

Views from ALA President-Elect Maria McCauley

Meagan Albright

What does it take to be president of the nation's largest library association? And what does that person envision going forward? The Association for Library Service



to Children (ALSC) Public Awareness and Advocacy (PAA) Committee spoke with Dr. Maria McCauley, 2025-2026 president-elect of the American Library Association (ALA) and the past president of the Public Library Association (PLA), a division of ALA.

McCauley is Director of Libraries for the City of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Under her leadership, the Cambridge Public Library (CPL) has accomplished many things, including

- expanding its branch hours by over fifty hours per week;
- launching a STEAM at the Library program, including the first free public makerspace in Cambridge;
- eliminating overdue fines;
- leading a kindergarten library card campaign (resulting in a 95 percent registration rate);
- starting a library social worker program;
- advancing the library's digital equity work; and
- prioritizing the library's antiracism, equity, and inclusion efforts.

McCauley began her library career in CPL's Circulation and Reference Services. Before returning to Cambridge, she held several library positions at Northeastern University, served as the Director of Libraries in Santa Monica, and served as the Director of Libraries for the City of Somerville, Massachusetts. She is a global thought leader and has advocated for funding for libraries and legislation at the state and national levels, including to Congress; advocated for the freedom to read on *NBC10 Boston*;

and submitted written testimony in support of intellectual freedom and libraries. She has spoken at the state, national, and international levels on intellectual freedom, inclusiveness, courage in leadership, and the evolving role of libraries.

How did you become involved with ALA at a national level?

I am an arts-loving library director who spends a lot of time thinking about global connection, fostering peace and well-being, systems and structures of support for people to learn and thrive, and leadership development for individual and organizational success and positive community impact. I've been involved with ALA since 1999, when I was a Spectrum Scholar and in graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh.

As an academic librarian at Northeastern University, I got involved with the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and became a councilor and pursued my PhD at Simmons University part-time. When I moved to leading public libraries, I joined PLA and served on ALA's Executive Board and then as PLA president.

Reflecting back on your early career, what inspired you to become a librarian? Can you share something memorable from your library school education?

Like many of us, I frequented my beloved childhood library in Simsbury, Connecticut. But it was working part-time at the Cambridge Public Library when I chose working in libraries as a career. An early mentor of mine, former Library Director Susan Flannery, gave me a stretch assignment to facilitate a book discussion on two works—*Seeds from a Silent Tree*, an anthology of poetry, fiction, and personal narratives by Korean adoptees, and *I Wish for You a Beautiful Life*, a compilation of letters by Korean birth mothers to their children they gave up for adoption. The experience was profound.



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I enjoyed facilitating the discussion with community members, and the experience helped me to form compassion and curiosity for the birth mother I did not know. This experience helped to form a nugget of career possibilities that expanded to becoming a librarian. A few years later, I went to my first international librarian conference in Korea, visited my hometown, and saw the street where I was found when I was approximately six days old.

Dr. E. J. Josey was Faculty Emeritus at the University of Pittsburgh. I was a graduate student assistant and worked frequently in the department. Dr. Josey always made himself available to support students. He was a great source of inspiration as he continued his legacy of working for equity, inclusion, and justice as Faculty Emeritus.

Josey led the fight to desegregate libraries and state associations. A former ALA president, Dr. Josey founded the Black Caucus of the American Library Association in 1970 and served as its president from 1970 to 1971. I try to carry his courage and leadership with me.

ALA is celebrating its 150th anniversary—what do you see for the future of the association?

ALA will continue to have a vital role in championing libraries, developing library workers, and advocating for pro-library legislation and federal funding in support of libraries. ALA will share best practices, standards, policies, and collaborations and showcase its best in literature, including its beloved Youth Media Awards. ALA will continue to be a recognized international leader in the library association space and work collaboratively and supportively with others. ALA members will be connected and thrive.

What will your priorities be as ALA president?

There is a lot of work to do both within ALA and externally. This includes supporting member-leaders and staff as we carry out our strategic plan and get to a healthier financial situation.

Part of my public-facing work in giving presentations and talking to media will be showcasing what libraries are doing across all types of libraries across the nation and internationally to foster literacy and learning, promote information access, and help community members to thrive. I will also continue to lean into advocacy for intellectual freedom and funding for libraries and champion the work of libraries and library workers. I will amplify the work that members and affiliates are doing to uphold our values of equity, access, privacy, sustainability, intellectual freedom, and the public good.

What would you say to librarians who may be hesitant to be involved in a national organization like ALA?

I encourage joining ALA to connect with library workers and advocates across the United States and internationally. It can be an expansive experience to get to know people from other locales and library types. It is also an opportunity to look at best practices from various places, and it can be invigorating to get involved nationally and internationally.

Admittedly, it is a difficult time to be a librarian. What advice do you have for librarians in the face of censorship and other issues? What are your own self-care practices?

Have the courage to defend intellectual freedom for everyone! It is every person's right to read, from child to elder, to discover, and to grow. Books offer each individual the opportunity to learn more about themselves and others. Share and celebrate the message that libraries are places for opportunity, lifelong learning, and connection.

Take care of yourself and give yourself grace. My sister shared with me that life can be like the waves of the ocean with their ebbs and flows. Sometimes things feel insurmountable and you will be pulled under, but that crest will subside. I encourage you to cultivate the ability to hold complexity and have perspective. Support your peers, reach out to trusted loved ones, and build friendships. Supportive peers and loved ones will support you through the thick and thin of life.

My own self-care practice includes acts of gratitude; walking, biking, and yoga/stretching; being in nature and looking up at the sky (Gwendolyn Brooks as a source of inspiration); meditation; spending time with family and friends; and reflection and affirmations.

In this time of tightening budgets, how can libraries better communicate their value?

Be strategic and think about what your library is trying to accomplish. What are you trying to achieve, and what is your value proposition? For example, we want to extend our children's room hours from 6 to 7 p.m. so that we can better serve working families. After you form your goal and value proposition, identify who you need to reach and who your allies and supporters are, and then form your advocacy and communications strategy.

It is also important that every library worker, board member, and volunteer sees themselves as a library ambassador and spreads the word about library services, stories, and impacts.

What are the best ways for librarians to promote their spaces and resources daily?

You are your library's best ambassador! Share your excitement about your library's many offerings throughout the day. See if a library point person or communication specialist can help by coming up with areas of focus with talking points for team members. Invite patrons who sign up for a library card to opt in to a library e-newsletter to keep them aware of library happenings. Give tours and ask partners to help spread the word, and make it easy by providing that talking point, link, or flyer.

Your communications point person can ask your local government, school, and community partners to cross-promote stories to recipients of other e-newsletters as well. Ask your communication specialist to pitch library stories to local media. See if you can share posts with images and video on social media and the website, and follow any policies on patron notifications for recording. Remember, you are your library's best ambassador! &

This column was created with the help of the PAA Committee, which includes Tess M. Botkin, Soline D. Holmes, and Evelyn Indie Elizabeth Johns.