



## AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein  
November 30, 2007

***“Politically manipulating a library’s collection development policy to alienate any portion of a community served is a marginalizing act, rendering the community’s library as no longer ‘public’.”***

-From Todd Douglas Quesada’s “Spanish Spoken Here,” in *American Libraries* (November 2007)

A passionate REFORMA (the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking) listserv discussion about a cover story in the latest *American Library Association’s* magazine caught my attention recently. When I pulled out my copy, I discovered there are actually two cover stories on the same topic: whether or not public libraries should provide bilingual books and programs.

“Spanish Spoken Here” emphasizes the role of public libraries in providing multilingual information access for immigrants. Yet, the author notes, some libraries are eliminating their Spanish language materials’ budgets, thereby alienating a sizeable percentage of their local population. One reason for this, he says, is that librarians don’t want to spend money on materials and services that *may* benefit illegal immigrants.

It is frightening to think a public library could limit access to information because of

political fears or pressures. As Quesada points out, if libraries were to only restrict Spanish-language fiction, it would affect at least 16 million legal residents or citizens.

In the same issue, ALA president Loriene Roy begins her President’s Message by encouraging readers to review Article V of the Library Bill of Rights, which states: “A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.” Roy gives several examples of ways public librarians are providing much needed multilingual services and collections and emphasizes the importance of doing both. She ends her piece with a heartfelt acknowledgment of the contributions of those “who have immigrated to our lands.”

Perhaps her message is offered as an antidote to the startling and ire-arousing article by Julia Stephens, called “English Spoken Here.” It was her opinion piece that stirred

*continued on page 2*

the members of the REFORMA listserv and after reading it, I can see why. It is amazing to find it in *American Libraries*, since it fits so poorly with the inclusive, tolerant and democratic nature of librarianship. I can only assume it was published to provide a counterpoint to the more liberal and open-minded views of most of the magazine's writing, since public librarians pride themselves on offering all views and allowing people to make up their own minds.

However, this piece isn't written well enough to serve this function. Stephens' thrust seems to be that English should be the only language spoken in the United States and that by "creating bilingual libraries, librarians are undermining the American democracy that has created one nation for all." At one point in the article she tells us: "Librarians and teachers are doing Spanish-speaking populations no favor by encouraging

them to get by without learning English." This astonishingly ill-informed and nasty statement is preceded by talk about the "influx of Hispanic immigrants" and "the tidal waves of immigrants from Mexico and Central America." There is an inflammatory and negative tone underlying her choice of words and she appears to be so angry, it makes me wonder what prompted her to write the piece.

And although *American Libraries* has run it, I was happy to see not only Roy's message but also an editorial called "English Only is English Lonely." Leonard Kniffel stresses the ALA stand on bilingual library collection, noting that "Persons in the Hispanic communities...have diverse needs and are entitled to access to materials diverse enough to meet those needs." Ultimately, his point - which I wholeheartedly agree with - is that the real question is why so many children in America grow

up speaking only one language.