

Letter to NC senator requesting continued federal funding for libraries (April 25, 2017)

by Stacy Torian

Dear Senator:

As a library studies student and a working professional who understands the importance of libraries, I am writing to express my strong opposition to President Trump's proposal to eliminate funding for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS).

I grew up in a low-income household in Roxboro, North Carolina. My parents were two of the hardest working people on earth, but they could never earn the money they needed to make all the ends meet. They certainly could not afford to buy books, though they definitely encouraged me and my siblings to read. I did, so much that my parents used to say I was working my brain too hard with reading. I did not care. I loved to read so much. Before I learned how to read, I would cry just watching other people do this thing that I knew I wanted to do too. I knew I was missing out on something important because I could not interpret the written word. So, once I got to the point where I could read, I read everything I could.

The library allowed me to see beyond my circumstances into what the future could be. In elementary school, I used to check out career books from the school library. I read about being a scientist, a secretary, a doctor - anything that sounded interesting, and I was interested in just about everything. In junior high and high school, I fell in love with the town's public library. There I found all the magazines and books that I could not get at school, materials I needed for research papers and to satisfy my ever-growing curiosity about life. I did not understand every word I read, but that did not matter. The important thing was that I was learning to think for myself and dialogue with the world around me.

I graduated at the top of my high school class. I went on to earn a bachelor's degree and a master's degree from Duke. I speak a second language and have traveled to three foreign continents. I hold a communications position that pays well, and I have a comfortable standard of living. None of this would have happened without the support of good libraries. That is why I am writing this letter. **I have not just seen what a library can do for a kid, I have lived it.** I am doing everything I can to ensure that libraries have the resources they need to survive, so that other kids from low-income families can access the resources I had.

The popular thing to say now is that we no longer need libraries because of the Internet. Little do the people who say this realize that the Internet is one of the main reasons why libraries are still so important! Librarians help people distinguish between real and fake news on the Internet. They teach computer skills to displaced workers struggling to keep up with technological change. Library computers help bridge the digital divide for kids who are being asked to turn in homework by email when they do not even have a computer at home - or when they only have access to one iPhone that everyone else in the household is using. People who are barely making ends meet cannot always afford to pay for consistent internet access, even if they live in an area where internet access is available. They need library computer resources that will allow them to search for jobs online and complete college applications, so that they won't have to choose between the Internet and groceries. Libraries simply cannot provide this help to the extent that they have in the past without continued federal funding.

I recently spoke with a person who worked in the field of rural economic development for several years. She told me that **one of the first things corporate representatives would say when deciding whether to set up shop in a community was: "Let me see your library." To them, the upkeep of the public library was an indicator of what the community's priorities were. They did not want to do business in communities where the libraries were in bad shape, because they thought their employees would be unhappy in those communities.**

As the American Library Association has noted,

"Libraries leverage the tiny amount of federal funds they receive through their states into an incredible range of services for virtually all Americans everywhere to produce what could well be the highest economic and social "ROI" in the entire federal budget...The Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funded through IMLS is the primary annual source of funding for libraries in the federal budget. IMLS distributes the majority of LSTA funds to every state in the nation according to a population-based formula. Each state library determines how to best spend its allocated federal funds, which must be matched at the state level. The range of services provided to millions of Americans through LSTA grants is matched only by the creativity of the libraries that receive them: veterans transitioning to civilian life, small businesses seeking to expand their business online, summer reading programs, resources for blind and hearing-impaired patrons, resume writing and job skills workshops and computer coding courses to teach youth 21st century job skills."

At a time when rural communities are barely hanging on economically and workers are being swept underwater by waves of technological change, the last thing our federal government needs to be doing is cutting funds for the very institutions that are keeping people afloat. Please stand with libraries and with the people who need them by opposing any cuts to IMLS funding.

Sincerely,

Stacy Torian

Letter to the Durham City Council in support of increased funding for the Museum of Durham History (March 28, 2017)

by Stacy Torian

(A few weeks after writing this letter, I received the following response from a Durham City Council member: *Thank you for writing to me about the Museum of Durham History. I am glad that this important institution exists in this city. The council has not yet received the funding request that you mention, but I will give it serious consideration when it is brought to us for discussion.* The funding request was ultimately approved.)

Dear City Council Members,

As a Durham resident and former Museum of Durham History (MODH) volunteer, I am writing to share with you my passion for the MODH and to express my support of its operating request for \$51,100 from the County and \$51,100 from the City.

I volunteered for the MODH from 2013 to 2016. During that time, I greeted visitors at the front desk and conducted oral history interviews. As a greeter, I watched people spend long moments studying exhibit pictures or reading historical descriptions, sometimes identifying familiar places in the process. Alumni of local high schools would go through old yearbooks in the museum library, hunting down photos of themselves and classmates. One visitor was amazed to see that a young man in an early 20th century photo exhibit was sporting a hairdo very similar to his own 21st century hairstyle. Another visitor shared his memories of the old, pre-revitalized downtown Durham, at one point mentioning The Power Company, an old nightclub that both he and I remembered. This level of engagement speaks to the quality of the museum's offerings and reflects the emotional connection many visitors have with Durham. The most engaged and connected visitors hold the museum to a high standard. The ones I met gave the museum high marks for its creative and educational offerings; however, they were also quick to point out things that were missing or that they thought had not been covered in sufficient depth. A frequent comment was that the museum needed more space to adequately tell Durham's story. My hope is that the museum can one day have an expanded presence on Main Street that augments the high-quality exhibits it is known for. The requested operating support will help the museum build its capacity towards that future.

As an MODH oral historian, I had the honor of interviewing current and former Durham residents and recording their stories in the MODH Story Room. Among those I interviewed were a rapper-emcee, a social activist, a retired ESOL teacher, a minister, a former bookmobile librarian, and a substance abuse program director. Their stories inspired me greatly and gave me a kaleidoscopic perspective of Durham's past. The stories could very well do the same for others, but only if they are heard. More paid staff is needed if the oral histories of the Story Room are to reach their full potential as inspirational vehicles and historical research sources. Additional staff could market the oral history repository to Durham history scholars, as well as to Durham middle school and high school teachers striving to make history come alive to their students. They could coordinate and carry out the meticulous indexing work that make oral histories searchable and usable. They could organize regular programming that would highlight the stories of Durham residents like a woman I interviewed who triumphed over a decades-long addiction to drugs and is now helping women in similar situations move their lives forward. In short, they could use the stories of the museum to illuminate Durham's past and help bring Durham people closer together. The city's investment in this additional staffing would be a wise and significant

investment in Durham community building, especially at this critical -- and often contentious -- stage in the city's development.

I believe that one major end result of increased funding would be heightened visibility for the museum and increased foot traffic. This would benefit not only the MODH but also the surrounding businesses. Museum visitors do not just look at the exhibits and go home. They spend time downtown, drinking coffee at Beyu, eating chicken and waffles at Dame's, and attending movies at the Carolina Theater. The more visitors the museum can attract, the more it can contribute to Durham's economic growth.

Durham residents are paying attention to what happens at the MODH. They enjoy what it is now, but they want it to be so much more. Provide the funding to show that our city's historical museum - a cultural institution widely supported by Durham citizens and given the highest priority rating by the City/County cultural master plan - is more than an afterthought. This funding commitment would be a meaningful way of honoring the people who have made and who make Durham great.

Sincerely,

Stacy Torian