General Assembly to pass a state budget, but many library directors and deans have just finished months of selling our products and services by way of fiscal year 2015 budget work sessions, presentations, and negotiations with boards of supervisors, city councils, and the provost office. As exhausting as it sometimes can be, advocacy and product promotion is the name of the game, especially in working with and "educating" a new generation of legislators and policy makers—many of whom do not use libraries or only view them as a discretionary expenditure.

Recently I have reminded local and federal elected officials that their constituents use libraries. The soccer mom, the business executive, the local lawyer, and members of the armed services all use the library, as well as those patrons who might be poor, homeless, or underprivileged. We are not just another public social service. Over

the last couple of years my mantra has been that libraries are part of the local educational infrastructure. We are part of the allied forces in partnership with local schools and colleges in educating our mutual students. In the words of Henry Ward Beecher, clergyman and abolitionist, "A library is not a luxury, but one of the necessities of life."

Selling our line and promoting what we do is not just a once a year affair but something we must constantly do. The great thing is that it does not have to be formal presentations or meetings with legislators. Everywhere we go we can tell our story, demonstrate the cool products we have via our smart phones or tablets, and talk about our programs. The product we believe in because it really works is Library and Information Services. 

**Mark Your Calendar:  
October 22-24, 2014**

**VLA Annual Conference  
Williamsburg, Virginia**

**Agents of  
Change:  
The Library  
Spy Conference**

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