



One Teen Among Adults on the Library Board

Effecting Change from the Inside Out

▶ ALYSSA RATLEDGE

I SERVED FIVE MONTHS on the Library Advisory Board before I truly understood what I was doing.

The revelation didn't occur when I attended my first meeting, or helped interview candidates for the position of Library Director, or assisted in drafting recommendations on library hours for the City Council. It didn't come as I pored over budget breakdowns and staffing shortages, or even as I heard citizen statements for a support rally. No, it wasn't until much later that I realized the magnitude of my position.

Over the years, the public library had become my second home. I spent hour after hour there among the books, reading everything I could, staring longingly at the place on the shelf where a novel of my own would someday sit. Naturally, I became a youth volunteer the month I hit twelve. Working both at the Youth Services desk and as a member of the library's Young Adult Advisory Council (YAAC) showed me how the library operated behind the scenes, and the more I learned, the more ideas I had for improvements—especially as city budget woes cut funding more and more each year.

So I decided to do something about it. At the suggestion of a YAAC advisor, I applied for a mayoral appointment to the Library Advisory

Board, the citizen committee that governs the library. My delight at being selected degenerated into nerves as I attended my first meeting. I certainly had plenty of ideas when talking to my parents or friends, but would I be able to articulate them to library administrators? At my first meeting, I merely observed. I listened to the interim Library Director detail her work; I carefully scrutinized the data presented to me; I began to understand the intricate inner workings of a place I'd always taken for granted. After a short time, I gained a whole new perception of the library world.

I was a full-fledged voting member of the board, but I also served as the YAAC representative, a liaison between the two groups. Each month I prepared a report on the activities of YAAC and Youth Services, covering everything from the summer reading program for children to the Teens' Top Ten program to floor-plan changes in the Youth Services department. I reported back to YAAC and Youth Services librarians on notable Library Advisory Board decisions, excitedly detailing events like service fee hikes and catalog changes—although it seemed that few people were as interested as I was in comprehensive budget calculations.

Only a few months into my appointment, a delicate topic reached our table: Internet filtering on the library's computers. For some, filtering seemed superfluous or even vaguely Orwellian; for others, it was unquestionably necessary. As the sole teenager on the board, I offered a unique perspective because of my firsthand experience with the filters on computers at my school.

Being philosophically opposed to the filters myself, I took great care to listen to the opposing viewpoint. I also had to consider, as we all did, the legalities of the filters, similar proposals in libraries across the country, and likely citizen reaction. Through the discussions that ensued, both within the board and with outside community members, I found myself in a position to help make a pivotal decision for the library. Yet to do so, I would have to balance my ideological standpoint on the issue with the realities of running a library. I knew that if I took this controversy seriously, in turn I would be taken seriously.

When the time came for our final proposal, it seemed that the entire city had come to watch. As I pointed out a probable flaw in the filtering system, as I discussed possible patron reactions with the mayor, I found a startling truth: Every single person in the room treated me as an equal. The mayor found my points valid. The city attorney respected and considered my opinions. My fellow board members—teachers, lawyers, businessmen—didn't see a teenager. They saw a colleague.

After four years on the Library Board, I feel like an old pro. When I'm in Library Board mode, everything clicks. I debate, I consider, I manage. I calculate FTEs (full-time exempt staff) and investigate options, doing all I can to keep the library afloat despite massive funding cuts. And when I drop by to check out books instead of adjust the budget, I see more than just the shelves and racks that I've always known. I see all the details, all the work that other patrons look right past—because I had a hand in putting so much of it into practice. ■

Alyssa Ratledge completed her second term on the City of Mesa (Arizona) Library Advisory Board in May 2007. A member of YAAC from grades seven through twelve, she graduated from high school with more than six hundred volunteer hours under her belt. She currently attends Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

