

## Library associations need leaders with vision and the ability to inspire others effectively: **Lance Werner**

*Lance Werner is a President candidate (2020-21) of American Library Association (ALA), the oldest and prestigious library association in the world. Presently he is serving as Director of Kent District Library, U.S.A. He successfully fought for libraries for almost two decades on a local and state level and now he is eager to be a mentor and champion for library systems nationwide. Werner is a strong advocator of building better libraries and stronger communities through kindness, empathy and love. His contributions to the libraries and library associations have been well recognized and has won several coveted awards.*



**Open Interview** brings you Werner's exclusive interview with **Gopakumar V.** The objective of this interview was twofold.

First, to understand Werner's vision for the ALA as its President candidate. Second, to know his views and ideas on varied issues and challenges concerned with the public libraries and library associations. His answers reflect his passion and commitment for the library profession; vision for building a model association and constructive and inclusive ideas for the libraries and library professionals.

- **You are contesting for President's position (2020-2021) of ALA, the oldest and largest library association in the world. Open Interview wishes you all the very best.**

Thank you for the opportunity to share!

- **What inspired you to contest for the President's position of ALA?**

This is a situation where opportunity and preparation meet. The Director of a very large library system in California nominated me to run as ALA President, so I reflected on where I am today, the kind of leadership that the library industry needs and what I can bring to the table. A recent survey shows that nearly half of the ALA members are not satisfied with

membership and only 39% would recommend membership to peers. This is very troubling but fixable.

• **What are your immediate and long term plans if you are elected as the President of ALA?**

We have an opportunity to bring stakeholders closer together through engagement and advocacy. This is how the ALA can deliver significant value for members. To accomplish this, changes are needed. Our rapidly changing world has outpaced the old mode of simply promoting library service and librarianship. It's not enough to simply focus on our craft.

Step one is to make sure that member voices are heard when updating the ALA mission. Also, the mission needs a strong focus on the future, rather than on the here and now. ALA's focus on the future will help libraries better meet far-reaching goals and accomplishments.

Step two is to help libraries gain a "seat at the table" by leveraging their greatest assets: kindness, empathy and love. Libraries are masterful at using kindness, empathy and love with those they serve. These are the characteristics that businesses and other organisations often consider as "soft skills" that are not easily managed. This creates an opportunity for libraries to become strategic partners because we bring these strengths to the table. With this strategy, libraries can enjoy stronger alliances and advocacy. This is precisely what ALA can do on a national and international level.

As President of ALA, I will take the lead and inspire others to do the same. I'll accomplish this by: expanding ALA training to help people employ personal advocacy and inclusion; developing more extensive apprenticeship programs for real-world, on the job experience; guiding others in fast-track creation and implementation of ideas; seeking input from ALA members to explore answers to tough questions about the future of libraries.

• **ALA's Center for the Future of Libraries has prominently identified most prominent trends that affect the libraries, viz. aging, income inequality and connected learning. How these are going to be addressed if you're elected as the President?**

I believe that ALA must provide members and the library community with tools to address the issues of an aging population, income inequality and connected learning. My goal as a President is to ensure that best practices in each of these areas are shared and built upon for the entire library community.

• **ALA has its many subdivisions- MLA, SLA, PLA, ACRL and many others. How such an expansion was possible for ALA when some of the oldest national library associations in other countries (including India) are struggling to keep the main association/s live and active, thus, inviting criticism every now and then. What's your take on this?**

There's an old joke that *a camel is a horse that was designed by a committee*. Nothing against camels... they're pretty remarkable creatures, but if you need and expect a horse, they might not be satisfactory. Nothing against committees either, but they need leaders with vision and the ability to inspire others in an effective manner. The same is true for any organisation. ALA cannot be all things to all people which is why it's important to have focus and strategy. Wherever there are overlapping efforts, we need to choose, combine or eliminate. Activity and decisions about regional and local library issues need to be made at regional and local levels, and centralised authorities should focus on the framework that helps us all operate effectively and efficiently.

My management style is to empower others. I look forward to the opportunity to meet with other library associations and ALA subdivisions and help them to be more successful.

• **Last year, a total of 70% of the voters visited public libraries in the USA, in addition to the 52% who had visited them online. It is indeed a good trend but such a trend is a distant dream for some of the developing countries as the online public libraries are yet to emerge there. How do you see this trend or gap?**

We're fortunate that many libraries in the United States are polling places and community centers. They also provide access to computer and internet to many people who would otherwise be without access. This community integration has proven to be a good model. As a President of ALA, I would love to help spread this model further through partnerships with tech companies, philanthropists and government officials.

• **The public libraries, especially in the developing countries, are facing three distinct problems, viz. poor infrastructure, poor technological adoption and budget cuts. What are your views on sustaining the libraries in such a scenario?**

Creating a sustainable solution in these areas is definitely a challenge. However, it's also very important because libraries can be a cornerstone for communities like a modern town square. This is an area where ALA can offer tremendous value -- working to help foster the partnerships that libraries need with businesses, government officials and strategic service organisations. I would love to see ALA create opportunities for the best and brightest people in the library industry to personally visit these countries and help with these efforts.

• **We often speak of technology, finance, manpower, value added services, etc. to build better libraries and communities. You have added another dimension to it by saying 'building better libraries and communities through kindness, empathy and love'. Could you please share us how to achieve it?**

Service is the core value that libraries provide, and working with a focus on kindness, empathy and love make the core values as strong as possible. This is true at every level of library operations, from helping patrons with questions to forming partnerships with legislatures, businesses and other organizations but there's only so much that we can do ourselves. Working from a core of kindness, empathy and love, we're able to take partnering with and inspiring others to a whole new level, with no limit to what we can accomplish.

• **You are a licensed attorney and also chaired Legislative Committee of Michigan Library Association. In your view, how to make the public library legislation and the statutory bodies that are supervising the public libraries more robust and active?**

Library legislation and the statutory bodies are more robust when they're engaged consistently. Traditionally, they're only engaged when someone needs something, fostering a *quid pro quo* culture. Libraries need an ongoing seat at the table for municipal planning, education and other service areas.

**Apart from the mainstream public libraries (governed by the statutory bodies), many voluntary organisations, voluntary groups and individuals are running the libraries for the people in many countries including India. How can the concerned statutory bodies include them also if not impose any policy on them instead train the unskilled staff, provide open consultancy, etc.**

This is another area where ALA can be of significant value. These voluntary organisations have extremely limited resources, so toolkits and other resources from ALA can be very effective. However, as discussed in the answer to your earlier question about subdivisions, the regional groups need basic guidance and empowerment to make this happen.

• **In the academic libraries, majority of their materials budget is on journal subscriptions. How will open access system break this trend and become reality?**

Open access systems are the solution to the dilemma of how academic institutions can address user needs in an environment where financial realities repress access to information. I think that ALA should work to provide a robust open access platform that will allow scholarly works and research to be shared and in some cases improved through peer review and input.

• **How far have the privacy and confidentiality issues affected the public libraries?**

In the United States, privacy and confidentiality are staunchly protected by the Constitution of the United States but this constitutional protection must be defended every day. Libraries

in other countries do not have constitutional protections, and we must do everything in our power to help them.

• **What are your observations on the ALA’s accredited LIS (Library and Information Science) programmes/courses. Do you have any plans to bring changes?**

ALA accredited programs are very good! However, many library professionals need more help with administrative skills such as accounting, marketing and human resources. I would like to help librarians garner stronger skills that support their core professional expertise.

• **What impressions do you have about the Indian library professionals and the libraries?**

India has a long and rich history in the library profession. I remember reading *The Five Laws of Library Science* by S.R. Ranganathan as part of my Master’s Degree program. It gave me meaning and direction. I believe that India is a leader in libraries and will continue to be a leader in the field. I believe that Indian libraries and librarians face many of the same challenges that their counterparts do all around the world. I also believe that our mission is the same and if we all pulled the rope in the same direction, there is very little we couldn’t accomplish.

• **Apart from your run up for ALA Presidential election, what are your future plans?**

Besides the ALA Presidential election, my focus is on leading our library system in serving the underserved and early literacy. And I plan to go fishing!



**Note** • All the answers/ opinions expressed in this interview/document are of the interviewee.



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**Credits** • Assistance for framing questions and designing interview document- [Santosh C Hulagabali, PhD](#) • Technical assistance- [Sneha Rathod](#)

**Interviewee** • To know more about Lance Werner, visit <http://lancewerner.com>



**Gopakumar V, PhD** heads University Library of Goa University, India. He has served in different academic institutions and has rich experience of academic librarianship. He was instrumental in initiating UG and PG courses in library and information science at *Goa University*. He has been serving the library community as a trainer, speaker, author, research supervisor and organiser. He has a great interest in photography.

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