Win anything? Me – never! Door prizes, raffles, Bingo, you name it – I’ve lost it! Thus I was pleased and surprised to win the OPLA travel grant to PLA 2010 in Portland, Oregon. A career concentrated in public library work, I have attended my share of library professional development but never before to the conference Mecca for public librarians. The opportunity did not disappoint!

Arriving to spring, Portland smelled like blossoms! Trees not in full bridal veil were of the light green that promises renewal …. a far cry from the grey at home in Ontario! I also loved Portland’s mix of heritage and new architecture, its clean streets, friendly folks and its fast and free MAX light rail transit.

First morning, MAX delivered me to the conference centre. If I had forgotten I was on the West Coast, the preponderance of Birkenstocks and a relaxed dress code soon reminded me. Looking around the conference, I could not help but notice the aging demographic – my age albeit, but a greying and mature-figured group certainly. Where were those of the next generation? Victims of library budget constraint - left behind to mind the stacks while senior staff and managers attended?

The conference opened with singer/ songwriter Nathalie Merchant performing from her latest album, setting to music works of past and contemporary poets. She made a heartfelt shout out to public librarians, recalling the support she, a small town girl with big dreams, found at the local library. Closing with her 2005 hit song “Thank you”, there was not a dry eye in the crowd.

The audience was also moved by the keynote address following, given by New York Times, Pulitzer winning journalist, Nicholas Kristof, who related stories of women and girls from developing countries. Their realities illustrate the lack of female human rights in the developing world; a situation he feels is one of most pressing global issues of our time.

On to the sessions - every day, every timeslot, it was difficult to choose! Each presented three or four possibilities. All were engaging and one very much stood out – that an innovative take on public library service developed by the Rangeview Library District in Colorado.

Rangeview brands themselves with a squiggle “a revolution that starts with a doodle and has no end”. They call it ANYTHINK™ and with this concept, Rangeview has moved along the San Jose way and stepped beyond. Theirs is a customer-centric approach. ANY HURDLE CHALLENGED/ANY OPPORTUNITY EXPLORED/ANY GIANT LEAP TAKEN/ANY VISION A REALITY. Their new library buildings are designed around public use first, then collections, and built at Silver or Gold LEED standards. Their collections focus on popular materials and they have introduced a fines-free policy. Rangeview now also employs a word focused classification system - ANYTHINK which proclaims: “We’ve dumped Dewey”.
Their publicity is stellar. “Any accusation/Any culprit/Any twist/Anyone’s guess – want mystery?” On their website, the “ANYTHINK TANK” they reach out to their customers: In our complex, ever-changing world, libraries are finding it more important than ever to innovate and evolve…. to establish themselves as vital to their communities. .... The Anythink Tank is a place where library enthusiasts can discuss challenges and share innovations they have made or would like to see. A most impressive feature of the website is the catalog link that first brings you to an interactive calculator which adds up, in real dollars, the personal worth of their library service. (My test calculation came to over $1400 per month)

The Rangeview staffing models were redesigned; job descriptions rewritten. "Ranglers" (remember this is Colorado) are the material handlers, the “Concierge form the customer service staff and the reference staff are “Guides”. All staff re-applied for the jobs they preferred, guaranteed to remain employed with no drop in salary. At work ANYTHINKERS” are encouraged to be playful –Fun at work is essential for a healthy work environment. How do you incorporate play in your work day? (We personally like kazoos and after-hours bowling.) And in keeping, at their PLA session we were gifted with Anythink goody bags complete with kazoos! The Rangeview “Anythinkers” certainly left me thinking!

In fact, I came away from Portland with much to think about from every session I attended. Those discussing library security hit home with some shared realities and library in-charge strategies. The speakers and the marketplace sparked dreams and new ideas about public library service. This bi-annual conference, focusing on public library issues, is a wonderful forum for networking and sharing. PLA 2012 is slated for Philadelphia. You might want to start planning for it now.

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