

Cultural Daily

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Commission Testimony, Continuing Controversy Surround Library Foundation and ALOUD

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, November 14th, 2018

Since the abrupt August 27 firing of Louise Steinman, director of the popular ALOUD series, and Maureen Moore, ALOUD's associate director, by the Library Foundation of Los Angeles, Los Angeles' literary community has reacted with protest and activism. (Our prior coverage of this story is [here](#).)

It's important to understand the distinction between the Library and the Library Foundation. The Library Foundation is an independent, non-profit organization designed to support the Los Angeles Public Library. The Foundation was established in 1986, following the devastating fire at LA's Central Library, and provides programs, free services, and support; ALOUD, the signature literary program, was a program of the Foundation; the Foundation operates with its own staff, management, and board of directors.

The Los Angeles Public Library, on the other hand, is a part of city government, supported by our tax dollars. The Public Library is governed by the Board of Library Commissioners, chartered by the city as the legal head of the Library Department.

On November 8, the Board of Library Commissioners held their first meeting since Steinman and Moore were fired. Several people testified at the hearing, including Henry Gambill, president of Librarian's Guild, and Terry Wolverton, a member of the Ad Hoc Committee that began the petition protesting the Foundation's actions.

"I represent an Ad Hoc Committee of authors, editors and journalists in support of ALOUD," Wolverton testified. "We developed a petition that to date has been signed by over 1000 writers, readers, and leaders in the literary community. Our initial request was simple: transparency about the firings, and a role in ensuring the future of literary programs at the Library. This petition was sent to the Chair of the Foundation, to the Mayor, to the City Librarian, and to the Library Commission, as well as to the media.

"In response, the Foundation stonewalled us, insisting that as a private nonprofit, personnel matters are its own business. We take the position that the Foundation exists to support the Library; it uses city-owned facilities for its programs; it is responsible to the public.

"Library employees have contacted us with their concerns about the way the Foundation pre-empts their use of space and their own programming. They have further shared concerns about the use of

the Foundation's funds and they keep repeating to us: follow the money.

"We are here to ask the Commission for a public accounting of the Foundation's funds and its spending on specific programs, which its tax filings do not reveal.

"We ask you to investigate the atmosphere of fear that surrounds the relationship between the library's staff and the Foundation. We ask you to reveal the circumstances surrounding the firing of Steinman and Moore, as well as the management decisions made in the aftermath of those firings, both of which have greatly damaged the library system's reputation."

After the hearing, I exchanged emails with Commission President Bích Ngọc Cao. Cao emphasized that the commissioners do not have control over the Foundation. She wrote: "Yesterday's meeting was a tough but welcome conversation. I've recently met with Ken Brecher and a member of the executive committee of the Foundation's board, and I've also had conversations with library staff and my own board members. I have to respect the Foundation's personnel decisions, whether I agree with them or not, because they are the leaders of their organization. I have asked the Foundation for more transparency and communication to the public in regard to the continuation of ALOUD."

Cultural Weekly has requested a discussion with Foundation executive director Ken Brecher and a member of the board's executive committee, but thus far the Foundation has maintained a position of silence. However, I don't think the situation will improve until the Foundation addresses it in an open and inclusive way.

It is already having an effect on programming, with some community members saying they will boycott future events until the situation is cleared up. Jen Hofer, co-founder of language justice and literary experimentation organization Antena [recently published an open letter](#) to Brecher, the staff and board of the Library Foundation, in which she declared: "I am writing to inform you unequivocally that neither Antena nor Antena Los Angeles will work with LFLA [the Foundation] until this matter is resolved in an ethical, respectful and transparent way — as not just Maureen and Louise but also the many communities who love both the ALOUD series and the amazing beloved Los Angeles Public Library deserve.

"Antena and Antena Los Angeles have been so proud to be connected to the ALOUD series and the Los Angeles Public Library — our #1 favorite public institution — but at this point any association with LFLA feels entirely contrary to everything our collectives stand for. We encourage other writers, artists and cultural workers who are invited to participate in LFLA-sponsored events to take an ethical stand alongside us and register your dissent by non-participation accompanied by public statement, or by bringing these issues up as part of any LFLA-related programming in which you choose to participate."

Following the commission hearing, I spoke with Roy Stone, a retired librarian who is the Librarian Guild's past president. Stone had also testified. Stone told me, "In prior discussions with the Commission, we raised the question about the amount of space the Library gives the Foundation for free, but the Commission has not addressed our concerns. Is the money the Foundation saves [by getting free space] going to programming, or is it going to salaries? The Library staff is crowded into smaller and smaller office spaces, while the Foundation has big rooms and they don't pay rent. We've also seen a reduction over the past few years of the amount of programming provided by the Foundation; again, is that money going to salaries instead?"

Stone continued, “The way Louise and Maureen were fired, being escorted out of the building, it’s not humane, it’s not right, and it gives a bad impression — it looks like the Library did it. But the Library didn’t. It was the Foundation.”

Image: Chuck Levin, community activist, finishes testimony at Board of Library Commissioners meeting on November 8, 2018. Photo by Gary Leonard

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