

The LeRoy C. Merritt Humanitarian Fund

Help for Librarians in Need

By Virginia B. Moore, Ma'lis Wendt, and Jim Kuhn

Librarians, as we know, are underpaid for the important role we hold in society. In addition, often we assume the responsibility of having to defend unpopular material and ideas against community pressures. Law enforcement occasionally adds to the tension by attempting to circumvent library policies and abrogate the privacy of library users.

Individual librarians are now often targets: the USA PATRIOT Act imposes gag orders and presents the possibility of jail time to librarians who violate them. In some states, laws have been proposed that would hold librarians liable if minors accessed material considered “harmful to minors.” At the same time, funding for libraries is increasingly politicized and fragile—meaning that librarians often are encouraged to keep silent and overlook policy in the interest of keeping their livelihood.

But librarians have a secret weapon to assist them when the need to speak up arises: the LeRoy C. Merritt Humanitarian Fund.

Since 1970, the Merritt Fund has provided grants to librarians to help them in their most vulnerable time. Specifically, the Merritt Fund gives grants to librarians who are victims of workplace discrimination (based on race, sex, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) or who are fired or denied employment rights based on their defense of intellectual freedom.

Simply put, the Merritt Fund is a “lifeline” to these librarians. Our assistance has helped recipients afford rent and medical care as they seek new employment. It has allowed them to seek legal assistance as they defended their rights. It has been a friend to otherwise isolated colleagues.

Recent recipients of Merritt Fund grants include a library director who was fired merely for giving an opinion against computer filters; a librarian whose religion made her the subject of harassment and eventual termination; and a library director who was threatened with criminal prosecution unless she changed her library’s privacy policy.

Through the years, the Merritt Fund has been funded in two ways. The first is through the generosity of librarians. Individual donors give in large and small amounts so the Fund can remain available to all of our colleagues. In a way, the Fund becomes a source of group insurance—donors help make sure that if *they* ever need assistance, the Merritt Fund will be available.

The second source of funding is recipients themselves. Every grant we make comes with a note encouraging—but not obliging—reimbursement to the Merritt Fund when the recipient is able. Recipients take this responsibility very seriously. Sometimes we see reimbursement (with interest, even!) within a few months. The recipient may have been successful in their fight for their job, or found a new job quickly. Other times it has taken several years. But grant recipients remember the help they got when it seemed like none was to be had. They want to make sure the Merritt Fund is available to others who find themselves where they were. Our proudest moments as Trustees are when we see that check from a former recipient—when the Merritt Fund has come full circle.

If you would like to support the work of the Merritt Fund, send a check to the LeRoy C. Merritt Humanitarian Fund, 50 E. Huron, Chicago, IL 60640. The Merritt Fund is administered by ALA staff but is a separate organization—a trust. As a trust, donations are not tax-deductible. Visit www.merrittfund.org for more information on the history and work of the Merritt Fund.

If you or someone you know has been fired or denied employment rights due to gender, age, race, color, religion, sexual orientation, disability, or defense of intellectual freedom, please call us at 1-800-545-2433, ext. 4226, e-mail

merrittfund@ala.org, or write us for an application. You also can download an application at www.merrittfund.org.

Virginia B. Moore, Ma'lis Wendt, and Jim Kuhn are Trustees of the Merritt Fund.

We would love to hear your [feedback](#) on this article!

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