

## Thoughts from the State Librarian

by Christie Brandau, State Librarian

*Since we celebrate the birthday of our democracy in July, I thought I would reprint part of a speech on intellectual freedom that I gave recently. We have so much to be proud of in our Kansas libraries, including our role as “keeper of the flame” of freedom.*

*Best,*

*Christie*



In May I attended the annual conference of the U.S. Commission of UNESCO. In 2004, President Bush reentered the United States into UNESCO, and I am one of 100 commissioners selected from around the country. One of our discussions at the conference centered on the reaction of Islamic extremists to the publication in a Danish newspaper of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed. Those cartoons – which if you saw them were pretty innocuous – were the cause of riots and deaths because of those who felt that they were blasphemous.

One of the belated casualties of that event was that a library – located in a YMCA in Gaza City – was blown up this past February. The newspaper account of the bombing said that 12 gunmen detonated a number of explosive charges, causing heavy damage. The pictures looked like only rubble to me.

The re-publication of those infamous Danish cartoons was the impetus for the bombing...but the reason given by terrorists was that they blew up the library because they wanted the ideas contained in the library suppressed.

That's shocking. But what would you think if I told you that suppression of ideas is something almost every free public library in the United States faces at one time or another?

We cannot compare the violence of the extremists who blew up the library in Gaza with the motivations of an American advocating removal of library materials that they object to. But there are similarities, and one is the basic idea of freedom of information.

This is one of the hardest parts of being a librarian and a board member. A mother may ask that a book be removed from the library because she does not want her child to be exposed to inappropriate content. A person of color may object to library materials that can be interpreted as racist. A Mormon may object to a book criticizing her religion. And on and on. All are legitimate and express true opinions, but removing materials everyone objects to would leave a pretty empty library.

I believe that public libraries are a cornerstone of our democracy. Our country was founded on the freedom of thought and expression, and nothing typifies that freedom more than a public library. Our democracy is unique, and similarly our libraries are unique. You really don't have free and open public libraries like those in Kansas in any other country in the world, especially Islamic countries. You will not find criticisms of the Muslim religion in a library in Iran. You will find criticisms of all religions in an American library!



Kansas's native son, Dwight Eisenhower, took a very unpopular stand in 1953 during the McCarthy era to voice his opposition to censorship in a graduation address at Dartmouth College:

*"(We cannot)... conceal the thinking of our own people. They are part of America. And even if they think ideas that are contrary to ours, their right to say them, their right to record them, and their right to have them at places where they're accessible to others is unquestioned, or it's not America."*

It's hard to stand up for these rights when the ideas expressed are tasteless, crude, blasphemous and totally, outrageously opposed to our own views. But we must. Because if the library begins to limit access or label materials, there is no end to the materials that are considered objectionable. We may object to books about Halloween. And if they are taken off the shelf, then books about holidays are next. Then books about customs. Then all reference to religious or alternative celebrations.....where does it end? It doesn't end.

There has never been a more important time in US history to support freedom of information. We need to be an example to the world that the freedom of ideas and expression are not to be feared. We need to demonstrate that unlike many Islamic countries, we are not afraid to let our people learn and read and discuss and criticize. Public Libraries are the keepers of the flame. The flame they are keeping is not that of one point of view, but of many. And that is the freedom needed for democracy.

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