

From the President of RUSA

# The Courage to Show Up

## Advocacy in Times of Turmoil

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### A Season of Reflection and Resolve

October is a month rich with meaning for our profession. It comprises National Medical Librarians Month, Banned Books Week, American Archives Month, National Friends of Libraries Week, and TeenTober. Even within this single month, these observances remind us that librarianship is more than a career. It is a calling rooted in service, advocacy, and a commitment to equitable access to information.

As I sat down to write this in October, I reflected on the importance of having the courage to take action on the issues that matter and that can make a positive impact on the world around us. Each of these celebrations showcases a different aspect of who we are as librarians and what we stand for. Having spent more than twenty years as a health sciences librarian, National Medical Librarians Month serves as a vital reminder to me of the significant role we play in the healthcare environment. The goal for this observance is to highlight the many ways health information professionals contribute to advancing evidence-based care, improving patient outcomes, and empowering informed decision making.

Considering the current state of affairs in the United States, where misinformation, malinformation, and disinformation spread rapidly, where intellectual freedom is under siege, and where library workers are increasingly targeted for upholding professional ethics, these observances have renewed urgency. They remind us that our work is not neutral. Our commitment to equitable access to information, literacy, and lifelong learning, as well as inclusion and belonging, matters profoundly. These values are not seasonal celebrations. They guide our profession, especially in times of turmoil.

What these October observances say to me is this: our work is important and needed now more than ever. Advocacy, whether at the reference desk, in library administration, or in the community, is not an optional part of librarianship. It is the work. To stand for access when others seek to restrict it, to center truth when others amplify falsehoods, and to serve every member of our community with dignity and respect, these are acts of courage that define who we are.

Having the courage to show up means choosing to be present, even when the things around you seem uncertain or uncomfortable. It means standing firm in your values, amplifying your voice when silence feels safer, and acting when inaction would be easier. For me, it is summed up by the inspiration card that sits on my desk: "Speak up even if your voice shakes."

## Advocacy as a Personal Practice

When I think about advocacy, I also think about where it began for me. Girl Scouting has been a meaningful part of my life since I was a child and now as an adult volunteer. Every October, Girl Scouts across the United States celebrate the birthday of our founder, Juliette Gordon Low, born on October 31, 1860. It was in scouting that I first learned the power of advocacy and the importance of taking action to make the world a better place.

The Girl Scout Law teaches scouts to be honest, fair, friendly, helpful, courageous, strong, and to respect ourselves and others. Those lessons formed my earliest understanding of what it means to be an advocate, to stand up for one's values, to serve the community, and to lift others as you climb.

The Girl Scout slogan, *"Do a good turn daily,"*<sup>1</sup> reminds scouts that we can make a difference in both big and small ways. That spirit of everyday action continues to guide me as a librarian and leader, affirming that advocacy is not only about grand gestures but also about the small, consistent acts that make a lasting impact.

The Girl Scouts also promote breast cancer awareness during October in honor of Juliette Gordon Low, who died of breast cancer on January 17, 1927.<sup>1</sup> Her courage and commitment to empowering girls and women continue to inspire generations of Girl Scouts to lead with courage, confidence, and character. For me, that same spirit carries into librarianship.

## Advocacy in Action: Learning from Our Peers

Across the country, library associations and systems are demonstrating what sustained advocacy looks like in practice. As we look ahead, I encourage you to identify your state's next library legislative day or advocacy day and begin preparing now to participate. These events provide invaluable opportunities to share your library's impact, meet with legislators, and strengthen relationships that advance our collective mission. Regardless of the type of library you work in, your voice and presence matter. Advocacy days remind decision makers that libraries are essential resources in our communities and on our campuses. Examples from the broader community include:

The New York Library Association (NYLA) hosts an annual Library Advocacy Day to bring together library workers, trustees, and supporters to meet legislators, share impact stories, and advocate for equitable funding.

The Michigan Library Association (MLA) rallied under the theme "Libraries Light the Way!"—a joyful reminder that libraries illuminate pathways to learning, discovery, and belonging. Their framework emphasized that every library worker, regardless of title, can advocate by building relationships and articulating how libraries contribute to strengthening civic life.

On the West Coast, the California Library Association (CLA) hosts a "Day in the District" initiative, featuring the Ursula Meyer Library Advocacy Training Day. This annual workshop equips participants with the tools to communicate effectively with local and state officials and sustain advocacy throughout the year.

These efforts demonstrate that advocacy is not a one-time event. It is continuous, creative, and relational. They show how library associations build awareness, cultivate allies, and shape public policy.

Online engagement has also expanded the scope of advocacy. The Take Action for Libraries website (<https://action.everylibrary.org/>) allows information professionals to pledge their support

for issues affecting libraries nationwide. Through this website, library advocates can sign petitions, contact their representatives, and amplify messages that protect funding, intellectual freedom, and access to information. Sometimes advocacy begins with a single click, but when multiplied by thousands of voices, it can influence the national conversation.

I encourage you to explore opportunities in your own state or region to participate in library advocacy days, legislative visits, or statewide campaigns. Whether through a local rally, a digital pledge, or a quiet conversation with a policymaker, every act of advocacy contributes to a stronger, more resilient future for libraries.

## Everyday Acts of Advocacy

Advocacy is most powerful when it becomes an integral part of our daily routine. Beyond attending Advocacy or Legislative Days, we can all take small but meaningful actions that amplify the value of libraries and the people they serve.

While everyday acts of advocacy are important for libraries, they are equally important for the issues that matter most to you. The same principles that drive us to defend intellectual freedom, equitable access, and literacy can be applied to other causes that shape our communities and our world. Whether your passion is health equity, environmental justice, literacy, or social inclusion, advocacy enables you to use your voice to make a meaningful difference.

Each of these actions, no matter how small, reinforces the idea that advocacy is not reserved for specific roles or occasions. The responsibility to be advocates belongs to all of us, every day, in everything we do.

## Timeless Lessons in Advocacy

Advocacy has been a constant thread in librarianship's evolution. Kirchner offers guidance encouraging librarians to "Make it your business to stay in business," which remains just as relevant today.<sup>2</sup> Kirchner encouraged librarians to promote their libraries, build networks, understand their allies, and see advocacy as a learned skill rather than a spontaneous act.

Dr. Camila Alire in collaboration with Patty Wong and Julie Todaro, launched "52 Ways to Make a Difference – Public Library Advocacy Throughout the Year." This initiative provided a full year of advocacy ideas, one for each week, encouraging every library worker to integrate advocacy into their daily practice. Their message was clear: advocacy should not begin at the point of crisis but rather be built into the library's culture itself.<sup>3</sup>

Building on that tradition, Pionke et al. reaffirmed that advocacy is not the work of a few. It is the shared responsibility of all. The authors' study of MLA members identified three key themes: vulnerability, voice, and value. Medical librarians, they found, are seeking stronger national advocacy, greater visibility, and tangible tools to communicate their impact.<sup>4</sup>

From Kirchner to Pionke, the message is consistent: advocacy is both tradition and transformation.

## Advocacy Extends Beyond October

The lessons of advocacy are timeless, but October gives them greater meaning. It is a month filled with worthy causes that remind us why our work matters and why it must continue. Advocacy is what was on my heart when I began writing this piece, surrounded by observances that honor who

we are and what we stand for. However, advocacy cannot be confined to a single month. It is the daily practice of living our values out loud, standing for truth, equity, and access even when it is uncomfortable.

Here are a few reminders I carry with me:

1. **Recognize your privilege and use your voice.** Each of us holds influence through our roles, our networks, or our access to resources. Use it to raise awareness, amplify the voices of historically excluded groups, and champion the right to read.
2. **Understand that advocacy looks different for everyone.** There is no single path. Advocacy may look like attending a rally, mentoring a colleague, or supporting a cause that aligns with your values. Every action matters.
3. **The most important thing is to act.** Advocacy is not passive. It is a verb. Small steps can have a powerful ripple effect.
4. **Keep going.** Advocacy is lifelong work. It requires endurance, empathy, and renewal. Progress happens through persistence.

I invite you to choose where you will align your advocacy efforts and to take actions that are appropriate for you and that fit into your life. You have to have the courage to show up for libraries, or for whatever issue is important to you and your sphere of influence. Advocacy is not about doing everything; it is about doing something, consistently, intentionally, and with purpose. Each of us has a role to play in advancing the work of libraries and the values that sustain our profession. When we act with conviction and compassion, we honor our shared belief that better information leads to better decisions and better lives.

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