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Topeka grad Matthew Polly receives Alex Award recognition

How many authors have the opportunity to get the happy news that they've received a literary award from their high school librarian?

Probably about the same number who write acclaimed kung-fu, coming-of-age memoirs.

Matthew Polly, a Rhodes scholar and 1989 graduate of Topeka West High School, fits both descriptions.

He was one of 10 authors to receive an Alex Award on Jan. 14 from a committee of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), the fastest-growing division of the American Library Association.

Polly came to the attention of the selection committee through his book, "American Shaolin: Flying Kicks, Buddhist Monks, and the Legend of Iron Crotch: An Odyssey in the New China."

Polly's librarian at Topeka West, Diane Goheen, alerted him to the honor via email the morning of the announcements. "She has always been a huge supporter of mine," Polly said, "so to get a happy email from her was tremendously gratifying."

It was also special because when Polly was at Topeka West High School the head librarian was Michael L. Printz, whose dedication to the American Library Association was such that in recognition the ALA named one of its awards after him: The Michael L. Printz Award.

"When I was in high school, Mr. Printz took so many of us, including myself and my sister, under his wing and taught us the value of reading," Polly said. "Sadly, he has passed away. But I'm sure he's up there, looking down and smiling."

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The Alex Awards were created to recognize that many teens enjoy and often prefer books written for adults, and to assist librarians in recommending adult books that appeal to teens.

"I hope this award will help point teens and their parents to my book, because at its heart it is an inspirational story," Polly said. "It is also a good way for young people to learn about China in a fun and engaging way."

Angela Carstensen served as chairman of the Alex Award committee that read hundreds of books in order to arrive at the final list of 10 recipients.

Regarding Matthew's book, Angela had this to say:

"Anyone who has ever been bullied dreams of learning martial arts to defend himself. Matthew Polly actually did it. He took two year off from Princeton and studied kung fu at the Shaolin Temple in mainland China."

"In his funny and self-deprecating *American Shaolin: Flying Kicks, Buddhist Monks, and the Legend of the Iron Crotch: an Odyssey in the New China*, Polly tells how he improved both his mental and physical strength. Teens and adults love reading about Polly's cross-cultural misunderstandings, too, as well as his fighting moves. It's a completely different kind of 'sports' book."

The Alex Award is named in honor of the late Margaret Alexander Edwards, fondly called Alex by her closest friends, a young adult specialist at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. She used adult books extensively with young adults to broaden their experience and enrich their understanding of themselves and their world.

In addition to selecting titles for the Alex Awards, the Alex Committee presents a program at the ALA Annual Conference. The 2008 program will take place in Anaheim, Calif., Saturday, June 28 from 4 - 5:30 p.m., and will feature a panel presentation highlighting the winners and how to sell them to young adults. Authors will discuss the impact the award has had on their careers.

Polly's selection was announced at the American Library Association's Mid-Winter Meeting in Philadelphia.