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# The Need for Continued Activism in Black Librarianship

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## **The Need for Continued Activism in Black Librarianship**

Andrew P. Jackson (Sekou Molefi Baako)

The opening words to Bernard J. Keller's poem, "*Harvard 8/9/85*" begins with, "*If you cannot be the best for yourself, do it for those who were denied an opportunity to be the best...*"<sup>1</sup>. Those who attended the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ALA Mid-Winter Celebration in the early Monday morning hours heard this poem as a tribute to the spirits of those whose names may not be remembered, but who were none the less warriors not to be forgotten. Keller's poem (see *Essence Magazine*, November 1987 edition) has stayed with me since I first read it at a Brooklyn high school. Since then thousands have heard this poem. Our historical past is too important for us to forget how we got here and where we are going.

One interpretation of the African Adinkra symbol "Sankofa" means "*we must return and claim our past in order to move toward our future*"<sup>2</sup>. This is a constant reminder of the journey we have traveled, obstacles overcome and work still to be done in this world and in librarianship. In 1992, when I attended the 1<sup>st</sup> National Conference of African American Librarians (NCAAL) in Columbus, Ohio, my eyes were opened to the mission and purpose of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, Inc. (BCALA). I met Caucus officers, board members, and seized the opportunity to observe numerous Black Librarians at one time. Reading the history of this pioneering organization in the conference program and listened to speakers and panelists gave me a new perspective on our profession. As a result, I was moved to become a part of this movement - The Black Librarian in America.

As I had not yet attended graduate school or become familiar with the history of librarianship, I was unaware of the struggles for access to library services, jobs or opportunities. I was unaware of the African “keepers of the scroll” in ancient Africa or early Black Librarians in America. I was riveted by Prof. Itibari M. Zulu’s conference paper presentation, *The Ancient Kemetic Roots of Library and Information Science*.<sup>3</sup> When I entered my library graduate program in 1993, this history was omitted from the introductory course in a similar way chapters of pre-American Black History are missing from traditional history courses and textbooks. This sparked an interest in the African roots of library science and caused me to ponder about where we fit in the history of libraries here in America. These memorable experiences convinced me it was not adequate to just have membership in the Black Caucus without being active, learning its history and remaining committed to the vision and legacy paved by Dr. E.J. Josey and other. This edition of *The Black Librarian in America* was inspired by that first library conference and activist librarians, especially E. J. Josey.

The struggle for equality in librarianship is no different and if anything, parallels the struggles for civil and human rights in America. By reading the first two volumes of *The Black Librarian in America*, two editions of *The Handbook of Black Librarianship*, conference proceedings of earlier NCAALs, and other works and essays by E.J. Josey, *Educating Black Librarians* (1991) by Benjamin F. Speller, Jr., Donnarae MacCann’s *Social Responsibility in Librarianship Essays on Equality* (1989), John Mark Tucker’s *Untold Stories Civil Rights, Libraries, and Black Librarianship* (1998), *In Our Own Words* (1996) by Teresa Y. Neely and Khafre K. Abif, and Binnie Tate Wilkin’s *African American Librarians in the Far West Pioneers and Trailblazers* (2006), or works by other authors in this profession, we are introduced to and reminded of who and how Black librarians contributed to the development and participated in the

evolution of libraries. Despite being ignored, dismissed, denied jobs, promotions, discriminated against in the workplace, and denied entry into libraries, hotels and restaurants, Black men and women librarian ancestors and living elders broke down barriers, kicked in doors, sat in, prayed in, withstood insults. Black Librarians attended conferences and meetings, participated in council sessions and round tables at ALA Annual Conferences and Mid-Winter Meetings to move forward an agenda of change and resistance, with or without the cooperation of the status quo. I encourage young librarians to read the books, essays and papers to understand the significance of their sacrifices and accomplishments in spite of the odds. Because of those Black Librarians of yesterday, Black Librarians today stand tall.

Pioneers and trailblazers like Daniel Alexander Payne Murray (1852-1925), Edward Christopher Williams (1871-1929) and Thomas Fountain Blue (1866-1935) through Virginia Lacy Jones (1912-1984), E.J. Josey (1924-2009), Effie Lee Morris (1921-2009) and others have taught us lessons of strength, leave a blueprint of revolution on how to make changes within organizations and the profession, in or outside of the system, and how to make the necessary preparations behind closed doors when necessary. As Frederick Douglass once said, *“Power concedes nothing without a demand, it never did and it never will...”*

All is not well in librarianship. Despite all that has been accomplished and all that Black Librarians have overcome, there is still work to be done, glass ceilings to be shattered, closed doors to be accessed. As with any movement, after major progress has been made there comes a period of adjustment, growth and a shifting of power, and then complacency, it's time to go back and get it. It's no time for Black Librarians to get comfortable or shift the agenda now that new players are at the table. Progress can only be sustained with commitment, involvement and mentoring of the next generations of librarians of all cultures and interests. As we've learned the

struggle for equity and equality is no longer a Black and White struggle, it's a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-dimensional, multi-issue struggle in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As with the Civil Rights Movement, progress is made when we work together with colleagues of like minds, other organizations, other ethnic groups. Power to the People!

Sadly, we are witnessing the transition of elder librarians and retirement of the generation that entered the profession as a result of battles won and obstacles overturned in the 1950's and 1960's, a time when Black Librarians were looked up to as mentors and followed as trailblazers. Today's call for action is for young and new Black Librarians to stand tall and firm on the shoulders of our ancestors, benefit from their nurturing and work. It's your time to keep on pushing, make a difference and address the challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Activism is as necessary today as it was during the Civil Rights Era. But, as it was back in the day, some people are still afraid of revolution, afraid to stand, fight or belong to an organization with "Black" in its name. And yes, some do not see themselves as "Black Librarians" or "Activist Librarians," only librarians who happen to be Black and in many cases don't see the need for activism. No need to join the Black Caucus, no need to attend a National Conference of African American Librarians or a Joint Conference of Librarians of Color (JCLC). Some feel that in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century membership in an American Library Association, a roundtable or a professional organization of their choice is sufficient. Is it? Are the issues of Black Librarians so high on their agenda that we no longer need our own organizations to address issues affecting our community? As with our founders, I don't think that will ever be the case.

This is still America, and there will always be racism, classism and other “isms” that separate and withhold access and services. It’s the American way! Just as there is still a need for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) or Black chapters of other professional organizations and Black Greek organizations, BCALA serves that same purpose. Involvement of Black Librarians within ALA and its respective roundtables, committees, and professional organizations is warranted and necessary. We can only hope that in the future racism will cease to exist in America. However, until that day the need for BCALA, the NAACP and other like organizations is mandatory.

Our responsibility to ancestor warriors and elders is not fulfilled. The work of the first generation of Black Librarians was not completed with the advent of BCALA in 1970. As E.J. Josey and Marva L. DeLoach wrote in their Introduction to the second edition of *The Handbook of Black Librarianship*, (2000) “...As one reviews the history of African Americans, it becomes quite obvious that black Americans have had a long and distinguished history in American librarianship...”<sup>4</sup> and the profession’s focus on ‘cultural diversity’ should not cloud the need to address issues that affect Black Librarians, libraries that focus on public and academic Africana collections across the Diaspora. As Dr. Josey wrote in his Introduction to *The Black Librarian in America: Revisited* (1994), “...the country, including all of its institutions and libraries, have given mainly lip service to the concept (of cultural diversity). They have not implemented the concept so that there would be change in our society. In spite of cultural diversity, African Americans in general, and African American librarians in particular, would contend that until the United States comes fully to grips with its most historic, endemic, and pervasive problem—the problem of racism—it will be incapable of fashioning a real cultural diversity climate throughout the land...”<sup>5</sup>

*“If you cannot fight the fight for yourself...If you cannot dream the dream for yourself... If you cannot love you for yourself... If you cannot be proud for yourself... Do it for yourself if you can, but whenever you cannot do it for yourself, do it for them.”*

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