



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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***“The struggle is over
whether we as
librarians should
practice total neutrality
in terms of library
materials and service,
or encompass advocacy
in our work”***

-Ann Sparanese, 2003
from “Activist Librarian-
ship: Heritage or Heresy”
in the *Progressive
Librarian*

I recently went to the California Library Association annual conference, in San Jose. This conference provides an opportunity for library staff of all kinds to talk to each other, attend workshops, visit exhibits, and even look for jobs.

I went to two workshops and the annual Coulter lecture and luncheon. The first workshop, “Doctors’ Orders: Libraries & Medical Clinics Partnering to Promote Pediatric Literacy,” was a panel discussion and presentation about a program that promotes partnerships between library literacy programs and medical clinics.

Using a national model called Reach Out and Read (ROR), doctors and libraries encourage parents to read to their young children, by providing free books at medical clinics. One panelist was a doctor who enthusiastically described using books as assessment tools at regular well baby checkups. He also gave us statistics that demonstrated an

increase in weekly reading time by the families who received these books, and showed us some wonderful photographs of children with their new books.

The second workshop was an interview with Chitra Divakaruni, the author of several popular books, including *Mistress of Spices* and *Arranged Marriage*. James Quay, from the California Council for the Humanities, interviewed Ms. Divakaruni, and her comments were humorous, charming and inspiring for both readers and writers. I came away grateful to have had the opportunity to be there.

But for me the highlight of the day was the Coulter lecture and luncheon. The speaker, John Berry, is the editor-in-chief of *Library Journal*, which was founded in 1876 and is described on their website as “the oldest independent national library publication.” The title of his lecture was “Got Politics? Librarians, Libraries, and Social

Activism from the Sixties to the Present,” and the lecture was as promised.

He started out talking about information sources in our society. He gave examples, like the news and the Internet, and commented on the way they are “winnowed down” for everyone. And that is definitely true: someone has selected the information we receive when we read a newspaper or find facts on the Web. Sometimes, this is just a matter of space saving; other times, it is to present a particular point of view.

But the job of a library, according to Mr. Berry, is to provide all the information and let the public do the winnowing. This idea is not new; it is, after all, what librarians say all the time: libraries are about providing equal access to all kinds of information. However, sometimes the information we

provide isn’t the whole story. His point is that libraries need to take another look at their role as neutral parties. They need to become advocates for “un-corrupted information,” as opposed to information that is presented by each political party or candidate. He proposed that libraries call themselves “the antidote to spin” and that we tell our public “you need to know it so we can continue to govern ourselves.” He emphasized that a democracy depends on “an informed electorate” and that a library’s job is to do the informing.

This concept gives public libraries a huge responsibility. But we are capable of meeting this challenge, because we have the tools and the knowledge and the ability to find accurate and in-depth information. I agree with Mr. Berry that we all need to make sure the facts we use when we cast our ballots

are facts with substance. And what better place to find those than at the public library?