
Volume 25
Number 2 *Oregon Libraries are for Everyone:
Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion*

10-28-2019

Notes From an Equity Fellow: Casual Diversity and ALA Conferences Spark Enthusiasm

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Recommended Citation

Frazee, A. R. (2019). Notes From an Equity Fellow: Casual Diversity and ALA Conferences Spark Enthusiasm. *OLA Quarterly*, 25(2), 13-15. <https://doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1986>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Notes From an Equity Fellow:

Casual Diversity and ALA Conferences Spark Enthusiasm

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An elementary school librarian for Portland Public Schools, AYN REYES FRAZEE takes seriously her responsibility to the 452 students she serves. “Developing our small but mighty collection to include beautiful new books with characters who look like me and my students has been a welcome challenge,” she wrote. In addition to her work in the school library, she serves on the board of the Oregon Association of School Libraries and as a reviewer for Kirkus. Ayn is a 2019 ALSC Equity Fellow. You can see what she’s up to on her library Instagram: @BeachElemLibrary

I’m a school librarian, and I love connecting students with books they get excited about reading—we’ve all had that thrilling moment of handing a patron a book and seeing their eyes light up with recognition and enthusiasm. There’s nothing better! Connecting readers with books that resonate is our goal and our joy. A recently awarded fellowship opened the doors to new conference experiences for me, deepening my understanding of the many diverse and authentic voices in children’s literature while also highlighting the places where there is room for growth.

The children’s and YA publishing world has increased the representation of diversity in book characters gradually over the years but still has a long way to go (CCBC, 2019). When I stepped into the role of librarian at my elementary school five years ago, I noticed that books on the shelves representing black and brown characters seem to stick to a narrow range of topics and skew toward the stereotypical—books featuring African American kids frequently have Civil Rights and basketball themes and books featuring Latino children portray characters struggling with immigration issues. While these topics are important and do represent the interests and experiences of some of my students, I found myself searching for books featuring main characters who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in the ways that white characters have been represented for years: solving mysteries, creating art, navigating friend drama and more. Finding high-quality books featuring this type of



casual diversity—meaningful diversity that is incorporated into a book but isn't the focus of the story—became my new crusade. Even more challenging is finding books featuring diverse characters that are written by diverse authors, a movement that has been aptly named Own Voices. Many representations of racially and ethnically diverse, disabled, LGBTQ, and religious characters are written by authors who don't come from the groups they're writing about. My students have noticed the new additions to our collection and are checking them out to read with gusto. My goal is to enhance inclusion for all and especially to help students of color feel seen and heard at school. Students in the school where I teach speak at least 11 different languages, and the majority of our student body is made up of children of color. It's incredibly important to infuse culturally relevant components into everything we do and recognize that culture is a resource.

I became aware of the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC) Equity Fellowship through an Oregon Association of School Libraries listserv post last fall. ALSC is a division of ALA, the American Library Association. The Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Task Force within ALSC was seeking ethnically and racially diverse library professionals who demonstrated a commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion in their personal or professional life, a capacity for leadership, and are providing direct services to children. In my application essay, I wrote about my work seeking out and selecting books for my school library collection, as well as my experience as a Mexican-American school librarian. I received a phone call later in the fall from a member of the task force letting me know that I had been selected as one of only six ALSC Equity Fellows in the country for 2019–2020. The news was exhilarating, and I was thrilled to learn that the fellowship includes membership for two years in ALA and financial support to attend the 2019 ALA Midwinter Conference in Seattle and the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, D.C. In addition, the EDI Task Force connected me with a mentor from ASLC who can help me get more involved in the organization and navigate the complex conference schedules.

I met the other five EDI Fellows for the first time in Seattle at the ALA Midwinter Conference in January 2019. After an inspiring opening featuring Melinda Gates, followed by some overwhelming time exploring the enormous exhibit hall, I connected with the Fellows as well as the members of the EDI Task Force who had originated the idea for the fellowship at an after-hours event held on the top floor of the beautiful Seattle Public Library. It felt incredible to meet library professionals from all over the country who had also been awarded the EDI Fellowship. I have never before been in a professional setting where all of the library staff I was meeting with were people of color. It was both empowering and made me recognize how exclusive library work can sometimes feel as a woman of color. Despite being Latina, I hold a huge amount of white privilege that impacts my work and my world. My time at ALA Midwinter prompted much self-reflection as well as ignited my interest in continuing the specific equity, diversity, and inclusion work that ALSC has begun.

Around six months later, I boarded a plane headed for Washington, D.C.—less than a day after I finished closing my school library for the summer. I ran into many people I'd met and connected with at the Midwinter Conference and felt more confident that I was where I belonged. Addresses and sessions headlined by YA and children's authors like Jason Reynolds, Yuyi Morales, Tomi Adeyemi, and other talented writers and literacy experts punctuated a packed conference schedule. Planned meet-ups with the other EDI Fellows and my mentor throughout the conference kept me from feeling too overwhelmed. One experience organized by the EDI task force and mentors was attending the 50th anniver-



sary Coretta Scott King Awards breakfast; it was a privilege and a highlight of my first ALA Annual Conference. The audience laughed and cried with award winners as they shared their acceptance speeches, and the importance of books with which children can relate was underscored repeatedly. I also attended the Pura Belpré Awards Celebración and was in awe of the closeness that everyone in the room felt as award winners put out a call-to-action to protect our most vulnerable children. The conference was at times surreal when I spotted legendary authors eating bacon at a publisher breakfast or asked a recent Caldecott Honor winner if I could take a selfie with her. I listened and absorbed as much as I could from meetings, author talks, and sessions that I attended and I'm still digesting it all with the help of my copious notes.

I returned to reality from both conferences filled with excitement about new project ideas and a bit overwhelmed by the ambitious task that we as librarians are charged with: helping users find what they need, interpret, and then synthesize and share it. In my case, I am more motivated than ever to connect my students with books they can feel proud to read. Nearly every author I heard speak at both conferences attributed their push to write stories to a response to not seeing characters that shared their experiences or skin color, in books they read growing up or in school. I want my students to write books because they are inspired by the wave of diverse characters crowding our library shelves, not because there is a hole where these characters should be. In my own small circle of influence, this will look like continuing to weed books that uphold racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic or other inexcusable messages—even if they're beloved classics. It will also look like having student voices involved in my selection process, and like taking extra time to research new acquisitions and support books and publishers that promote Own Voices. All this while being careful to avoid tokenism and optical allyship. It's a huge undertaking, and I will likely make mistakes along the way, but I know that I have a fantastic group of new friends in ALSC to bounce ideas off of, a wealth of experiences from two conferences to draw from, and colleagues here at home who will support this important work.

While the status of the ALSC Equity Fellowship for next year is still unknown, you can find the most up-to-date information on all ALSC awards, fellowships, and scholarship opportunities at: <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/scholarships> 

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