

# Virginia's Emerging Leaders

by Elizabeth Hensley, Mary Hanlin, Renée DiPilato, and Sally Ma

**T**hree librarians recount their experiences participating in the American Library Association's Emerging Leaders Initiative 2008.

## Mary Hanlin

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Not long after I was accepted into the ALA Emerging Leaders (EL) program, my employer, Tidewater Community College (TCC), arranged for our institutional photographer to drop by so that my candidacy could be announced in the news section of our college website. I'd just come from the gym, and my face was still beet-red, my hair a damp swathe of tangles. "Okay, I'm ready!" I announced. The photographer blanched. I paused at his reaction. "Should I brush my hair?" The photographer ... meekly nodded. When I think of my Emerging Leader experience, I often begin with that memory, not just because it is pretty funny, but also because it captures a similar tone to that of the Emerging Leaders: the ingenuousness and quiet ebullience of an initiative so new that the program wasn't entirely aware of how it was seen and what it meant, or didn't mean, to those who were selected. The experience was, nonetheless, one which I hope every librarian could have. It was a lesson that I will keep.

The process for becoming an Emerging Leader candidate typically begins in May, with applica-

tions due in July. Applications are required for all candidates, and in some ways, the application process is tougher than getting into college or library school. Candidates are required to submit their resumes, thoughtfully respond to several essay questions, and submit two letters of recommendation. Can-

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didates also have to be new to the profession and are generally under the age of thirty-five. Every candidate has to be an ALA member. All applicants agree to attend both ALA midwinter and annual conferences. This is a bigger concession than it appears: scholarship funding for the accepted EL candidates is sparse, and though many institutions, as TCC did for me, were willing to pay for traveling fees, I met many other Emerging Leader candidates who had to fly to Philadelphia and Anaheim on their own tab.

In October, I learned I was accepted into Emerging Leaders. A manic, occasionally annoying, though extremely needed listserv of EL candidates was organized. The listserv communicated everything from finding roommates for ALA midwinter and annual to dis-

covering, serendipitously, that the academic librarian in Arkansas had once worked in the same library as the school librarian in Rhode Island. Other communication took place through the Emerging Leaders wiki, where bios and pictures were readily available. Soon after being selected for the program, I was assigned to a smaller collaborative group. As a group, we would work with the Committee of Archives, Libraries, and Museums (CALM) to update their website and to specifically add more content to the CALM wiki. The group consisted of four other librarians: David Conner from Haverford College, Marcia Dority from University of Nebraska, Michelle Baildon from MIT, and Heather Cole from Harvard. Frankly, I was nervous: I mean, MIT, Harvard, U Nebraska, Haverford, and then ... little me from TCC?

When I first met my EL cohort at ALA midwinter, I almost expected them to be wearing sweaters with felt elbow pads, corduroy pants, and the wearied, contemplative faces of the truly erudite. There had to be something—anything—to say to me in an indirect manner, "I am a *librarian*, and you—not so much." It wasn't there, and I quickly realized that what made us colleagues wasn't where we worked, but rather what we did. In between collaborating, we traded database searching tips and discussed the fastest way to get to the Liberty Bell.

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The other large component to the EL program consisted of the leadership development seminars. Conducted by Connie Paul, executive director of the Central Jersey Regional Library Cooperative, and Maureen Sullivan of Maureen Sullivan Associates, the seminars consisted of various role-playing games and specific questions intended to help us determine our leadership strengths and weaknesses. We also had the opportunity to participate in Q&A sessions from current, past, and future ALA presidents Leslie Burger, Jim Rettig, and Loriene Roy.

At the end of the daylong seminar, we were introduced to our project mentors, who typically chaired the ALA committees with whom each EL group had been assigned to work. Christian Dupont, formerly from UVA, served as our EL group mentor. Without his expertise, his constant feedback, and his sincere optimism, I suspect the work that we needed to do as a group throughout the six months between ALA midwinter and annual wouldn't have been done. Much of the tone from the daylong seminar and its various speakers was that of encouragement. ALA, according to all, genuinely wanted us to be involved, active members, perhaps even on some ALA committees—decision-makers. Consequently, I didn't just go to midwinter and attend the EL seminar. Rather, I went to midwinter and attended various roundtables and committees, particularly the Video Roundtable and the community college section of ACRL. All of the groups were extremely welcoming, and I genuinely didn't feel as though it was awry for me to attend something in which others had been involved for years. I left midwinter with a sense of optimism: I would not only successfully foster relationships through Emerging Leaders, but also truly become an active member of ALA.

Between midwinter and the conference, there was an unintended lapse in communication between my EL group and me. Nonetheless, the experience between us remained positive. We quickly delineated responsibilities, and all of us genuinely committed serious time to getting the project done, and done well.

Before I knew it, I was packing for the annual conference in Anaheim, where Maureen Sullivan conducted more leadership workshops. Once again, part of the daylong seminar was used to

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describe the various opportunities and structure of ALA. Leslie Burger, ALA past president, opened the discussion up to Q&A. I think we were all a bit surprised by some of the Emerging Leaders' commentary. At one point, one of the EL candidates complained about the membership fees, and Leslie Burger pointed out that compared to other organizations, ALA's fees were not huge. From there, however, it seemed as though a stronger, unspoken resentment toward ALA was being articulated. One person complained about lack of clarity regarding ALA structure. Another challenged Burger's assertion that ALA fees were indeed cost-effective. This continued for several minutes, until, tongue-in-cheek, Burger announced that she only had five minutes left to solve all the problems of ALA. We all laughed, and the tension lightened a bit.

But that moment, though small, is one of my more distinct memories of my Emerging Leader experience. What I think that moment captured and what I have since learned is that it takes much more than a daylong seminar or a few free lunches to build a sense of belonging and commitment to one's professional organization. My Emerging Leader experience did provide some good tips about better personal leadership, but for me it was even more successful in making me understand that ALA, as an organization, had spaces for me to become not simply a member but also a participant. I wonder, however, if there were other Emerging Leader candidates who just attended the EL seminar and nothing else. I wonder whether they were the ones who still found no purpose in their membership fees other than to get into the Emerging Leaders program—and whether being an Emerging Leader was merely a point on their resume.

I have many colleagues who don't belong to ALA, just as there are many of us who don't belong to VLA, and I realized that the decision not to belong begins first with the sense that no one wants us to belong. I used to think if someone, or something, didn't reach out to me, they didn't want me, but I've learned that it's not that simple. Is ALA perfect? Of course not, but the reason it effects change so potently is exactly why we must reach out to it to really belong. ALA is huge, and though it may not know that we exist, I've learned it honestly does welcome us when we present ourselves. My Emerging Leader experience showed me that no professional organization is going to shut a door in my face unless I do it to myself first. "There are no closed ALA meetings," Leslie Burger responded at one point. And I remember a moment of stunned silence: no closed meetings at all? You can walk into any meeting?

Why hadn't anyone told us this? Though I don't know the answer to that, I do know my experience with EL has given me more confidence to walk through the door. It has given me more assuredness that even though I don't work at Harvard, no one is giggling behind my back. I am not one who will ever envision myself as a leader, but Emerging Leaders has given me enough to believe, to know, that all of us, even on our worst-hair days, belong.

### Renée DiPilato

*Renée DiPilato (rdipilato@alexandria.lib.va.us) is the branch manager of the Duncan Branch of the Alexandria Public Library. She earned her MLS from the Catholic University of America.*

I cannot say enough positive things about my experience with ALA's Emerging Leaders program. The leadership training components given by Maureen Sullivan at midwinter and annual were top-notch. These training sessions provided a venue to learn new skills and be introduced to our colleagues within the program. I will note that it would have been beneficial to have an additional face-to-face meeting in between the conferences—this would certainly be easier to accomplish with a statewide program. Another exciting aspect of the program was getting to know individuals in similar situations throughout the country. Connecting with other young librarians and forming friendships and relationships was a wonderful opportunity.

The crux of the program involves the working group and project to which you are assigned. Each participant does have some choice in this project through a "bidding" process. Projects varied in scope and had some connection to a division within the overall organization. I chose and happily

was selected to work on the Public Library Association's transition from committees to Communities of Practice. Personally, I was quite deliberate in my selection, as I wanted to work on a project that was likely to be implemented within ALA. Feedback from past participants indicated that a project's implementation was crucial to their satisfaction with the EL program. Clearly, it is a disappointment to work with team members for six or more months only to have your project shelved.

The most rewarding aspect of

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my time with the EL program was getting to see my group's work used in an actual PLA program. Our research and report formed the foundation for the transition to Communities of Practice, so we became part of the process and were included in the implementation.

If VLA were to form a leadership program, I would advise creating projects that are relevant and of actual use to VLA. This is the best way to get people excited and involved in their professional organizations.

### Sally Ma

*Sally Ma (sallyma16@gmail.com) currently works as the youth services manager at the Lorton Branch of Fairfax County Public Library and part-time as a research associate with Fitzgerald Information Services in California. She received her MSLIS from*

*the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in August 2007.*

I first learned about the ALA Emerging Leaders Program from an email calling for applicants on the listserv for Spectrum Scholars. As per the Emerging Leaders wiki, "The program is designed to enable more than one hundred new librarians to get on the fast track to ALA and professional leadership. Participants are given the opportunity to work on a variety of projects, network with peers, and get an inside look into ALA structure and activities." The program was started as one of former ALA President Leslie Burger's six initiatives.

There is a criterion for applicants to be under thirty-five years old and/or have fewer than five years of post-MLS experience. That criterion was what attracted me most to the program. At the time I applied, I was twenty-three years old, had just received my MSLIS from Illinois, and did not have much experience in the field. I was excited to work with other new librarians who could relate to me. I am also interested in the management and administrative side of the profession and thought the workshops would help prepare me for future leadership roles.

The Emerging Leaders program consists of two all-day workshops, at the midwinter and annual conferences, and virtual work projects in between. At midwinter, we learned about the ALA organization and structure, principles and practices of effective leadership, opportunities and challenges of leading in a professional association, and project management. Then we broke up into project teams, met with our mentors for consultation on the projects, and ended the day with a reception/meet-and-greet. The program coordinators for the Emerging Leaders program did a great job at choosing a diverse group of participants.

There were twenty-six projects

to choose from. I got my second choice, which was to create recruitment videos for librarianship and the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA). My teammates included a children's librarian from California, a project coordinator from New Jersey, a business researcher from West Virginia, and a branch manager from Arizona. We communicated via email and our group wiki. Working virtually was definitely challenging at times, but I think it was a good learning experience for all of us. Instead of a traditional video, we decided to do a slideshow with pictures, text, and music (mostly due to our geographical limitations). Although the video did not turn out exactly as we had planned, we were happy with the end result nonetheless.

I enjoyed the second workshop at the annual conference immensely, more than the first one at midwinter. The highlight of the workshop was to present poster sessions of the projects we had been working on for the past five months. But for me, the best part of the day was a session called "Transforming ALA: A Dialog with Leslie Burger." It was basically a Q&A session with a former ALA president about what improvements might be made to ALA. Participants were not shy about expressing their frustrations with ALA, including the costs of joining (especially when adding on divisions and roundtables), wanting to get involved on committees

but not having the financial means to attend conferences, not receiving any responses when inquiring about wanting to join committees, and the importance of politics and networking when getting involved in ALA. There was a clear dissonance between how ALA is cur-

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The best part of participating in the Emerging Leaders program was being around people who are passionate about the career field. From the participants I spoke with, they all seem to have a genuine interest in becoming leaders in the profession and creating change. I think young librarians face various challenges in the workplace because of their age, so it was refreshing to be

in an environment where people did not focus on my age and professional experience. It was a great networking opportunity, and I still keep in touch with my team members and other participants.

One way VLA can help support new librarians is to sponsor an Emerging Leader. The Emerging Leaders program does not provide any financial assistance to attend the midwinter or annual conference, although various library organizations (New Members Round Table, Library and Information Technology Association, Association of College & Research Libraries, and Georgia Library Association) provided sponsorships of \$1,000 each to cover the costs of attending the conferences. Of the 121 people accepted into the program, 37 received sponsorships. The Emerging Leaders program is going into its third year, and I think it has a lot of potential to create positive change not only within ALA but also among future generations of new librarians.

*Two members of the Virginia Library Association, Laura Horne from Richmond and Sarah Townsend from Norfolk, are among the participants in the 2009 Emerging Leaders program. Three other librarians from Virginia include Beth Larkee; Suzanna Panter, who was sponsored by AASL; and Sarah Wright. vi*