

The value and significance of Library Associations around the world: libraries, librarians and communities.

*Mario Coffa, President of AIB Umbria, interviews Loida Garcia-Febo,
President of ALA.*



Loida Garcia-Febo is Puerto Rican American librarian. She is a member of the Board of Directors of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) for the bienniums 2013-2015 and 2015-2017 and a member of the Executive Committee of the American Library Association (ALA). She was president of the National Association for the Promotion of the Library and Information

Services for Latins and the Spanish Language (REFORMA) from 2009 to 2010 and President of Information New Wave, an international charity that seeks to improve the education of minority groups in the United States and in developing countries. She was also a candidate for the 2017 elections and elected as President of the American Library Association for 2018-2019.

1. **Let me start with libraries: what do you think is the main task of a library today should be?**

Libraries are all about people! Libraries are helping people to meet their informational needs via different medium. We are and we will continue doing that. Now more than ever, libraries are turning outward to identify community needs

and provide access to information in different formats to the communities they serve at academic, public, school or any type of library.

2. Already knowing the worth of the library as a social and cultural aggregator, who is the librarian? Is their figure attributed the same value that is generally granted the library institution he works for?

Librarians are amazing. We help to make the world go round. Our work impacts each area of our world as included on the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) adopted by all the members of the United Nations. When I talk about what we do, I always remember what I learned while advocating for libraries at the United Nations. At the very core of what we do, librarians are infomediaries, we help connect people with information. That goes along with being an information intermediary as in people + librarian + information.

Your second question is very timely. Librarians should be valued all the time. As President of ALA, I advocate together with library workers and library advocates for librarians to be valued, to have better salaries and better workplace conditions. It is towards this end, that I embarked on a [National Library Tour](#), with the theme Libraries=Strong Communities, as an advocacy effort to ignite public awareness about the value of libraries and library staff. The Tour dates have included stops at academic, public and school libraries all across the USA where elected officials and city councils have recognized with official City Proclams those dates as dates for “Libraries=Strong Communities Day.”

3. After your speech at the European Parliament in 2018, what do you think the situation is in the so-called Old Continent? Are American and European policies and programs convergent?

During the event at the European Parliament, I had insightful conversations with colleagues from different European countries that revealed that unfortunately, local governments threaten to close libraries in European cities and leave librarians without jobs. So, we share that situation. Here in the USA, ALA has ongoing advocacy efforts to save libraries and librarians jobs. We also share with our European colleagues, a deep sense of advocacy, to fight to keep libraries open, fully equipped and with librarians!

Although Europe and USA might have different policies and programs, my experience collaborating with librarians from both regions, tells me that all these librarians are fighting for copyright laws and e-books policies always focusing on library user's needs. Additionally, for instance, USA librarians do follow the WIPO deliberations because it can impact these areas of our work.

4. "Libraries = Strong Communities": it's a phrase you seem very fond of and we know it's so true. What does a library have to do to turn theory into real practices?

Libraries=Strong Communities is the theme of my National Library Tour, an advocacy effort to highlight the work done by libraries and library workers. In order to turn theory into real practice, my best recommendation for libraries is about turning outward to really work with different stakeholders to look into the needs of their patrons at academic, public, school and all types of libraries. Once libraries identify the needs of the community, they can plan programs and services that would meet the needs of the community members. Libraries are providing access to information, helping people analyze that information and use it to better their education and lifelong learning. That is real practice! There are libraries providing

courses for people to obtain their high school diploma and other libraries provide Pre-K classes for children to get ready to enter school at Kindergarten level. Last week, I visited a school library partnering with public libraries to provide access to more books to its students.

Academic libraries are partnering with public libraries to expand their catalogs and bring access to online resources from public libraries. Just today, I read about how libraries are saving lives: a public library in Michigan partnered with the local transportation agency to provide bus passes along with its library cards. A person who was considering stopping going to dialysis due to lack of money to purchase bus passes, wrote to them to let them know how their bus passes allowed him to continue going to receive their treatment. This person clearly wrote “You guys are lifesavers!”

5. Associations like AIB and ALA have a very important mission. What should they improve or amend to strengthen their role?

We must always remember and keep as a central rock of our work that associations are their members. During my term as ALA President, my big take-away is that ALA is its members. My experience as a member of the IFLA Governing Board and as member of IFLA FAIFE, CPDWL and with the IFLA New Professionals also confirms this. Associations are their members. As I always say, Together We Can! Together, the association leadership, the association employees and the members can be invincible!

6. "Public Libraries 2030": in the light of this project, what can be the future prospects and changes according to you?

I love the work of the Public Libraries organization, before and now with the new direction. I think the main piece of future prospects and changes ought to keep in mind that we are all about our communities, the people. I believe that we are creating the future today. Since we should always be about the populations we serve, it is vital that we keep an eye on societal trends which impact the role and the work of libraries. At ALA, we have the [Center for the Future of Libraries](#) which keep track of trends and how libraries are (1) stepping into new roles (2) how they can continue providing information to help communities. Libraries consult their [trends collection](#) to inform decisions about grants, programs, services, librarians training, and new opportunities. Personally, I have collaborated closely with the Center in areas such as artificial intelligence about which I wrote on my [President's Column](#) of the March issue of the American Libraries magazine.

7. It's the year 2050: the newly graduated Mario and Loida wish be librarians: what will you recommend they should do in order to pursue their profession?

I always advice students and newer librarians to seek a mentor or mentors that can advice them over time. Someone they trust and to whom they can go to talk time and time again about their wishes and different situations. I also recommend to keep all their options open and be willing to look for opportunities in different cities and even countries. I also speak to them about how librarians colleagues are working in all types of libraries and in different library settings including beyond library buildings in places such as NASA, museums and not-for-profit organizations. Remember we make the world go round and our librarian skills are needed everywhere. The sky is the limit! So, I would recommend the same thing to newly graduated Mario and Loida. Overall, be always the best you can be. Do what you said you were going to do. Treat others as you wish to be treated.