

Cultural Daily

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Foundation Explains ALOUD Firings; Ad Hoc Committee Responds

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On November 16, 2018, the Library Foundation of Los Angeles made its first statement of explanation regarding the firing Louise Steinman, director of the popular ALOUD series, and Maureen Moore, its associate director. The explanation was contained in a press release about a temporary restraining order the Foundation had obtained “against a man who physically threatened Ken Brecher” at a recent ALOUD event, and denouncing “intimidation tactics.”

The Ad Hoc Committee quickly responded to the Foundation’s press release, raising questions about the Foundation’s rationale for firing Steinman and Moore, and disputing the characterization as “intimidation tactics” of “a petition signed by more than 1,000 authors, local, national and international; op-eds; investigative articles; public letters asking for transparency and accountability from LFLA staff and peaceful symbolic actions like displaying banners at ALOUD events.”

Below are both texts, reprinted in full; first the Foundation’s press release, followed by the Ad Hoc Committee’s statement.

Library Foundation of Los Angeles Press Release

LIBRARY FOUNDATION OF LOS ANGELES OBTAINS TRO AGAINST SF MAN WHO THREATENED HIM DURING ALOUD EVENT

LOS ANGELES, Ca. (November 16, 2018) – The Library Foundation of Los Angeles (LFLA), has obtained a temporary restraining order against a man who physically threatened Ken Brecher, President of the Library Foundation of Los Angeles, Tuesday during an ALOUD event at the Central Library.

The Foundation obtained the order Tuesday in Los Angeles Superior Court against artist Ricardo “Rigo 23” Gouveia after he charged at Brecher, who was standing at the exit of the Central Library’s Taper Auditorium. The incident occurred immediately after a protestor disrupted the Tuesday evening event in support of ALOUD’s two former administrators, one of whom is Gouveia’s partner.

“This is not the first time that a member of the Foundation staff has felt physically threatened by this person,” said Brecher. “It is a pattern that is not going to be tolerated. The Court clearly

agreed. It is deeply regrettable that I had no choice but to take this action.”

The administrators recently lost their jobs in a restructuring of the Foundation’s public programming. ALOUD is the Foundation’s literary conversation series in which authors are interviewed one-on-one at the Central Library about their work.

Brecher said his decision to restructure ALOUD came after more than four years of studies and internal discussions that indicated the program, once considered on the cutting edge of literary culture, had failed to keep up with the city’s social and demographic changes.

He said the studies showed ALOUD’s programming, adherence to a week-night schedule and near-exclusive use of the Central Library’s Taper Auditorium drew a niche audience that was increasingly unrepresentative of users in the library system’s 470 square-mile service area. Meanwhile, the program was facing competitive pressures for top authors from new speaking series in bigger venues around the city.

Under the restructuring, ALOUD will retain much of its traditional core programming while reporting to a new and different management position responsible for larger portfolio of literary events and cultural activities of interest to the library’s diverse audiences. While many of the events will take place at the Central Library downtown as before, others will be held at various library branches, as well as off-site venues in partnership with other organizations.

LFLA Board Chair Gwen Miller noted that in recent weeks, supporters of the two former administrators have published opinion pieces, circulated a petition, called for Brecher’s resignation, and confronted Foundation Board members through emails and in person. In one incident, a protestor jumped on stage at an event where Brecher was speaking.

“I recognize there are some people who don’t understand Ken’s decision to restructure the ALOUD program because they are not aware of all the facts, but this case went over the line,” said Miller. “The Board does not condone these types of intimidation tactics.”

In his declaration in support of the TRO, Brecher said Gouveia came to the event where a protestor, wearing a mask of Brecher, stood during the introduction of authors and displayed a banner saying Brecher should lose his job.

After the protestor was escorted out by police, Gouveia got up to leave. He made eye contact with Brecher, who was standing against the auditorium’s back wall, then charged at Brecher as if he were going to attack, Brecher said in his declaration.

“I threw my arms up to protect my face and neck ... because I was fearful that he was going to punch me or grab me,” Brecher said in his declaration.

The incident Tuesday was witnessed by an LAPD safety officer, who on a prior occasion had to escort Gouveia out of the building when he became confrontational because he was prevented from entering a secured area, Brecher said in the declaration.

The temporary restraining order requires Gouveia stay 100 yards away from Brecher. The Court has scheduled a Dec. 5 hearing date to consider granting a permanent injunction.

The Library Foundation of Los Angeles is a private not-for-profit organization that is the principal

funder of programs offered by the Los Angeles Public Library.

Ad Hoc Committee Statement

We have no comment on the “threatening” behavior Mr. Brecher alleges. But we must respond vigorously to LFLA’s statement, which mentions “intimidation tactics,” and seems to apply that label to peaceful acts of protest including a petition signed by more than 1,000 authors, local, national and international; op-eds; investigative articles; public letters asking for transparency and accountability from LFLA staff and peaceful symbolic actions like displaying banners at ALOUD events.

These are democratic voices and actions coming from the community that supports the most important and cherished public literary institution in the city.

What we are asking for is transparency. And yet, it is only now, in its response to this incident, that LFLA has offered any kind of rationale for the sudden and needlessly traumatic firing of Louise Steinman (67 years old and a 25-year employee) and Maureen Moore (then 6 months pregnant and a 9- year employee).

The rationale is as patronizing as it is absurd.

The implication that Steinman and Moore were unaware of or unable to address “demographic and social changes” in the city is laughable. Look at the programming they produced. It reflects — as do the ad hoc committee and the hundreds of signers of our petition — the diversity of this city. We live that diversity in our bodies and work as writers and teachers, artists and readers. It is why we celebrate ALOUD.

The Foundation claims it was worried about being able to attract “top authors” to its hallmark series, yet the curatorial vision of Steinman and Moore was never about celebrity for its own sake. Instead, they sought to bring to the table the most compelling and relevant ideas about an eclectic range of subject matter, a focus that distinguished ALOUD from other literary presenters. Until now, the Foundation has said that since the firings were a personnel matter they had no obligation to disclose or discuss. Now that they are saying it’s a programming decision, we ask again for disclosure, discussion, and a voice in the future of ALOUD.

— Ad Hoc Committee in Support of ALOUD

Donna Frazier, Lynell George, Reed Johnson, Rubén Martínez, Hector Tobar, David Ulin, Terry Wolverton

Image: Audience at an ALOUD event, earlier this year. Photo by Gary Leonard

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