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## Banned books, politics, and ethics: A conversation between Larry R. Oberg and Maresa L. Kirk

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# Banned Books, Politics and Ethics:

*a Conversation Between Larry R. Oberg  
and Maresa L. Kirk*

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*Maresa L. Kirk serves as Circulation Services Coordinator at the Hatfield Library, and is one of the many young voices of the profession speaking out in defense of intellectual freedom and the freedom to read. Larry R. Oberg serves as University Librarian for the Mark O. Hatfield Library at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. He has been an outspoken advocate of intellectual freedom and a strong supporter of paraprofessionals in today's academic libraries.*

Today, libraries across the country are under attack from a variety of extremist groups that would ban books that somehow offend their beliefs. In Oregon, librarians and library staff defend their collections, intellectual freedom, and cultural diversity daily against the deeply anti-intellectual Oregon Citizens Alliance, or OCA. Since the founding of the OCA, attempts to ban library books have increased dramatically. The 1994 OCA sponsored anti-gay rights initiative, Measure 13, would have mandated censorship of libraries in the state. This is the story of how one library staff member chose to fight back. It is also a story that illustrates the extraordinary range of initiatives many library support staff undertake and the commitment they demonstrate to the values the profession has long defended.

LRO: Maresa, tell me a little about your background and what brought you to the Mark O. Hatfield Library?

MK: I grew up in Eugene, Oregon, the youngest of two girls. I graduated from the University of Oregon with a B.A., having majored in English and minored in anthropology. After graduation, I really had no idea what I wanted to do, so I took a couple of odd jobs before I stumbled across this one. When I saw the advertisement in the paper, I thought: "I love books and, even though I've never worked in a library, this sounds like something I could do." So, I decided to apply. I came to Salem for the interview and, by the time I got home, there was a message on my answering machine offering me the position of Circulation Services Coordinator.

LRO: Since you came to work in the library, you have shown an exceptional interest in the areas of intellectual freedom, banned books, and the rights of the disabled. What prompted your interest?

MK: Growing up in my family, we were taught and encouraged to speak up, to stand up and speak out, especially if we were witness to something profoundly wrong. We learned to set goals for ourselves and have our own

thoughts and our own opinions instead of letting someone else decide what we were to be and what we were to think. We were also taught to respect other people's ways. My parents were pretty contemporary for their time, I guess! I suppose that this upbringing taught me to respect everyone's rights. This includes the right for people to read, watch, or listen to whatever they wish. We can't make judgements for other people, nor should we. When I began working in the library, I was amazed at the amount of censorship occurring in my own backyard. It was Jan Tudor, a librarian I work with, who first motivated me in my fight against censorship. Jan had learned of my interest and it was she who suggested that I do a display for banned books week. I've never been the same since! My becoming involved with the rights of the disabled came about by having disabled family members and seeing the problems that they and their caretakers have to deal with daily. Things that we take for granted can be quite difficult, if not impossible, for the disabled.

LRO: Most everyone in the country knows by now that Oregon is the home of the OCA, a group that wants to deny civil rights to gays and lesbians. A lot of folks may not know, however, that the OCA's agenda also includes banning books in publicly supported libraries. In fact, the extraordinary growth in the number of challenged books in Oregon libraries in the past few years has paralleled the growth of the OCA. How did this threat to our collections influence you?

MK: I'd say that this threat influenced me strongly! In fact, it has made me fight even harder. It made me want to get involved, to put up displays, bring in speakers and, in short, to do everything I could to defend intellectual freedom. I would say the theme of this year's display came as a result of the political climate in Oregon, this strange



Maresa Kirk stands in front of a banned books display she designed.

need for one group of people to oppress other groups of people. A person doesn't have to be gay to be concerned with what's happening here. The influence the OCA has obtained here in Oregon is frightening, especially when you consider that most of the people out there aren't even aware of what they would be losing if Measure 13, the 1994 OCA-sponsored anti-gay rights initiative, or now the new "Daughter of 13" measure were to pass. The implications are much broader than people know or want to imagine. I want to try and help them see, try to enlighten them on the dangers that threats like these pose to all of us. I think the OCA and its supporters also need to know that there are people out here who don't agree with their discriminatory views. I mean, who are they going to go after next? People of color? Overweight people? Tall people? Where would it all stop?

LRO: One of the things that you have done that I really admire is this year's banned books exhibit that you pretty much single-handedly designed and constructed. It was very well received! Tell me about this exhibit and how it came about.

MK: Thanks! I've done a display twice before this one, and I really wasn't happy with either one of them. For the display this year, I took some of the ideas from the first two (and some library money) and expanded the display using a shadow-graffiti motif. I wanted shadows to represent powerlessness, people making decisions for you because they've decided you aren't able to make them for yourself.

So you're left standing in the shadows watching someone else make those life decisions for you, allowing others to cover your eyes, ears, and emotions. The last part of the display is showing people how they can come out of the shadows and take control. I've included information on how to register to vote, organizations that fight censorship, and encouragement to keep reading, watching, listening to banned materials. I think all of us, knowingly or not, have read at least one book that has been banned, censored, challenged, or expurgated by someone, somewhere. And whether or not we enjoyed the book, at least we learned something from the experience and we were able to decide if it was appropriate for us to read it ... not someone else. The people who worry that their children have access to books that they disapprove of should monitor their own children. They should not expect teachers, librarians, and baby sitters, to be responsible for what their children read. The argument that "I'm too busy" doesn't work. Both my parents worked full time and they were very aware of what my sister and I read, watched, or listened to.

LRO: You also talked me into sponsoring two continuing education workshops on values and ethics for all library staff this past summer. They were expensive to produce, so you must have been convincing! Like a lot of librarians, I guess that I had thought interest in the *Library Bill of Rights* and the other library policy statements on values and ethics was pretty much limited to librarians. Why do you think that they are important to support staff as well?

MK: Well, actually, I was only responsible for one workshop, *Ethics in Academic Libraries*. The other one I just helped organize. However, I do think that these library standards are important to everyone who works in a library and not limited to librarians alone. Support staff are just as likely to encounter ethical dilemmas as anyone else in a library, probably more so if they work in access or public services. We need to have as much information and training as possible to be able to respond effectively and to make the right decisions. When I began working here at Willamette, I wasn't presented with the *Library Bill of Rights* or the *Code of Professional Ethics*, but I was cautioned that we don't release certain pieces of information to patrons, such as who has the book charged out. My first question was why? I mean, I understood the desire for privacy, but it was never explained to me where this policy came from or how it came about. I found the *Library Bill of Rights* at a seminar I went to and then it all made sense: Everything came together. I realized that it wasn't just my library that had this policy! That understanding, that knowledge of the ethics of the profession of librarianship then clicked everything into place and now I am able to answer questions much more clearly, respond to patrons more accurately, and explain why we won't tell them who checked out the book they want. Then, instead of getting angry because they don't get the information they want, they appreciate the protection they are getting.

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## Banned Books

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LRO: I don't know if putting up the Banned Books Week displays and organizing workshops on ethics and values is typical of support staff initiatives around the country or not, but I'll bet that a lot of folks are saying to themselves that they probably wouldn't get the support they need to do these things in their own libraries. What advice to you have for them.

MK: I'd love to know what others are doing! I can't think that I am that atypical. Advice to folks that want to do this and aren't sure if they will be allowed to? Ask! You don't know the answer until you ask. If the answer is no, keep asking. Inform the powers that be about the importance of Banned Books Week and continuing education. Start small if you have to. I only got fifty dollars for the first display and had to borrow the books from bookstores and from staff! For the second year's display, I reused materials from the first. This year, I was able to obtain more money, which was a great help for creative purposes and visual effects. But again, the big help came from people lending materials and giving donations. The text that I wrote or cited was free of cost, and a faculty member donated his time to come and speak free of charge. If you aren't in an academic setting, that doesn't have to stop you. Solicit speakers from your local university or bookstore. You might be lucky and find someone who is willing to speak free of charge. If you can pull it off the first time, chances are the powers that be will have a harder time saying no the second time. With regards to workshops, they can be done with minimal charge to your institution as well. We linked up with one of our local consortia (Valley Link) and split the cost of the two seminars we held over the summer. If that's not an option, formulate a presentation yourself. Run off copies of the *Library Bill of Rights* and the *Code of Professional Ethics*, hand them out to participants, and then discuss them. Set up case studies and ask how, in the light of these policy statements, they would deal with the situation if it were to occur in their library. And go to a workshop yourself and report back on what you learned at your next staff meeting. Additionally, I would ask University Librarians and Library Directors to accept, promote and encourage the enthusiasm paraprofessionals show for their job and work to accommodate requests such as these.

LRO: Maresa, its been great talking to you! My last question is what you plan to do next, both here in the library and your own life?

MK: Thanks, Larry! It has been nice talking with you, too! At this point, I have decided that I would like to go on to graduate school and obtain my MLS. This was a very difficult decision to make because I truly enjoy what I am doing and opportunities for paraprofessionals are growing rapidly and the jobs are becoming more challenging — for example, I now work on the reference desk several

hours a week. However, what I ultimately want to do is be in a position that will allow me to combat censorship more effectively; a position in which I can be more involved than I am currently. To do that, I need to further my education. As for now, I'm already thinking about what to do for next year's Banned Books Week. I also plan to take a class on intellectual freedom at a local college this year as well as attend the Oregon Library Association's annual conference. In short, I'm going to be as involved as I can be and continue to learn as much as I can. **Q**

*Editor's note: The OCA-sponsored Measure 13 was narrowly defeated by voters in November 1994 (51%-49%). In Idaho, a similar measure was defeated by fewer than 4,000 votes. In both states, supporters of these measures vow that they will be back in 1996 to try again.*

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