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We Are Rich in One Another:

The OLA Support Staff Division's First Twenty Years

by Susan R. Gilmont

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The story of the Oregon Library Association's Support Staff Division (OLASSD) begins with an individual and an idea. In 1990, after over 15 years of working in libraries, Donetta Sheffold attended a library support staff conference in New Jersey. She came back to Oregon burning to share the experience.

Younger readers may not understand how isolated support staff members were in those days. The Internet had yet to explode into our lives. No massive open online courses (MOOCs), no webinars, no web, no e-zines, no e-mail, no texting, no social media. You could work for years without meeting workers from other libraries. I did. Educational opportunities and means of communication were limited. Attending that conference had been illuminating and inspiring. Now, Donetta wanted to break the isolation and share with others the experience of connecting with peers. The Support Staff Division of today is the product of that inspiration and the efforts of many people.

This article is not a full history¹. Instead, it gives highlights of the group's efforts on behalf of support staff in its first twenty years. The list is not comprehensive. I have left out a lot, including organizational mechanics. As you read the timeline, some broad themes will emerge. The Oregon Library Association's support for this group has been unfailing, as has SSD's advocacy for its members. I hope readers will share my pride in this valiant little band's many accomplishments, and perhaps some of you may even be moved to participate in the organization. The next chapter belongs to you.

Beginnings

- Dr. Melvin R. George, Director of the Oregon State University Libraries, offers a scholarship for a staff member to attend the annual conference of the New Jersey Association of Library Assistants. (1990)
- Donetta Sheffold attends the New Jersey meeting. She is inspired to do something in Oregon. (Summer, 1990)
- Donetta and Deb Cook, then a library technician at Southern Oregon State College, co-host a roundtable discussion at the OLA conference in Ashland to learn if there might be interest in starting a support staff group in this state. Interest is high. (April, 1991)
- Letters are sent to attendees and a ballot on whether to form a group is distributed, along with options for naming the group. The group is approved. (1991)
- Petitions supporting the formation of a Library Support Staff Roundtable (LSSRT) within OLA are distributed among OLA members. The OLA Executive Board unanimously approves the new roundtable. (1991)
- The Library Support Staff Roundtable becomes an official part of OLA. OLA provides some seed money to help the fledgling group get off the ground. (January, 1992)
- LSSRT holds its first official meeting at the 3rd OLA/WLA Joint Conference. Fifty-two people attend. Donetta Sheffold and Judith (Jey) Wann from the Oregon State Library are elected chair and vice-chair. (April, 1992)



- Vision and goals statements are drafted and routed to members for discussion. (1992)
- Sheffold and Wann travel across Oregon meeting members in person and learning about their concerns. (1992–1993)
- LSSRT sponsors its first sessions at OLA. (1993)
- A membership directory is produced and distributed to members. (1994)
- The LSSRT chair and some members attend the OLA Continuing Education Summit and speak about support staff education needs. (1994)
- Planning begins for LSSRT’s own conference. From the beginning, it has been clear that many support staff are unable to attend OLA, having to “mind the store” while librarians attend the conference. An alternative to OLA for support staff is needed. (1994)
- Donetta Sheffold attends the New Jersey conference again and solicits advice for the Oregon group. (1994)
- To the best of our knowledge, Donetta Sheffold is the first Oregon library support staff member to serve as an officer in OLA when she is elected Secretary of the Oregon Library Association.
- The first LSSRT conference, “Gateways ‘95” is held at the Wilsonville Holiday Inn. It is a resounding success, with 298 attendees. (July, 1995)

Consolidation

- Soaring to Excellence broadcasts are sponsored around the state. (1995–1999)
- Increased sensitivity about language referring to library employees leads to removal of the term “non-librarian” in LSSRT’s charter. It is replaced by “library support staff.” (1996)
- A networking directory is distributed to members. (1996)
- The first support staff-themed issue of the *OLA Quarterly*, “Special Focus—Library Support Staff” (v.3, no.1, Spring 1997) is published. LSSRT members and supporters edit and write articles for the issue. (1997)
- LSSRT develops scholarships to enable members to attend library conferences. (1997)



“I do want to say that it was the friendships, laughter and wonderful conversations with a group of extremely dedicated women who brought about the strong bond we all had in this cause.”

—Donetta Sheffold, Oregon State Library

- The second edition of the networking directory is distributed to members. (1997)
- LSSRT establishes the “Donetta Sheffold Scholarship” is established to expand continuing education opportunities for members. (1998)
- LSSRT moves from Roundtable to Division status and the OLA Support Staff Division (http://www.olaweb.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=313) is born. We now have a seat—and a vote—on the OLA Executive Board. (1998)
- The committee structure has freed the Executive Board to look at broader issues. Policies are developed for grants and scholarships, decision-making by e-mail, guidelines for archiving SSD materials, expenses for site refreshments, expenses for continuing education sessions and speaker honorariums. A new logo is developed. (1999)
- A new electronic discussion list for members is launched. (2000)
- SSD begins to sponsor book mending workshops around the state. (2000)
- A long and beneficial relationship with Kris Kern and Carolee Harrison of Portland State University begins; they give many book mending workshops around Oregon. (2001)
- When the OLA Treasurer position becomes vacant, OLA Chair Janet Webster appoints Suzanne Sager of Portland State University to the position for the 2001/2002 year. Sager is re-elected for 2003/2005 and later becomes the first support staff member to be OLA’s representative to the American Library Association. (2001)
- SSD petitions the OLA Executive Board, asking that “inclusive language” (i.e., “library staff” instead of “librarians”) be used when referring to all who work in libraries. The OLA Executive Board approves. (2002)
- *OLA Quarterly* v.9 no.2, Summer 2003 (“Diversity Matters”) features an article by Maresa Kirk and Jey Wann, “With All Due Respect,” which urges respectful treatment of all library employees. (2003)
- A logo contest produces a member-created logo for SSD. (2003)
- SSD supplies eight \$50 scholarships for workshops on library security and sponsors training on Front Page software in Eastern Oregon. (2004)
- The Winter 2005 (v.11 no.4) issue of the *OLA Quarterly*, “A Day in the Life,” features contributions by and about support staff. (2005)
- SSD contributes \$250 to support the Summer Literacy Conference. (2006)



- Susan Mincks, a retiring SSD member, donates money to found scholarships to help support staff attend the SSD conference. (2006)

Hard Times

- SSD lobbies OLA to hold down dues increases for lower-paid library staff. (2007)
- Vice-Chair Michael Baird resigns in April. Since he was also head of the Conference Committee, the resignation causes a crisis. Chair Suzanne Sager takes over as head of the Conference Committee and Executive Committee members pitch in with Conference Committee members to help create another successful conference. (2007)
- To our great pride, past SSD Chair Jan Griffin is awarded the OLA Distinguished Service Award. We believe this is the first time support staff received this award. (2008)
- SSD continues to express concern to OLA about the costs of membership. Following a raise in OLA dues, the SSD Executive Committee votes to waive the \$5 fee for membership in SSD. The fee remains waived to this day. (2008)

“I remember the first LSSRT Conference. We weren’t really sure how many people to expect, and we ended up with (so many) attendees! We knew we were on the right track by providing library support staff with opportunities to learn and network.”

—Ellen Mueller, Multnomah County Library

“SSD was an opportunity that went way beyond my expectations. There were so many wonderful people who willingly shared their knowledge and expertise. I learned so much from them and the organization mostly how valuable support staff are to the library world. Working with the SSD family provided me with tools to improve my skills and value my job.”

—Cathy Zraggen, Deschutes Public Library

- Three library workers get to talk about their work life in the inaugural installment of the popular “A Day in the Life of a Library Assistant” session at the SSD annual conference. (2008). This annual feature gives many support staff the opportunity to tell their stories.
- Our awareness of issues facing people with disabilities is raised when SSD invites a deaf library employee to present at our annual conference. SSD helps fund a team of interpreters, supported by an Executive Committee member who has American Sign Language skills. Although the presenter had worked in libraries for many years, this was the first library conference she had ever been able to attend. (2009)
- SSD gets a Facebook page, has a new webmaster, and support-abil-i-ty (<http://www.ola-ssd.blogspot.com/>), the SSD blog, is born. (2009)



- The new national Library Support Staff Certification Program creates a buzz. An anonymous SSD member donates money to fund five \$200 scholarships to help support staff participate in the program. (2009)
- SSD has its first video-meeting. (2010)
- As part of our statewide outreach, SSD members participated in the fall meeting of the Eastern Oregon Library Association. SSD contributions included a talk on the history of SSD, a talk about support staff certification, and a book-mending workshop. (2010)
- To build a closer relationship with the Washington Association of Library Employees (WALE), the WALE Chair attends SSD's conference and the SSD chair and the chair of the Continuing Education Committee attend the WALE conference. (2010)
- With all our steps forward, the economic downturn causes a step back. Portland State University (PSU) Library decides that participation in OLA is not a necessary part of support staff members' jobs, and will therefore no longer allow release time for staffers to attend SSD meetings. PSU's heretofore extremely valuable participation in SSD plummets. The SSD chair calls OLA's attention to the problem in a Board meeting, in her annual report and at the OLA retreat. (2010)
- SSD gets a laptop and begins using Skype at meetings. (2011)
- The organization reaches a long-held goal of geographic diversity, adding board members from southern and eastern Oregon. (2011)
- Susan Bacina, the SSD chair, works with other OLA members to examine barriers to participation in library organizations. Bacina notes that OLA is moving towards online meetings, which will make it easier for some people to participate, but that "attitudinal barriers will be harder to break down, especially in the current economic times." (2011)
- SSD collaborates with the State Library on an ALA scholarship for certification training, offering and granting a matching funds scholarship amount. (2011)

"I can't imagine what my library life would have been like without SSD."
—Jay Wenn, Oregon State Library

¹For a good early history of the Support Staff Division, see Sheffold, Donetta. "LSSRT—Wind on the Buffalo Grass?" (*OLA Quarterly* 3(1):11,18).

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