

Teach Your Children Well: What ALAN Means to Me

Executive Secretary 2011–Present

Some will understand the reference to Crosby, Stills, and Nash in the title. Their song asks us to teach our children since we have experiences they have not yet had; the song goes on to ask children to teach their parents, too. I think that nicely sums up what ALAN has been and continues to be for me.

I joined ALAN the year that I had Dick Abrahamson for a children's literature course. He came into class the first night and talked about being professionally active, handed out the forms for membership, and offered to mail them in for us. I suspect we all joined that night. I know Kylee Beers did, since she and I were sitting together. Now I was a member of ALAN. It might have just ended there, with me paying dues while I was in the graduate program, except for two serendipitous incidents. First, I attended my first ALAN Workshop (again at the behest of Dick). If the lineup of authors I had the pleasure of listening to were not enough, Don Gallo invited workshop participants to hand him a proposal for a workshop breakout session. I summoned up the courage to do just that.

The next workshop found me presenting with session chair Bob Probst. Though I was so nervous I almost could not summon up words, I made it through the session and then got to sit and talk to Bob afterwards. I knew that this was an organization where I belonged. Here were my mentors, the scholars who wrote the articles about YA literature that helped form my classroom routines, that informed my reading in

the field, and that assured me I was helping to create lifelong readers. I was HOME.

There are so many seminal moments for me over the more than 30 years that I have been a member of ALAN. Meeting G. Robert Carlsen is one that touched me deeply. After he shook my hand and allowed me to babble like a fangirl, I walked around the rest of the day in a fog. After all, Carlsen wrote some of the most important pieces about reading and YA literature—articles I still have in a file and quote often. I also have wonderful memories of watching Gary Paulsen almost fall out of his chair laughing during Jack Gantos's ALAN breakfast speech one year, and listening to Laurie Halse Anderson sing during her keynote speech the year I was President of ALAN (right after 9/11), offering us hope in the midst of our fears. I recall, too, Christopher Paul Curtis offering to pay for anyone who was not a member of ALAN after he finished his ALAN breakfast speech one year. I worried for his safety when he was mobbed by people brandishing membership forms (thank you, Chris!). There are other memories, of course, too many to count, of conversations with authors while they autographed books or even as they sipped coffee during our breaks. Authors became colleagues in those brief but meaningful moments. I recall striking up a conversation with Paul Zindel about *Loch* at one of the ALAN cocktail parties. He was so pleased that I liked the book and often referred to me afterwards as “fab and brill.”

What I recall still and what is perhaps the most

important aspect of ALAN for me (and countless others) are the nuggets gleaned from the presentations at the annual workshop. Tobin Anderson spoke of the future of books and publishing; Ellen Hopkins addressed the chilling effect of censorship; Joan Bauer brought us to tears as she emphasized the need for hope. I have laughed uproariously as Gary Paulsen talked about the stupid things he did as a kid. I have also sobbed audibly while listening to author after author share letters from readers, letters that time and again told of how books save lives. In the age of Twitter, I can go back and look at the tidbits from my colleagues as they listened to the presentations as well. Educators not even in attendance at the workshop were able to gain insight through the feeds to social media.

Why does ALAN continue to thrive and to grow when so many professional organizations are struggling to maintain members? One of the things that has pushed and continues to push ALAN to the forefront is its single-minded determination to “spread the gospel” of YA literature. *The ALAN Review* and the workshop and the ALAN breakfast spurred the initial growth of membership. Now, ALAN is online through its website and its Twitter and Facebook presence. In addition, ALAN began to diversify in terms of its membership, especially when the library community began to join us. Leaders such as Betty Carter, Michael Cart, Patty Campbell, Diane Tuccillo, and Walter Mayes helped ALAN pull together two very important populations: educators and librarians. ALAN has also grown because educators are looking for that same corroboration I was all those decades ago: that bringing relevant and rich and (dare I say) rigorous contemporary literature into the classroom not only addressed the curriculum, it enriched the lives of readers.

I think ALAN has indeed fulfilled the first half of the quote “teach your children well.” And now it is time for the children to teach us, literally and figuratively. Just two years ago, I was selected to fill some rather large shoes (and suspenders) when I was named as the third Executive Secretary (now Executive Director) of ALAN and first female in this position. I knew the history of the two gentlemen who preceded me. The first, Ted Hipple, welcomed me as a visitor to my first ALAN Board meeting. (I had no

idea that no one outside of the leadership attended the meeting. It was open; I attended.) He encouraged me to run for the ALAN Board of Directors and to stand as a candidate for ALAN President. The second, Gary Salvner, more than held my hand as I stepped into his shoes. He continues to be someone I turn to with questions, and he always is happy to help. Under his leadership, ALAN undertook an overhaul of its Constitution last year. As I do the work of ALAN, Ted and Gary are always near me at least in spirit, whispering in my ear, offering sage advice.

In just a few short years, I have seen more and more young educators and librarians become actively involved in ALAN. They have been taught well. Now they are teaching us. They are teaching us about the need to have a strong presence online and to offer other services to ALAN members. Now we have an outstanding newsletter that allows us to stay in touch with our membership throughout the year. We have re-formed our committee that addresses issues of censorship under the leadership of Wendy Glenn. Our immediate past President cj Bott has developed a mentoring committee to ensure that our newest members, our children if you will, are made to feel welcome and are encouraged to become active participants in the organization. There are other plans in the works to keep ALAN vibrant and relevant. I for one cannot wait to see what our 50th birthday will bring.

In addition to serving as ALAN Executive Director, Teri Lesesne teaches classes in children's and YA literature for the Department of Library Science at Sam Houston State University in Texas. She is a past recipient of the ALAN Award and has served as President of the organization. Teri is the author of three professional books and is past chair of the Walden Committee. She maintains two blogs: www.ls5385blog.blogspot.com and <http://professornana.livejournal.com>.

Bringing relevant and rich and (dare I say) rigorous contemporary literature into the classroom not only addressed the curriculum, it enriched the lives of readers.
