

# A Capital Contribution

by Karen Westwood

During the 1999 Annual Meeting, a number of AALL members volunteered their time at four local, inner-city schools. Below are the "remembrances" from some of these volunteers, who took away as much from the

experience as they gave. "A Capital Contribution" was, by all accounts, a success. Along with voting to give the D.C. Public School Library Media Centers \$1000 from the Social Responsibilities SIS budget, the SIS voted to sponsor another volunteer

opportunity at the Annual Meeting next year. I hope many of you will consider joining the effort in Philadelphia next year. As for me, I'm thinking of tossing my red wool socks this year. Because when my feet get cold in the dead of a Minnesota winter, I know I'll have a lot of warmth from Washington, D.C., to draw on.

When I remember "A Capital Contribution" in Washington, D.C., this summer, the first thing I remember is the heat. When the Social Responsibilities Special Interest Section decided to sponsor a volunteer effort for AALL members during the Annual Meeting, it was the dead of winter in Minnesota. As the plan took form in the shape of collecting books for public school libraries in the District of Columbia, and as volunteers signed up to go out to the school libraries to assist the librarians with tasks ranging from writing up shelf list cards to reading stories to summer school children, the weather in Minnesota was starting to warm up to highs in the mid-50s.

Even in early June, when we selected the four schools (Adams Elementary, Gage-Eckington Elementary, Cleveland Elementary, and School Without Walls High School), Minnesota's days were still warm and breezy and the nights cool. As I looked over maps of the area, I thought to myself, "No problem, these schools are only a mile away—we'll just walk." Then I arrived in Washington, D.C. Each day of the conference seemed hotter than the last, and by Wednesday, July 21, it seemed I

could see the steam rising from the pavement. "Not to worry," I was reassured by my D.C. colleague Ellen Feldman, "Cabs in Washington are cheap."

So we piled into cabs that hot Wednesday in July, and drove through residential neighborhoods to get to our schools. The group I was with arrived at Cleveland Elementary School. We saw the playground surrounded by a high, chain-link

fence. As we entered the school, we were greeted by a security officer. After that, all my memories of heat turn to memories of warmth.

We were greeted warmly by Dr. Bester Bonner (Director of Library Media Services for the D.C. Public Schools). We were warmly welcomed by the librarian at Cleveland Elementary and we were studied enthusiastically by the children who'd come to hear Jim Heller and Carol Billings read to them. This warmth colored our experience, and I listened with keen interest about the challenges public school librarians face. I heard from the volunteers at the other schools as well that perhaps the greatest gift we gave was our ability to listen and empathize with the librarians.

And when I think of all the AALL members who weren't able to go out to the schools, but who donated books instead, I again remember warmth. I sat at the table and collected books during different periods during the conference. "My niece works

for a publisher—I bought every Newberry winner they had in stock." "The author signed this one." "My daughters loved this series when they were little." "I've read this one to my grandson more times than I can count." I can't help but think that some of the care and warmth that went into choosing these books will be transferred to the students who one day will read them.

—Karen Westwood

## Adams Elementary: Cataloger or SuperHero?

On July 21, a little before 1:00 p.m., several of us showed up at Adams Elementary School. "Are any of you catalogers?" the librarian asked eagerly. "No," we all answered sheepishly, "We're all public service types." "Oh, that's OK," the librarian responded gamely, "None of the librarians this morning were catalogers either, but they did fine on creating shelflist cards. I even let them use pen!" Fifteen minutes later, as we all sat hunched over our shelflist cards, there was a knock at the door and Rob Richards poked his head in. "I'm looking for the AALL volunteers," he said. "Are you a cataloger?!" asked the librarian. "Why, yes, I am," he responded, a bit puzzled. I quickly grabbed

my camera, in the event the librarian should throw her arms around Rob and kiss him on the spot. She didn't, of course, but I would venture to guess that few catalogers have met with as enthusiastic a reception as Rob did once his skills were known.

Between discussions of Cutter numbers and possible options for cataloging

various versions of the same fairy tale, the rest of us faded into the background. For the remainder of our time at Adams, the librarian kept Rob on his toes answering her cataloging questions. I couldn't help but think that Superman himself would not have made this librarian as happy as Rob did when he said, "Why yes, I know how to catalog."

—Karen Westwood



Jim Heller keeps 'em spellbound at Cleveland Elementary.



Adams Elementary School Librarian Pat Clouden and AALL volunteer Rob Richards discuss the arcana of cataloging children's books.

## Gage-Eckington

A while back Karen Westwood asked several folks about a volunteer project during the AALL Annual Meeting. Since I was supportive of the idea, I made sure I took part. For added muscle, I brought along my 13 year old son, Chris. We knew we were going to work in a school library in a poor part of D.C., but that did not deter us. My former wife teaches at an inner city school in Dallas and the boys and I are used to one or two visits a year to her school. Chris and I were not prepared for what deplorable conditions we found at the Gage-Eckington School in Washington.

Obviously the school was waiting for our group and we were graciously welcomed by the librarian, teachers, and students. We spent our time combining the books from a closed school into the collection of the remaining school. It was demoralizing to see the outdated, dirty, and worn-out books that constituted the collection. Throughout the hallways of the school there were posters in both English and Spanish. I asked about the Hispanic population of the



*The morning crew of Capital Connection volunteers.*

school and learned that 25% of the students speak Spanish at home. And yet in our group of four volunteers, not one of us saw a library book that was in Spanish. There was no money for new books.

I think we may have saved a career, though. The school librarian admitted her despondency over working in such conditions and could not stop giving us thanks for taking an interest in her school.

You often wonder if it makes a difference to drop in and do a project. On Wednesday,

July 21, 1999, it made a difference. A librarian, various teachers, and a hundred-plus students in summer school saw that four people cared enough about them and their library that they would give up other events to lend a hand. I took something back, too, and doubled my giving to community agencies where I live.

—Bruce Kleinschmidt

## School Without Walls

It was such a rewarding experience to participate in "A Capitol Contribution" volunteer effort. Michael Levy and I shared a cab over to School Without Walls (what a great name! My grammar school was plain old P.S. #27). We found our way into the building (of course choosing the correct entrance after trying every other one!) and up to the 3rd floor library, where we were greeted by cookies, ice tea, and the school librarian, who

was quite eager to have help from experienced librarians. Since Michael seemed a little apprehensive about typing shelf-cards and I'm barely 5 feet tall, I decided to put my fingers to use at the typewriter while he aptly took over the shelf-reading process. Soon after our arrival, we had a routine in place and quickly zipped through a large portion of SWW's collection, weeding out-of-date material, finding titles without shelf-cards, or shelf-cards without books. When our "gig" was up, I left School Without Walls satisfied with the knowledge that our volunteer efforts were truly

appreciated and looking forward to participating in "A Minneapolis Contribution" in 2001.

—Joanne Santino

## Cleveland Elementary

As an elementary school librarian, I have the pleasure of summers off. This summer found me visiting Washington, D.C., with a law librarian friend and spending a day at Cleveland Elementary School. Although the Cleveland library was smaller than a

classroom, it had the elements that any school tries to incorporate in its library. The librarian was warm, knowledgeable and child-centered. The space was inviting with its cheery yellow walls and patterned curtains. At Cleveland, as well as my assigned schools in Minneapolis, the job is overwhelming. In addition to running a library, we are expected to plan and track



*The afternoon crew of Capital Connection volunteers.*

lessons to students and in-service adults, be technologists, and be fundraisers!

Our librarian host had a variety of projects for us. "Could somebody just stamp the books so we can get them on the shelf?" "Please box these 1970 encyclopedias—they have to get out of here!" "How could this collection be arranged better?" It was obvious to me that funding for library collections was a low priority. Most of the books added to the collection that Wednesday were donations from organizations including AALL. I'm sure they were appreciated.

I had the pleasure of chatting with Dr. Bonner, whose enthusiasm and vision of what libraries will become in D.C. public schools is inspiring.

I enjoyed the camaraderie of my fellow school librarians and new law librarian colleagues. I was sorry to have to leave when there was so much to be done. That, I'm sure you'll agree, is the nature of the job.

—Ann Kreider

## Karen Westwood

*(karen.westwood@courts.state.mn.us), Head of Outreach Services at Minnesota State Law Library in St. Paul, is Past Chair of the Social Responsibilities SIS.*