

Presentation of Award to Harry Chan

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I can think of three words that describe the very essence of our work as librarians: collaboration, information sharing and innovation:

There is no one who embodies these ideals more than our honoree, Harry Chan. For those of you who are not familiar with Harry's work, I'll give a brief description.

The first time I met Harry back in 2003, he was standing modestly (as he always does) by his display at a county-wide school library vendor showcase. We casually chatted about his OPALS automation system, which I had never heard of before, though I knew of him from his previous work in library automation. Harry explained that his new system was based on open-source software. It was designed as an economical alternative to the currently available systems, which were becoming extremely costly as they were migrating to online platforms. At that time I was suffering from sticker shock at the price of my own system, which was going up astronomically. On a whim, I told him that my current system was unable to accommodate Hebrew font and asked if his designers could come up with a means of allowing that option for cataloging. "Hmmm," he said, in his soft, modest voice. "I can try to help you out with that." The rest is history. Not only did his developers enable Hebrew cataloging, but OPALS became the system of choice for the network of Bookshelf libraries funded by the Avi Chai Foundation at the time. This allowed for a union catalog of over 50 Jewish school libraries in Canada and the US for sharing collection development, interlibrary loan and cataloging resources.

The mission statement of MediaFlex, Harry's company which is based in Montreal, Quebec and Champlain, New York, is "listen, communicate, innovate and serve." This is demonstrated by the fact that OPALS was developed in response to a particular need by a particular library community (that of a consortium of school districts in upstate New York) and is now used by over 2,000 libraries all over the world. They include school libraries, public libraries, special and academic libraries. By collecting rather small fees, MediaFlex can provide support and allow users to customize the software to their individual needs. In order to enable even the poorest libraries to have the best system, they even provide free support each year for a given number of schools.

Speaking of support, Harry has been associated with AJL for many years. He faithfully attends every conference, and has helped to fund them as well. On a personal level, Harry is a delight to talk to and a pleasure to work with, always showing his respect and consideration for others. I've also come to appreciate his artistic side. He posts the most beautiful shots of the changing seasons deep in the Canadian forest, where the snow piles up over the rooftops, the birds pose in magnificent color, and the ice always seems to be melting.

The acronym OPALS is derived from "Open source Automated Library System." Harry Chan and his company truly embody the spirit of the open source movement: to provide resources for lifelong learning through cooperation, sharing, and innovation.

I am delighted and honored to present this award to Harry. Félicitations à vous!