

Paul Whitney – A Career Well Done!

By Jean Kavanagh.

January 14 was a very special evening in Vancouver Central Library's Alice MacKay room.



City Librarian **Paul Whitney**, Incoming City Librarian **Sandra Singh**, and Mayor **Gregor Robertson**.

Some 200 people gathered from across Metro Vancouver, throughout the province and several cities beyond BC to toast and celebrate Paul Whitney's superb 36-year career in public libraries.

Burnaby and Vancouver were best represented as many colleagues wished to pay tribute to Paul in person. Paul retired after seven years as Vancouver's City Librarian and earlier served as Burnaby's Chief Librarian for 14 years.

A former BCLA and CLA president, Paul's outstanding career began at Burnaby Public Library in 1974 where he worked for 29 years. Throughout his career, Paul's work locally, nationally and internationally was distinguished by his commitment to advance the profession as well as to respond to the changing needs of public librarianship.

During his tenure as Chief Librarian, Burnaby Public Library was one of the heaviest-used public library systems in North America on a per capita basis. And while at VPL, Paul's leadership resulted in numerous innovative and award-winning initiatives including:

- A significant increase in hours of operation across the 21-branch system.
- Introduction of an innovative early childhood literacy outreach program.

- Implementation of Writer and First Nations Storyteller in Residence programs.
- Development and completion of the multi-million dollar federally funded pilot project, Working Together, which trained public library staff in four Canadian cities (Vancouver, Regina, Toronto, Halifax) in a community development role engaging marginalized residents.
- A partnership with the Vancouver International Writers Festival to create Incite@VPL, a twice-monthly series featuring illuminating readings and discussions with novelists, poets, non-fiction writers and more! First season authors include 2010 Giller Prize winner Johanna Skibsrud, Bernhard Schlink, Alexander MacLeod and Timothy Taylor.

Friends and colleagues from all aspects of Paul's career either spoke or sent messages highlighting what he contributed to them personally and to the profession.



Cathy Wang, Britannia Branch Manager (VPL) and **Jan Fu**, Fraserview Branch Head (VPL).

And while all spoke respectfully and glowingly of his intellect, wisdom and professional accomplishments, what came through repeatedly was the kindness, mentoring and friendship Paul had shown to all of these people throughout this 36-year career.

One speaker chose a selection of words with examples from colleagues of how they applied to Paul. They included:

Generous – Paul is always willing to patiently share his expertise and knowledge with others.

Supportive – No matter how crazy the question or mundane, he will spend the time necessary to answer the question.

Gentleman – Paul is often a gentle voice of reason in a discussion. He has a gentle sense of humour rather than sarcastic or biting. He's a little bit old fashioned and obviously was 'brung up right'.

Wise (like Solomon) – I will miss those thoughtful interjections.

Sage – Not as in elder, but as in acute, discerning, intelligent.

Visionary – More often than not, it is Paul who brings to your attention a potential problem or opportunity that is in the offing with a suggested plan of action.

Other descriptors from the evening's speeches included: 'frighteningly excellent', 'copyright guru', patient, determined, relentless, dedicated.

Ingrid Parent, University Librarian at the University of BC and IFLA's President Elect, wrote this about Paul's role on the international library scene.

"In addition to his many activities and achievements locally and nationally, Paul has been a dedicated and enthusiastic supporter of library activities on the international scene, recognizing that all libraries can benefit from advancements and advocacy efforts made at the international level, both politically and culturally."



Daphne Wood, VPL Director, Planning & Development and Maureen Sawa, CEO Greater Victoria Public Library.

On the IFLA Board, Paul has been an articulate advocate for access to information for all and is the expert on copyright issues. He is always ready to support his Canadian and international colleagues with their specific projects, and does so with insightfulness and good humour. Paul has been an exemplary representative for Canadian libraries and librarians, and is held in high esteem by his colleagues around the world for demonstrating those Canadian values of collaboration, diversity and equality that are so appreciated internationally.

Paul was customarily humble and understated in his remarks, asserting that he was not solely responsible for all the excellence outlined throughout the evening. However, he was clearly delighted and moved by all those who gathered with him at VPL to remember a career well done.

Jean Kavanagh is Manager, Marketing & Communications at Vancouver Public Library.

Photos by Krisztina Kun, Vancouver Public Library.