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One of my State's leading politicians was speaking recently at a book launch, to a primarily multicultural audience, when the subject of the *International year for Tolerance* came up.

'I really hate that expression,' he said, tolerantly 'I mean, what's it supposed to all mean?' A multitude of heads nodded in agreement with him.

It's an episode that probably provides all of us with a *deja vu* experience as we recall to ourselves how we felt upon first learning that 1995 was the *International Year for Tolerance*.

It doesn't seem to have the instant connections that we can all make with concepts like 'family' and 'disability' that have been themes of previous years and which have blended nicely with our work and home lives. In essence, to be able to celebrate a year of tolerance we have to acknowledge that there are intolerant aspects of our lives; and I suspect it is that subliminal negativism which is making it difficult for people to warm to the theme.

To get back to my politician's comment, I was able to say to myself 'I think this is what it's supposed to mean' the day one of our library users popped in the door and asked us to track down a book for him. He said the book had 'something' about change in its title and the author was Richards... then again, maybe Richard was the author's first name. I kept an enthusiastic smile on my face in deference to the *Year for Tolerance*.

My dictionary provides several options for honing in on the con-

cept of 'tolerance'. By definition it is:

- the power or capacity of enduring; the act of enduring;
- leniency towards the opinions, faults or objectionable traits of others;
- the act of tolerating;
- the power, as in medicine, to support medication or pain which would normally prove injurious.

With those definitions in mind, let it be said that librarians... this is indeed our year!

Our libraries are the epitome of tolerance.

Since the days of Aristotle our libraries have been tenacious protectors of the concept of a free-flow of information, a concept that has endured through the ages and promotes the democratic opportunity for everyone to have access to a diversity of thoughts, opinions, facts, customs and cultures.

Throughout history, we have seen threats, both real and philosophical, to that democratic concept and have endured curiously enough, often by fighting society's intolerance with our tolerance. Our example has demonstrated, time and again, that fear is the culprit and an informed society will have no need to fear.

The adage is that history repeats itself, so it is interesting to note that the western world of some 200 years ago found itself in the throes of an Industrial revolution and dealing with principles of toleration on a racial and political level (replacing the religious issues which initially gave rise to principles of toleration throughout the

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sixteenth and seventeenth centuries).

Here we are at the crossroads once more, but this time facing an information revolution which promises to have a much greater impact on the way we live and the way we work, than did the industrial revolution two centuries ago. And we are also dealing with principles of toleration on a racial and political level as our society debates land rights, racial hatred, media ownership and privacy issues.

Now, more than ever, we must set that example of combating fear, prejudice, and ignorance by nurturing an informed society that has finding skills, research tools, and access to a free-flow of information.

We must stress the essential role of our libraries and our librarians in maintaining a tolerant society, an information rich society, a health society, a compatible society.

Perhaps because of our libraries' foundation in the democratic free-flow of information and the concept that a library does not discriminate and has no 'vested interests' in its purpose of providing information access, we have somehow taken as an unwritten codicil that we can also have no vested interests for our profession.

This is the one issue where we should be demonstrably intolerant in this year for tolerance.

We must not be passive about the importance of librarians. Our librarians are essential to an information rich future... and we need to be making it our business to make sure everybody understands just how vital that is to the well-being of our society. ■