

**Remarks by Gail Spangenberg
President,
Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy
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**Introducing the American Library Association
as Recipient of the Leadership Award
of the National Coalition for Literacy**

I've never introduced an organization before. But what an organization! The American Library Association is truly remarkable, one of the nation's great assets.

Did you know that the ALA is the oldest and largest library association in the world? It has more than 64,000 members. Its reach is international in scope. Somewhere between 13,000-15,000 public libraries in the U.S. – and they are spread across the country -- are a part of this membership. About half of them provide adult literacy services in some form.

From the standpoint of protecting and advancing knowledge and information, the ALA has no peer.

Its wide range of programs and services prove daily that it values the needs and rights of *all* Americans – every age, every ethnic and racial background, every level of educational achievement.

Its actions – day in and day out – protect and advance the best of America!

ALA's Washington Office works to encourage responsible political behavior, accountability, and public policy – at national, state, and local levels. Its huge array of Chicago-based programs are dedicated to building public understanding of libraries. They celebrate freedom of thought, promote effective library use, develop access and inclusiveness, enhance quality of life issues -- on a community by community basis. And the ALA dedicates a lot of energy to leadership development.

The ALA is a staunch defender of our core democratic values and *open access* to information and knowledge is an area of very active interest there. Along with the rights of individuals to privacy in their reading and library habits, and to the tools of reading and literacy.

I had the pleasure of attending the June national conference of the ALA in New Orleans in June. It was a remarkable event for many reasons. Here are just a couple of them:

I was truly impressed that the ALA decided right after Hurricane Katrina devastated that city to keep its annual conference there. This sounds like a small thing, but most contracts were *not* honored. The ALA was the first large national conference to return to New Orleans. ALA leadership and its attendees – 17,000 strong – provided a remarkable vote of confidence in the city's future and their presence paved the way for other large conferences to return to New Orleans. The gesture didn't go unnoticed by the national media.

City officials were gracious, grateful, exuberant. Mayor Nagin was especially profuse in his thanks at the opening session of the conference. His people worked very hard to make the ALA feel welcome, and the ALA gave back.

I mention this experience because I think it reflects a core value by which the ALA operates.

Madeleine Albright was another remarkable thing about that conference. She was the keynote speaker. She was eloquent in her own understanding and praise of the ALA as an educational and democratic force. And she was *highly* complimentary of the ALA because it respects, encourages, and *listens to* diversity of opinion and thought.

The qualities I've just touched on are good enough reason for the Coalition to give its leadership award to the ALA. We *want* people to be literate for these *very large reasons*, not just to be literate per se.

But the NCL is about *adult literacy*. I should mention a few of the ALA's remarkable achievements on this front, too.

One of five key action areas at the ALA is something called "21st Century Literacy." Each of its key action areas has a principle explicitly stated to guide its actions. For 21st Century Literacy, it is: *To assist and promote libraries in helping children and adults develop the skills they need – the ability to read and to use computers – understanding that the ability to seek and effectively use information resources is essential in a global information society.*

In looking through the ALA website, I was impressed to discover that it gives dozens of special awards every year. From the standpoint of literacy, I was struck by three:

Its Howard Award is a bi-annual award that honors a librarian, a library board or group, or an individual who has “*exhibited unusual courage for the benefit of library programs or services.*” The optimist in me likes to think that adult literacy service is an area of attention for this award. If it isn’t yet, maybe it will be.

Two awards are specific to adult literacy. One, the Advancement of Literacy Award, “*honors a publisher, bookseller, hardware and/or software dealer, foundation or other group, that has made a significant contribution to the advancement of adult literacy.*” The award is given at the ALA annual conference each year.

The other award, the ALTA Award, is given annually to a library trustee or volunteer who has made a significant contribution to addressing the literacy problem in the U.S.

On another front, I’m sure that most of us in adult literacy at the national level remember that the ALA was one of the key forces, perhaps *the instrumental* force, in creating the National Coalition for Literacy in its original form. That was in the 1980s. My organization at the time – the Business Council for Effective Literacy – gave a \$400,000 grant to launch the NCL back then, and I vividly recall the depth of the ALA’s commitment to the Coalition, as well as its wisdom about the range of buy-in that would be needed

from the potential membership for the group to succeed. Its president at the time was our own Bob Wedgeworth. He understood then that there was a hot connection between literacy and libraries. He still does.

On still another front, when I did my national study of the role of libraries in adult literacy in the mid-90s (the Library of Congress was the main sponsoring organization), the leadership of the ALA took the report seriously.

Among other actions it took, it hired its first full-time literacy officer in the Office of Literacy and Outreach Services.

Under the leadership of Dale Lipschultz – she’s the Literacy Officer there, in addition to being the NCL’s *very* active and superb president – the ALA has developed a whole variety of literacy-related services for its membership, including training, information resources, and technical assistance. Most recently the Office’s outreach was extended when its materials and services were made available on a new website, called BuildLiteracy.org. BuildLiteracy operates in collaboration with Literacy USA, Proliteracy, and the National Institute for Literacy.

ALA also joined with Verizon, the National Center for Family Literacy, NIFL, and Reading is Fundamental in another partnership. It’s an online network called Verizon Literacy Network. This initiative offers another online approach to providing resources to promote literacy.

Finally, for many years, the ALA was the fiscal home of the National Coalition for Literacy, and as such had a continuous in-kind role in the life of the Coalition. That role is historically important, continues on to this day in other forms, and is both unique *and* generous.

That Dale Lipschultz has been able to function well as NCL's president these past two years is due in part to ALA's understanding and commitment to literacy, and to the support of the woman who directs the Office for Literacy and Outreach Services, Satia Marshall Orange.

Satia is accepting tonight's award on behalf of the ALA.

Anyone who has ever heard Satia speak about the needs of underserved populations or about adult literacy knows her to be a strong and persuasive advocate. This value was instilled in her from childhood by parents who were both librarians. Satia is deeply dedicated to equity in access, and, I have been told, sees adult literacy as essential to achieving that access.

Satia. 😊