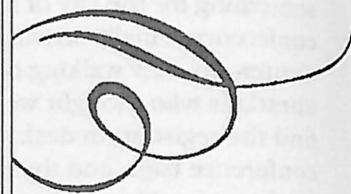


THE NEW ORLEANS CONFERENCE:

TAKE TWO

by Kim Carr



Atending the 2006 ALA annual conference was my first trip to New Orleans. Like most post-Katrina visitors, I did not know what to expect and was a bit nervous about what the city would be like. When I arrived at the airport, I felt welcome immediately! A lively jazz band greeted visitors as we collected our luggage and made our way to the shuttle buses. The happy atmosphere continued while our busy, friendly shuttle drivers were efficiently attending to all of the visitors, double-checking that everyone was boarding the correct bus route. My first contact with a New Orleans resident was with our bus driver, who made it evident how much the ALA conference meant to his city. While he greeted and talked to all the passengers, he inquired about our hometowns, the length of our journeys, and announced to all of us how grateful he was that we had chosen to visit. He assured us that the community was more than ready for the first major conference to return to New Orleans.

I had heard rumors that hotel accommodations might be questionable, elevators non-functioning, and so forth. Upon arrival at the hotel, I was delighted that it seemed in good repair, clean, and comfortable. My hotel was located in the Warehouse District of the city, which had not suffered too much damage according to the hotel staff. The hotel presented promotional bookmarks to visitors that week, which read "We're Jazzed You're Here." These bookmarks were created by the city and librarians loved them, of course. All local people I encountered were excited about the librarians coming to New Orleans and treated us like honored guests. Nearly every time I entered a hotel or restaurant, I was greeted in a friendly manner, and often had the door opened for me! The same held true when visiting the conference site. The huge Morial Convention Center was clean, cool, and wired for the conference. Shuttle buses running between hotels and convention center, provided by Thomson Gale, were a welcome relief to tired feet and an escape from the heat and humidity. There appeared to be plenty of staff at the conference to see to everyone's needs. And as always, the conference offered something for everyone.

In a conference presentation called "What's So Funny?" authors Lisa Yee (*Millicent Min, Girl Genius*), David Dunbar (*Revenge of the Lawn Weenies*), Jack Gantos (the Joey Pigza books), and Mo Willems (*Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*) discussed humorous elements in their lives which transferred to their writing. Willems grew up in New Orleans (which he insisted is pronounced "N'awlins") with European parents who dressed him in lederhosen as a young boy. He claims that he had to become a comedian and writer as a form of therapy. More people would know he was from New Orleans if he wrote about his childhood, said Willems, but he quipped that nobody would want to read something that traumatic. He thanked us profusely for buying his books and for helping rebuild his hometown. He also taught the audience how to draw the "Pigeon!"

Another presentation featured writers Susan Straight, Roy Blount Jr., and others who write about New Orleans. The first thing Blount did was to thank everyone for coming to New Orleans. Then he joked, "It's strange to me. You didn't used to have to thank people for coming to New Orleans. You often thanked them for leaving, but not for coming." This sense of humor, celebration, and gratitude permeated the conference and the city. At the Saturday evening opening session, Mayor Ray Nagin thanked us all for coming and congratulated us on being the first organization to hold an event in the city since "the storm." Wynton Marsalis also thanked the attendees via video presentation, praised the library profession, and urged us all to have a bowl of gumbo for him. (I did.)

One concern of those who attended the conference (and probably many of those who chose not to attend) was that of personal safety. There were military police patrolling the streets, and at least once I saw a military helicopter hovering above the city. It was obvious that extra security measures were in place. While in my hotel room, I watched a CNN report about the ALA conference and how it was progressing. It was amazing to be watching coverage of what was obviously an important national event and one in which I was taking part. Leslie Burger, ALA president-elect, was inter-

viewed during the segment, as well as New Orleans officials who stressed the urgency of visitor safety as a priority. This conference was not only a significant money-maker but also an important precedent to other events scheduled in the near future, so the success of the ALA annual conference was crucial. I felt proud to be a member of an organization that took a stand to help their fellow Americans get back on their feet.

On the way downtown that morning, a bus driver told me he had moved away from New Orleans about twenty years ago, and when he retired, he moved back—he couldn't stand being away. Although he evacuated because of the storm (I did not hear the locals use the words "Katrina" or "hurricane," they used "flood" and "storm"), he returned as soon as he could. He asked me where I was from. I told him I was from Muncie, Indiana, and he knew that wasn't far from Grissom Air Force Base. There were two other people on the bus, a woman from Boston and a man from Norway. The driver had visited both of their hometowns at some point in his life. I was amazed. As I got off the bus, he recommended that I return to New Orleans for Jazz Fest. I am considering it. Three things will always stand out in my mind about my first trip to New Orleans: the exciting ALA conference, the fascinating city, and the wonderful people.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kim Carr earned her BS and MA from Ball State University and works as a library media specialist at Burris Laboratory School in Muncie. Kim has served on the board of the Association for Indiana Media Educators for 10 years. As the current AIME president, she attended the ALA Conference in New Orleans as a delegate to the AASL Affiliate Assembly

