Mississippi Library Association
PO Box 13687
Jackson, MS 39236-3687
Office Hours: 9 a.m. – 1 p.m. M, Tu, Th, F
E-mail: info@misslib.org
Executive Secretary: Mary Julia Anderson
MLA Web site: http://misslib.org
Webmaster: Molly Signs McManus, signsmj@millsaps.edu

Catherine A. Nathan
President
Title: Director
Institution: First Regional Library
E-mail: cnathan@first.lib.ms.us
Phone: 662-429-4439

Jeff Slagell
Vice President/President-elect
Title: Director of Library Services
Institution: Roberts-Laforge Library/DSU
E-mail: jslagell@deltastate.edu
Phone: 662-846-4441

Otha Keys
Secretary
Title: Media Specialist
Institution: South Jones High School
E-mail: orkeys@yahoo.com
Phone: 601-477-9199

Carol D. Green
Treasurer
Title: Serials Librarian/Assoc. Prof.
Institution: Univ. of Southern Miss.
E-mail: carol.green@usm.edu
Phone: 601-266-4476

Susan S. Cassagne
Immediate Past President
Title:Director
Institution: Natchez Adams Wilkinson Lib. Serv.
E-mail: scassagne@naw.lib.ms.us
Phone: 601-445-8862

Robert Lipscomb
ALA Councilor
Title: Director
Institution: Harrison County Lib. Sys.
E-mail: r.lipscombl@harrison.lib.ms.us
Phone: 228-868-1383

Mary Beth Applin
SELA Councilor
Title: Instructional Coordinator
Institution: Cook Library - USM
E-mail: mary.applin@usm.edu
Phone: 601-266-4245

Mary Julia Anderson
MLA Executive Secretary
PO Box 13687
Jackson, MS 39236-3687
Phone: 601-981-4586 Fax: 601-981-4501
E-mail: info@misslib.org

Molly McManus
Parliamentarian
Title: Pub. Serv. Coord. & Systems Librarian
Institution: Millsaps-Wilson College Library
E-mail: signsmj@millsaps.edu
Phone: 601-974-1086

2007 Sections

ACRL Section
Chair: Margaret Jane Stauble
mjstauble@hindscc.edu

Public Libraries
Chair: Marsha Case
mcase@jhlibrary.com

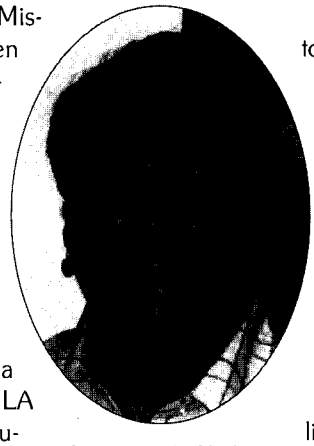
School Libraries
Chair: Diane Willard
dwillard@fcsd.k12.ms.us

Special Libraries
Chair: Tracy Carr
tcarr@mlc.lib.ms.us

Trustees
Chair: Randy Sherard
sherardjamesr@bellsouth.net

For additional information and a list of committees and roundtables, see the Mississippi Library Association's Web site at http://www.misslib.org/.

PRESIDENT'S PAGE



Catherine A. Nathan

Can anyone working in Mississippi libraries today even remember life before MAGNOLIA? Yes, the MAGNOLIA Project is now ten years old – and is being celebrated across the state this year in a variety of special ways. The state legislature, which picks up the bulk of the tab for the MAGNOLIA Project, was given a piece of Magnolia Birthday Cake at this year's MLA Legislative Reception on February 6, 2007.

I have been privileged to serve as a member of the Project's Steering Committee, representing public library interests, since the Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) assembled us and commissioned the committee to "work together" and to figure out the logistics of "how to make a statewide electronic library possible." Two librarians from each type of library – university, community college, public school (K-12) and public – were asked to serve. Although many of those pioneering librarians have either retired or moved on to jobs in other states, their contributions live on.

In 1997, there were only a handful of states that had the kind of consortia we could "pattern" ourselves after – and the vendors which offered the products we were considering were often "caught" without established pricing guidelines. To say that the steering committee helped push, drive and even determine some of the database marketplace at that moment would not be an understatement.

The original funding earmarked by the legislature to create MAGNOLIA came directly out of the IHL and community college boards' budgets. IHL became the pass-through agency for the payment of MAGNOLIA's bills for a number of years. Eventually, the Mississippi Library Commission agreed to take on that responsibility and has been processing the invoices for payment ever since – with the state legislature providing the funding for the purchase of the database access.

The steering committee had to keep several things in mind as it began its work:

1. the consortium must work out a way to provide access to database information for all publicly-funded institutions – as per the state legislature;
2. the consortium was to provide access to database information helpful to all types of publicly-funded libraries, including those supporting the K-12 institutions;
3. the legislature wanted all of the money it had earmarked for this purpose to be used to purchase access to information – i.e., not to hire a director, a staff, or to maintain an office.

To that end, librarians from the various types of libraries were recruited to serve on the many working sub-committees that were formed. These scores of volunteer committee members came together in Jackson – often meeting each other coming and going along our state's highways. Remember: these were the days before "virtual" meetings!

Some of the more important questions these sub-committees were asked to solve included which vendors to select while staying within the amount of money we had been "given," how to tame the technological issues, how to train folks and how to get the word out. Ultimately, the problems were solved, the databases selected, and the MAGNOLIA Project was born in 1997 – offering information from databases from a variety of vendors for FREE!

The MAGNOLIA Project has changed some over the past ten years, but its impact on the way in which we all provide library services within Mississippi has remained significant. For example, because of the MAGNOLIA Project, a young high school student in the Delta now has access to much of the same periodical information that is contained in the best college and university libraries anywhere in the nation. ■

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