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Buddy Program for Georgia Libraries Conference: An Interview with NMRT Chair, Emily Williams, July 20, 2018

By Catherine Manci and Emily Williams

Tell me a little about what the buddy program is at the Georgia Libraries Conference.

The New Members Round Table (NMRT) Division Conference Buddy Program provides new GLA [Georgia Library Association] members and/or first-time conference goers an opportunity to meet an existing member who's attended the conference in the past and plans to be in Columbus this fall. The veteran member, or mentor, provides assistance to the mentee before and during the conference—answering any questions they might have and offering advice on how to navigate the event.

First-time attendees are identified at registration and given an opportunity to sign up for the program. NMRT will post a call for mentors on the GLA listserv and through our mailing list, and the mentors and mentees will be paired up. Beyond that, it's just a matter of making introductions via email or phone before the conference and then planning to meet in person in Columbus. From there, it's up to each individual to participate to the degree that they are able.

How and when did this program begin?

Kat Greer, the 2017 NMRT Chair, began the program prior to last year's conference in an effort to provide support to first-time conference attendees. She designed our version based on the Library Information Technology Association's (LITA) ALA Conference Buddy Program and the similar service provided by the GLBTRT Round Table of ALA. She drafted and submitted a proposal to the [GLA] Executive Board outlining the guidelines for participants and developed an action list of associated tasks necessary to establish the program. She essentially laid the foundation, and we're

working to improve the program and facilitate its continued success.

What does participation in the buddy program involve?

You know, it really only involves a small time commitment before and during the conference. As I've mentioned, we recommend that the mentor and mentee contact one another before the conference to ask and answer any questions about the conference and discuss their anticipated schedules. During the event, they should meet in person for a meal, coffee, tour of the vendors, or attend a session. Of course, we're going to encourage participants to attend the NMRT & Interest Group Council Social & Meet Up on Thursday evening, but it's not a requirement. We just want to connect people who don't know each other but might have something in common. Conferences can be intimidating and exhausting, especially for the more introverted types. Hopefully this program will serve as a way for people to meet someone new and reduce some stress for those experiencing conference jitters.

What is the benefit to the new members of GLA?

My assumption is that people have joined GLA to not only receive a conference discount, but to also become a member of a group of peers who dedicate some portion of their life to the world of libraries. Signing up as a mentee in the Conference Buddy Program enables you to meet someone within that peer group who is already familiar with not only the conference, but also the association. The program can serve as a networking tool to not only other members, but to committees and interest groups and the service opportunities they

provide. As a bonus, you'll have someone who can answer your conference questions ahead of time, provide a personalized introduction to the event, and be a friendly face when navigating through a sea of attendees.

What would you say is the benefit to the buddies that are veteran members of GLA?

Veteran members gain the opportunity of sharing their knowledge and seeing the conference from a different perspective. Besides the obvious service component, this is as much a networking opportunity for them as it is for the mentee. I can't think of one person in the library world who hasn't experienced some sort of fluctuation during their tenure—be it in vacancies, technology, or professional standards. The more people we know within our field means we have more people to call on when in need, be it to serve on a committee, provide assistance with a new ILS, or interpret new guidelines.

What is your hope for the future of the buddy program?

I'd like to see the Buddy Program reach more people and become a gateway to a more active relationship with the association. When connecting active members with new ones, there is greater potential to forge stronger relationships between new members and the association, leading to more individuals who will help do the work of our divisions, interest groups, and committees. New people inspire energy and provide fresh ideas and perspectives to the organization, preserving the legacy of excellence and innovation that GLA has established.

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