



of Radically Trusting Teens

What better way to recognize this 50th anniversary of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) as a division of the American Library Association (ALA) than through an article about a key aspect of YALSA's mission that **VOYA** shares? In *The Beasts Have Arrived: The Blooming of Youth Participation in YALSA* on page 116, Diana Tixier Herald and Diane P. Monnier range from today back to a 1979 White House Conference on Library and Information Services.

The youth participation (YP) movement has paralleled and shaped my career, as my first young adult librarian job also began in 1979. Among other sources for their article, Herald and Monnier mined memories and records from my work as Cathi Edgerton in committees and task forces that developed YALSA's youth participation practices. (Before 1992, it was YASD, for Young Adult Services Division.) This editorial serves as full disclosure.

As YALSA turns 50, I celebrate 25 years of my own membership, exactly half of YALSA's existence, when I progressed from YA librarian to **VOYA** Editor-in-Chief (since 1997). All my work in YALSA reflects my conviction that just as youth participation governs teen services, so it must be infused within the organization. In an old manila folder at home, I recently found a grey photocopy of a February 1980 **VOYA** article, *Youth Involvement Means Never Having to Say You're a Token*. I had taken to heart its advice: "The youth viewpoint must be presented by young people themselves."

One year later, in 1981, YASD established a Youth Participation in Library Decision-Making Committee led by Evie Wilson, who became YASD President in 1982, the year I joined. That same year, my first Young Adult Advisory Board (YAAB), at Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland, began attending an annual January meeting at Prince George's County Memorial Library System, where YAAB enjoyed sharing their opinions of titles nominated for YASD's Best Books for Young Adults (BBYA) with local librarians. YAAB also sent their ratings to one BBYA Committee member each year.

Pratt's YAAB was so disappointed with the 1984 BBYA list that they wrote a letter to Mike Printz, the incoming 1985 BBYA Chair (yes, *that* Mike Printz), asking how teens might get a better hearing from librarians voting for Best Books. Printz sent excerpts of YAAB's letter to his Committee members and others, including **VOYA** editors Dorothy Broderick and Mary K. Chelton. After Chelton replied by asking the BBYA Committee to clarify "the unresolved issue of what kind of youth participation is actually appropriate for BBYA," eleven YAAB members wrote a letter to **VOYA**, published in August 1985, offering to serve as a national clearinghouse, collecting teens' reviews of BBYA nominations across the country.

Only one teen group responded to YAAB's offer: O.R.A.C.L.E. was just an hour's drive away in Alexandria, Virginia. The two groups enjoyed a spirited meeting at Pratt Central Library. The result—and my sacred trust—was a file box of orange cards containing 274 opinions on 105 BBYA nominations from 35 teens in both groups. As an observer during 1986 Midwinter BBYA meetings in Chicago, within the tight frame of two minutes for each title, I read aloud YAAB's and O.R.A.C.L.E.'s comments. Their favorite novel didn't make the list—**Walk Through Cold Fire** (Delacorte, 1985/**VOYA** August 1985), an intense drama about a rebellious girl written by nineteen-year-old Cin Forshay-Lunsford. Literally voicing teens' choices enhanced my radar for rare titles that both teens and adults judge "Best." This book wasn't one of them—although it was a **VOYA** Perfect Ten.

At the same conference, I visited the Youth Participation Committee chaired by Christy Tyson, whose YAAC teens in Spokane, Washington, gave their own annual Golden Pen Award to their favorite book. The YP Committee showed interest in considering a booklist compiled by teens. In 1986 and 1987, I served concurrently on the BBYA and YP Committees—of course. Among only five of fifteen BBYA members who brought teen reviews to the table, I encountered resistance to teen voices. Two thirds of our committee believed that only professionals could judge quality literature for teens.

Pratt's YAAB was invited by BBYA Chair Eugene LaFaille to give a short presentation at a local BBYA meeting on January 7, 1989, at ALA in Washington, D.C. After our encounter with a YASD representative who refused to allow the teens into the meeting room without badges, a scarlet-faced LaFaille himself ushered us through the door. YAAB's founding member Bill Henry had returned from college to tell the Committee how much the group's seven-year involvement with Best Books meant to them. (A quote from Bill's speech appears on page 118.) Just a few months later in May, YAAB joined with teens from other Pratt branches for an all-day conference to select their own Youth-to-Youth Books: A List for Imagination and Survival, which later served as a model for YALSA's Teens' Top Ten Books.

After moving in 1990 to Colorado, where I started another YAAB at Boulder Public Library, I consulted Mary K. Chelton about the politics of YP in YALSA. Her advice: "Change the rules." She helped me to compose this motion: to "seek permission from ALA Policy Monitoring Committee for an exemption to ALA meeting policy, which now prevents non-ALA members from attending conference meetings. This exemption would be limited to one meeting of YALSA's Best Books for Young Adults Committee at each conference, to allow invited local young adults to participate by expressing their views on nominated books."

On February 5, 1994, YALSA Board member Patrick Jones made this motion, which was seconded by Elizabeth Elam and quickly passed by the Board. ALA Policy Monitoring Chair Charles Bunge saw no need for an exemption, suggesting the "easier way" of registering teens as conference guests. Now YALSA's Youth Participation Coordinator handles all details for teen guests at any YALSA event.

Today youth participation, once so laborious to organize, happens easily in cyberspace. At her "Teens and Technology" workshops, Michele Gorman explains how librarians must connect with teens by "using *their* tools to reach them, not ours." As Teen Services Manager of the new Loft at *ImaginOn* in the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County in North Carolina, Gorman uses social networking (see her library's **MySpace** at <http://www.myspace.com/libraryloft>), blogging, Wikis, podcasting, photo and video sharing, instant messaging, virtual worlds, gaming, and more.

How did Gorman emerge, without a single discipline problem, from her 2006 Teen Read Week event that drew 2,346 teens? "Radical trust," she says. "I trust them and they trust me. We take the power out of somebody else's hands and put it in theirs."

In my YP heart, I recognize "radical trust," which served me well with teens. And handing over our power is what youth participation has always been about. That's why it makes adults and organizations nervous. Gorman could have been one of my own YAAB teens. Her new generation of teen librarians knows instinctively how to radically trust teens today.—CDM. ■



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BILL HENRY,
PRATT YAAB
MEMBER, IN
1985.