

A Commitment to Giving Back

Ken Yamashita, DA '82

A 1982 graduate of the Simmons GSLIS D.A. program, Kenneth A. Yamashita has worked at the Stockton-San Joaquin County (California) Public Library since 1981, and has been Library Division Manager since June 1990. Among his many professional affiliations, he is past president (1996-1997) of the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA), and co-chair of the 2006 Joint Conference of Librarians of Color (JCLC). He will complete a third term as Councilor at Large on the American Library Association (ALA) Council in 2006; he served as a member of the Public Library Association (PLA) Board of Directors and Executive Committee in 2000-03.

Family background

Although his grandparents had emigrated from Japan to the United States in the early 1900s, and his parents were both born in the United States, Ken Yamashita was the last child born at the Topaz, Utah internment camp. Topaz was one of 10 such camps where over 120,000 Japanese Americans, most of them U.S. citizens, were incarcerated after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.



with barbed wire fences and towers with armed guards around the perimeter.” In spite of these horrendous circumstances, Ken says his parents’ 1945 diaries show their happiness and excitement over the birth of their first son that September. For more information, see http://www.utah.com/schmerker/1999/topaz_camp.htm and <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/immig/alt/japanese4.html>

In January/February of 1942, after storing their belongings, selling their homes, leaving their jobs, and taking what could be packed into two sacks per person, his extended family was bussed to the Tanforan Race Track “assembly center.” There they lived in a horse stall to wait for the construction of the Topaz “relocation” camp, located in a remote inland area. Ken recalls his visit to the site in the 1970s: “It was in the middle of a desert with a road that goes down through some concrete foundations. There was no sign of a community anywhere. It was kind of eerie and depressing, to see where my family lived for over three years; very dusty, very hot—just some sage brush blowing around, no vegetation. The euphemistic government terms for the camps are in quotes because they were, in reality, concentration camps

Ken describes “a good family life growing up,” first in Berkeley, California where his family settled after leaving camp after his birth, and then in Bergenfield, New Jersey, where Ken attended elementary, junior high and high school. His father, who had received an MBA from Harvard Business School and worked for Mitsubishi Corporation before World War II, rejoined the company in 1949 to establish its U.S. Headquarters office in New York City.

“I was involved in many of the typical school and extracurricular activities that most kids growing up in the 1950s suburban environment participated in, including the Boy Scouts, safety patrol, school band and clubs, social events, occasional sports. I was elected president of the senior class. My family went on a few summer vacations to New York lake and mountain areas; the trips

and other family events were documented by my Dad who liked to take 16mm movies, slides and photos of everything of significance for future memories.

My Dad worked long hours every day to provide the appearance of a middle-class lifestyle for us. He commuted to New York City before we left for school and did not get home for dinner until 8:00 p.m. or later. We saw him briefly at night Monday-Friday and looked forward to the weekends. My Mom cooked two separate dinners every weeknight, and chose to wait for my Dad to come home to eat hers with him. The evacuation and the 1946-1950 years had been very hard times for both parents, and moving to New Jersey in 1951 with his wife and five young children to work as a typical “salaryman” for a Japanese company was the only way for my Dad to get his career back on track. He went into appliance sales after the war and that job did not utilize his education, bi-lingual abilities or corporate business background.”



Growing up Asian-American in Bergenfield

The Yamashitas were one of five Asian-American families living in Bergenfield at the time; four were of Japanese ancestry and one of Chinese. In addition, there was one African-American family, and one Hispanic-American family.

Ken recalls, “A somewhat humorous but telling situation that I remember about being a person of color in the 1950s East Coast environment was that, at Bergenfield High School, your color automatically afforded the distinction of being voted “Most Respected” in the yearbook. My eldest sister had been so awarded, along with one of the sons in the African-American family. My elder sister refused the “honor” when it was voted for her (and for another son in the African-American family!) in her senior year, saying that the criterion for the category was traditionally based on race and it was insulting. The “Most Respected” category was eliminated in my senior year; however, I was voted “Most Friendly” along with the Italian foreign exchange student. Somehow one’s color or ethnicity was worthy of an award to acknowledge one’s specialness!”

“Another thing I remember is that I thought the Hispanic classmate was Egyptian because she told me that her father went to Egypt as part of his job with the United Nations. Her family name was Gonzalez, and no one – not even my Mother who had grown up in California – corrected that misapprehension. We knew a lot about Japanese and Japanese-American customs and culture but were pretty ignorant about other folks of color. There was discrimination and prejudice, sometimes directed against family members or me, but I recall derogatory remarks being made against Italians and Jews in the predominately blue-collar community as well. My mother taught us to feel sorry for anyone who would do stupid things like pull up the corners of their eyes and say “Ching Chong” – they were ignorant and not well-brought up, and we were better than them.”

A focus on learning, at school, at home – and in the library

“Education was a great value in my family. There was never a question about whether any of us was going to college, and all academic pursuits and standards, as well as income

from part-time jobs, were focused on achieving that goal. Both of my parents, who were graduates of the University of California, Berkeley, knew that higher education broadened minds, opened doors to opportunities and afforded a comfortable life which they wanted for their children. Their determination was fueled by their experiences at Cal Berkeley and what they witnessed in the Topaz camp, where many college-educated men and women, who were unable to get jobs in their chosen professions before the war due to racism, were able to work in the camp as teachers, doctors, newspaper editors, managers, etc. My parents hoped that they might start fresh after their release from the camp and that their incarceration would prove their loyalty to the U.S., which would in turn reduce the barriers to their children in their striving for successful careers after college graduation.”



“There were always a lot of books and music recordings in the house; my Dad bought the *World Book Encyclopedia* for us when I was in grammar school. My parents loved symphonic music, opera and Broadway musicals and brought the records home when they attended performances in NYC and thus encouraged our interest and appreciation. After business trips to South America and especially Mexico, my Dad took a liking to the music of those countries which he played often. Whenever I hear mariachi music, I think about my Dad and the effect the happy music had on him. My Mom enjoyed reading and was a member of various book clubs. Japanese art from my father’s family was hung in the living room and around the house to remind us of our heritage. The war years in camp were without books (I don’t think that Topaz had a library) and music (radios had been confiscated) and my parents made up for

that gap in their lives after the war, and it enriched us as a family.”

Ken remembers that it was an adventure to go to the Bergenfield Public Library, which supplemented the books Ken had at home. Since it was too far to walk, his Mom would drive. “The library was located in the basement of the city hall building and was very crowded, and I don’t recall staying around very long in the cramped space after I had selected my books. However, the librarian, Bea James, was an interested and attentive guide for my reading. My best memory is of the kind face of the librarian who warmly welcomed me and my sisters every time we visited. I got the feeling that she took a personal interest in me which I liked. During summer vacations, she encouraged me and my sisters to take stacks of books home every two weeks. When I became a librarian and attended the New Jersey Library Association conference during Bea James’ term as president, she said that she remembered my family coming to the old library and was happy that I had chosen librarianship for my profession.”

SIDEBAR? “The most influential book I read when I was young was *The Gold of Troy*, a biography of Heinrich Schliemann, the German archeologist who discovered the site of Troy and its gold artifacts and jewelry. It is significant to me because it was a Book of the Month Club title that my Mom allowed me to select out of an array of choices. I was so pleased to be able to make my own selection of an adult book and considered it a privilege that my Mom had given me the responsibility. The topics covered in the book – ancient art and architecture, archeology, discovery of a lost city – are interests that I carry to this day.”

The focus on education and culture paid off: Ken's oldest sister is a retired U.S. Dept. of Labor economist in Nevada. His older sister was the Anglophone department chair of a private school in Paris, France; she received an award from the French Government upon her retirement. His younger brother is a photographer/photo journalist for National Geographic and a documentary film producer; and his youngest brother is an independent investment banker/consultant in Hong Kong. And Ken? He chose Rutgers University, where he majored in English Language and Literature and where he earned the MLS in 1972. Ten years later, he earned the Doctor of Arts at Simmons College in his chosen profession of librarianship and library administration.

The opportunity of a lifetime – and a lifetime mentor

During his years at Indiana University, Ken found a summer and between-semester work-study job at the Montclair (NJ) Free Public Library, a job that would prove to be fundamental to his career. At the time, the new director, Arthur Curley (a Simmons grad and later ALA president), was “transforming a staid, insular institution into open, community-based, progressive library through outreach and collaborative partnering.” After graduating from Rutgers in 1967, he attended Indiana University to work on a Masters in Fine Arts History (coursework completed but no dissertation) and began looking for jobs in art museums – unsuccessfully.

“I asked for Arthur's help and advice and he told me that I should consider librarianship instead of museum work. His description of the bright future of the profession and the place for someone like myself in it convinced me that I should be a librarian. He said that minority librarians, whom he was recruiting at the time, should ideally look at library service as a way to give back to their communities. Although there was no significant Asian-American community in Montclair, there was

a sizable African -American community that was un/underserved in the township that I might be interested in serving. Arthur picked up the phone and called the dean of the Rutgers library school and I was enrolled in the September class. He arranged for a library trustees' scholarship to cover tuition and expenses and gave me a job as a librarian-trainee at Montclair Library. I was fortunate to have one of the giants of American librarianship as my first mentor.”

Ken had great experiences while earning his master's degree at Rutgers. “The faculty in 1970-71 that I remember included Robert Wedgeworth, Margaret Myers, George Rehrauer, and Benjamin Weintraub. Their classes were the most interesting and stimulating because of the passion and dedication they conveyed in their teaching. Bob Wedgeworth and Margaret Myers went on to become executives at ALA and the supportive relationship with them continued after library school.

A working professional

Although the Montclair Library Board of Trustees had paid for Ken's graduate education, they did not expect him to continue working there after graduation. In fact, Arthur Curley's philosophy was that “a good librarian working anywhere is a gift to libraries everywhere.” However, Ken chose to accept the offer of a full-time job at Montclair after getting his MLS because working with Arthur was such a great learning opportunity. “He supported my involvement in the ALA and NJLA; he gave me collection development responsibilities, outreach programs to oversee, building design and space allocation planning projects, and had me appointed the format and production coordinator for *New Jersey Libraries*, the newsletter of the NJLA of which he was editor. He treated the other new librarians the same way; he wanted us to discover where our skills and knowledge matched the

assignment. He also wanted us to enjoy library work and excel in it.”

Montclair Library also gave Ken one of his first experiences with coordinating a community outreach program. “One of the things that he did was put me in charge of an Outreach Program to the local African-American community to try to encourage a community that wasn’t using the library (before Arthur’s directorship, the staff of the library actually discouraged African Americans from using the facility) by bringing the library to them. It was very exciting: a summer camp was held in Montclair’s parks and the library brought books and other materials out to these camps in a station wagon with soul music playing through loudspeakers and a “reading frog” strapped to the top. The books were not checked out but were given away; there was a note inside each book that said, if you enjoyed reading this book, you’re welcome to return for more. There was no requirement for the books to be returned but most people did, in order to receive more books. We had had received a grant to do this, and it was a very exciting facet of library service that I didn’t know about. Our aim was to promote reading and the love of books, and if that was accomplished by helping families to start home collections, we were happy to do so.”

Ken has had other outreach experiences in the jobs that he has held after Montclair. He was head of Extension Services at the Decatur (IL) Public Library where two bookmobiles brought library services to diverse city neighborhoods and rural county areas in Central Illinois; he was assistant to the Commissioner of The Chicago Public Library where he helped in the recruitment effort to hire Hispanic American/Latino and African American librarians for the system, many of

whom would be overseeing outreach as part of their jobs. He has come full-circle in his current position as library division manager for the Stockton-San Joaquin County Public Library. As an essential component of the Stockton library’s Literacy Program, Reach Out and Read, books are distributed to toddlers during their pediatrician visits so families can start building their home libraries, and the library’s outreach efforts are directed towards the rich cultural diversity of Stockton, with its established Latino, African American, and Asian American communities and its new immigrant Hispanic and Southeast Asian American communities. He is able to “give back” to all communities of color and is very proud of this aspect of his job.

A Simmons D.A. degree – and another important mentor



Because of his positive experiences at Rutgers library school and on-the-job successes and challenges at Montclair, Decatur and Chicago Public libraries, he decided to apply for the Doctor of Arts program at Simmons College, with the encouragement and support of David L. Reich, the former Commissioner of the Chicago Public Library who was the then director of the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners (state library agency). David had mentored Ken in being a professional in terms of communication and appearance, behaving politically and ethically, and serving as a role model for the staff he supervised. David is still a valuable sounding board for his concerns and a close friend. While at Simmons, Ken’s doctoral program advisor, Dr. Ching-chih Chen, became the guiding force in his education. “She was consistently available for my every need and I could count on her to provide the most appropriate direction and counsel for those needs. She

was attentive, understanding, and concerned about my welfare, so much so that she helped me to get a fellowship that funded my Simmons education. Dr. Chen was and is a primary mentor for my professional life after Simmons and a good friend.”

A. J. Anderson, James Baughman, and Dean Robert Stueart were among the most engaging professors he met while at Simmons. “The doctoral program was very stimulating, very exciting, very challenging. Because students are required to have library experience prior to enrolling in the doctoral program, there were a lot of people who were library managers and who talked about the things that they were doing on the job, so it was a unique experience for me. I was fortunate to be able to have seminars with legendary educators such as Keyes Metcalf and to interview the renowned directors of the Boston Public, Harvard U. and M.I.T. Libraries during my time at Simmons. The Simmons GSLIS student body was not especially diverse in the early 1980s and the only other classmate of color in the DA program was a Chinese American. I think that I “fit in” well enough and Dr. Chen’s presence as the Assistant Dean and head of the doctoral program certainly was the standard to emulate. If anyone put the spotlight on me and the other Asian American in the doctoral program, it was Dr. Chen. We enjoyed meeting and exceeding her performance expectations as her “special students.”

Go West, Young Man

Just as Arthur Curley’s guidance got Ken started in the library profession, Dr. Chen’s advice helped him settle down. After Montclair, Ken’s professional journey brought him to the Stockton-San Joaquin County (California) Public Library via several positions at the Decatur (Illinois) Public Library, The Chicago Public Library, CLSI,



Inc. (Anaheim, CA), and the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners (Boston).

“Dr. Chen suggested that I stop hopping around from job-to-job. Up to that point I had not been at any job for more than three years and she said the time had come for me to settle into one job, rise progressively, and stick with it. Well, I went to the Stockton-San Joaquin County Public Library when I was still working on my doctorate. I needed access to a typewriter, so I went to the Director of the library and explained what the situation was and asked if I could use a library typewriter. Because of my background, she hired me as a part-time librarian in September 1981; then in April of 1982 a supervisor librarian position opened up and I applied for that position. After a few years in that position I became Division head.”

Leading by example

“Librarianship, and specifically library management, fits my personality and character qualities. I enjoy helping people and supervising/developing staff and library management allows me to do that. I pay attention to details and can see the big picture too; I strive for quality in work outputs, and have the same expectations of management team colleagues and those whom I supervise as well as myself. I like to work collaboratively with others and share decision-making. I am able to use these character traits to best advantage in a library environment, where intelligent, hard-working, team-oriented, public service-minded people are typically employed.”

“I think you should treat everyone with fairness and consistency. It really doesn’t make a difference whether they’re a person of color or not. It is just good management practice to treat everybody the same according to their capabilities. You might approach

them differently for different communication, learning and work styles, but your expectations about their performance should be the same. Librarians of color may have concerns and issues that are different from those of Caucasian librarians, and I feel that because I'm a person of color myself, I can help them address those issues more effectively.

Promoting diversity in the workplace – and in the profession

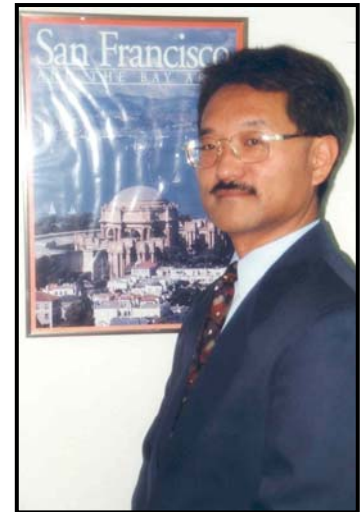
“My library helps promote diversity and services to populations of color through programming, outreach, staffing and collections. It has been an unstated mandate that we've been committed to since the 1970s, at least in terms of collection development and attempts to hire diverse staff. Stockton is a very ethnically/culturally diverse community and it always has been. It was the major jumping-off site for the Sierras during the Gold Rush, so even back in the 1849 period there were people from all over the country, and all over the world, who started out here in Stockton. It is one of the first of California's large cities whose population is majority minority and it's only natural that the public library would respond to the demographics. Our staff has been asked to speak at conferences, to showcase some of the exciting outreach and programming that we have done. We've received several grants for building world language collections, extending services to underserved communities of color through partnerships and we have a particularly outstanding literacy program, so the staff involved in those initiatives are sought after.

“As the Library Division Manager, I give my complete support to my colleagues in these speaking engagements and participate in them myself. We have a new Director who is the first person of color to be hired for the position and I am proud to acknowledge that she chairs the most diverse Library Management Team in California, perhaps the

county. We are actively recruiting librarians and library support staff from communities of color to fill our positions. We hope to grow a staff that reflects the many communities that we serve. The Library has become an information outreach partner at the celebratory cultural events of all of those communities so we are very accessible and visible.”

Getting involved goes (way) beyond doing the job

Ken's first involvement with a professional organization was when he joined the American Library Association after Arthur Curley sent him and three other new Montclair



librarians to the 1973 ALA Annual Conference in Las Vegas. “I had been asked (through Arthur's referral) to participate on a panel in a program sponsored by the ALA Task Force on Library Services to the Disadvantaged (now OLOS) on minority stereotypes in books and the media. Arthur encouraged all of his staff to join ALA and the New Jersey Library Association and obtained the funding to support our attendance at conferences. He also said that I should attend the Council meetings at conferences so I would know the current issues and concerns of librarianship and learn how the associations worked. That same year I attended the New Jersey Library Association conference in Atlantic City.

“One of the things I wanted to do when I was president of APALA (Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association) in 1996-97 was to make that organization more visible within

ALA. At the same time I probably made myself more visible too, which has led to appointments to ALA committees to represent the interests of Asian American librarians. Before that time, APALA and the other small associations of librarians of color didn't have a lot of visibility; for example, at Mid-Winter meetings, when ALA presidential candidates would go around at each one of the ethnic librarian caucuses to talk about their platforms, APALA, CALA (Chinese-American Librarians Association) and AILA (American Indian Libraries Association) were not necessarily thought of as viable campaign venues. As a result of the effort to increase visibility in ALA, the late Gordon Conable, who was the Chair of the Intellectual Freedom Committee, started routinely sending all Freedom to Read policy interpretations to APALA to review and react to; previously, that had not been done for any affiliate organization of ALA."

Ken also was involved with the development of the ALA Spectrum Initiative and subsequent scholarship program that, according to the Spectrum website, "has supported over 340 students from traditionally underrepresented groups with scholarships, leadership training, professional networking and mentoring" (see <http://www.ala.org/ala/diversity/spectrum/spectrum.htm>). Ken's involvement, again, was a result of his close affiliation with Arthur Curley, who had hired Betty Turock to be the Assistant Director of the Montclair Public Library when Ken was still working there. Betty became a mentor, in writing grant proposals and executing program planning and evaluation, and she shared Arthur's commitment to serving the historically underserved—communities of color—with even greater resolve.



When Betty was elected ALA President, she appointed Ken to the advisory committee for the Spectrum Initiative, which she had established with Elizabeth Martinez, ALA Executive Director. Betty also established the Diversity Council, made up of two representatives from each of the five ethnic librarian caucus associations and the SRRT Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Round Table. Ken was one of the APALA reps on the first Council. Betty continues to be an inspiration to Ken in his professional and personal life. To help ALA headquarters to increase the diversity of its staff, the Committee on Minority Concerns proposed that Minority Fellows be recruited to work in the Office for Library Services to the Disadvantaged (OLOS) for two-year terms. Ken was the chair of the Committee on Minority Concerns at the time and took the proposal to the ALA Executive Board where it was approved. In a small but significant way, the ALA headquarters staff diversity effort was a precursor to the Spectrum scholarship program to bring people of color into the profession. Ken counts the two endeavors as noteworthy career markers.

Ken's involvement in and contributions to the profession continue to this day. He is co-chair of the first Joint Conference of Librarians of Color (JCLC), to be held in Dallas in October 2006.

"It was an idea that came out of the Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS) at ALA, which has an informal meeting of the Presidents of the Ethnic Caucus Associations during the mid-winter and annual conferences. They talk at dinner about various issues and actually

the whole idea from the joint conference sprung from one of those dinners from the late 1990s. The concept was taken to the Executive Boards of the five ethnic caucus associations; they also thought it was a great

idea. In 2000, a Steering Committee was formed with two representative members from each of the ethnic caucus associations. Two co-chairs were elected from the 10 members. What we hope to gain from the first conference is greater visibility – to attract more from people of color into the profession and into the memberships of each of the associations – and also to share the information on recruiting techniques, mentoring, and services that can be provided to communities of color, with the profession as a whole and library supporters from the diverse communities, from the perspective of the experts who have performed those services and done that recruiting and mentoring.”

For more information about the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color (JCLC), please visit the website at <http://www.ala.org/ala/olos/jointconferenceofibrariansofcolor/jclc2006.htm>).

The future

The way Ken sees it, “The future of librarianship is bright, I feel. It will be filled with challenges caused by the lack of funding for all types of libraries and the availability of alternate, competitive informational, educational and recreational resources, but the need for librarians who are skilled in computer technology/applications and information seeking, customer service-oriented, passionate about programming and outreach, and who want to help individuals to empower themselves, will only increase in our society where meaningful personal interactions with service providers is no longer the norm. Librarians of color are especially needed to serve the growing diversity of communities in many cities and areas of the country.”

And how will these librarians of color succeed? “Future graduates of color should find a mentor who can support and encourage them at the beginning of their careers. The

mentor can be a librarian or not, on the job or from outside. I think that a mentor of color who has walked the same path that a librarian of color has chosen to travel would be the most helpful. Everyone can use some guidance and a sounding board when they start out in a career; new librarians of color who may choose to work in an environment where the majority of their co-workers are not of color, as is still the case in some libraries, can definitely use a mentor to help and advise them. I would also tell future graduates of color to persevere in the face of challenges and adversity and not become discouraged by set-backs, which are temporary impediments and in the bigger picture, not important to the advancement of their careers.”

