Editorial: Worlds beyond

Katy Ginanni

For several years, Trinity University has had a summer reading program. While everyone – students, faculty and staff – is encouraged to participate, the incoming first-year students are the primary targets so that they may have a shared literary experience. The book for the summer of 2008 is Three Cups of Tea, and the program is being promoted more strongly than usual because the co-author and subject of the book, Greg Mortenson, will be on campus during the first week of classes to give a lecture and to meet with smaller groups of students. The book is the story of how Mortenson, a former high altitude mountain climber, became involved in building schools in Pakistan, and later in Afghanistan. I was particularly interested to learn that one of his early supporters and board member of his Central Asia Institute is Julia Bergman, library system administrator at City College of San Francisco.

While reading the story of this remarkable man and the change he has effect in some of the poorest regions of the world, I began to reflect (not for the first time) on the incredible bounty that so many U.S. citizens enjoy. No country is without poverty, of course, but in the U.S., most of our citizens go to sleep with roofs over their heads and food in their stomachs. Compare our unemployment rate (a 2007 estimate) of 4.6 percent to South Africa’s 24.3 percent, 40 percent in Afghanistan, and an astonishing 80 percent in Zimbabwe.1 And in the U.S., a 2003 estimate shows that 99 percent of our population above the age of fifteen can read and write. Compare that to a literacy rate of 90.7 percent in Zimbabwe, 86.4 percent in South Africa, and 28.1 percent in Afghanistan (a 2000 estimate).2 Given those figures, it is difficult to deny that we have it good here in the U.S.

Some people may read Three Cups of Tea or similar tales, and be so influenced by the story that they begin to think, “I’d like to do some volunteer work and make a difference in lives. But I’m a librarian. What can I do?” Well, my friends, libraries help foster democratic societies! In a 2001 report to the American Library Association (ALA), then president Nancy Kranich said that libraries “provide access to information, which affords all citizens the opportunity to participate fully in their societies.”3 And as librarians, we have skills and experience that can be useful all over the world. In what feels like a very egocentric turn, I’d like to share with you some of the path of my life in hopes that it may open your minds to the possibilities out there.

From almost the beginning of my career in libraries, I’ve been a serialist. When I matriculated in the library science program at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University in the fall of 1985, one of the first courses I signed up for was basic cataloging. At the time, I had an idea that I might want to go into serials cataloging, and so I was excited to learn the theory of what I was practicing (to a very limited extent; I did some of the preliminary work for title changes, cessations and so forth) in my job as a paraprofessional in the Jean and Alexander Heard Library at Vanderbilt. Little did I know that Professor Marion Kimbrough was not a fan of serials cataloging! We barely touched on serials during the course of the semester. Nor did we in the subsequent advanced cataloging course I took the following semester. I was disappointed, but figured that in-depth knowledge would come later from on-the-job training.

As it turned out, I didn’t go into cataloging at all. I was able to parlay my paraprofessional experience in serials acquisitions into a professional position in Alabama. At the time, I was nearly buried by student loans and couldn’t afford the luxury of waiting for that perfect cataloging job to come along. After four years at that institution, I moved to a university in Virginia. Not too long after I hung pictures in my new office and was starting to settle in, I received an unexpected job offer from EBSCO Information Services. Working for a vendor was not something I had ever considered, but the job sounded interesting and fun. But how could I leave a job after only a few months? I consulted with colleagues, friends and family, and was reassured by all that if I didn’t make a career of job-hopping, one instance could be explained and forgiven. After some weeks of dithering around the decision, I finally accepted the offer.

In ways both significant and small, and both personal and professional, working for EBSCO changed my life. But there is one specific aspect that is relevant to what I’m writing here, so allow me to share that with you. Because EBSCO provided more financial support for professional travel, I was able to attend the 2003 ALA Midwinter Meeting where I was introduced to Greg Mortenson for the first time. The following fall, I wrote a letter to Mortenson asking for a visit. As it turned out, I had the opportunity to visit the Central Asia Institute in July 2005, and I knew then that I wanted to do more.

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activity and development than my previous employers, I was able to become far more active in professional organizations. And because I was involved in committees and discussion groups of ALA, I was a regular at the midwinter and annual ALA conferences. In 1999, however, I decided to take a break from EBSCO and library work, and (after a rather long and arduous application process) accepted an invitation to serve in Peace Corps.

During the ALA annual conference in June of that year (and prior to my October departure for Zimbabwe), I met Jordan Scepanski, a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer and chair of the ALA International Relations Committee (IRC). Upon learning that I was heading for Zimbabwe, he asked if I'd like to be appointed to the IRC Africa subcommittee. As it turned out, my Internet access while in Zimbabwe was not reliable enough to participate in that committee, but it was that first offer that made me realize I just might have something to contribute to the world of international librarianship. When I returned to the U.S., after an abbreviated term of service in Zimbabwe, I sought opportunities to become involved in the international library community.

In 2001 when ALA's Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS) was looking for a representative to the Serials and Other Continuing Resources Standing Committee of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), I volunteered eagerly. Being approved by the various committees and boards within ALA was another lengthy process, but serving as an ALCTS representative to an IFLA committee was a rewarding and eye-opening experience for me. One of the most important things I came to realize is that no matter what the World Bank's designation of a country (developed, transitional, developing), all of the librarians I met during my tenure on that committee had at least one thing in common: we all tried to meet the needs of library users. And whether a library had had access to electronic resources for years or was just jumping into the fray, we all experienced the same frustrations and successes in acquiring and providing access to those resources.

EBSCO also supported my activity in the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) during the two years I worked in the EBSCO office in Johannesburg. I was again struck by the similarities, not the differences, between academic libraries I served in Southern Africa and the academic libraries I had served in the U.S. Most of the librarians I met while working in South Africa were dedicated to providing good service to their users, and all of the librarians I worked with in LIASA were committed to service for their chosen profession. Working with those librarians on program planning, celebrations for South African Library Week, and other professional development activities was a joy and an honor.

My second position (of three) with EBSCO gave me more opportunity for worldwide travel than I had ever hoped for. I served as a training specialist; I did training for both EBSCO staff and customers. Because EBSCO has offices and customers all over the world, that’s where my job often took me! During those five years, I trained librarians and EBSCO staff from countries in Europe, Latin America, Asia, Australasia and Africa. Again and again, I was reminded that librarians around the world share similar experiences. The international experience and perspective that I gained was invaluable, and for that I owe a great debt of gratitude to EBSCO.

EBSCO was good for me, but I’m not advocating that you kind readers all go out and find jobs with commercial entities! If you’re interested in international experience, it’s easy enough to find those opportunities. With the help of the Web, a quick and simple search reveals dozens and dozens of organizations seeking volunteers. I would like to highlight just a few.

Peace Corps — For those who are more mobile and able to make a longer commitment, Peace Corps may be something to investigate. Peace Corps is currently actively recruiting volunteers over the age of fifty. In many countries of service, the volunteers who serve as teachers are often called on to develop libraries in the schools they’re serving.

Fulbright Scholar Program — The Fulbright Scholar program, administered by the Council for International Exchange of Scholars, has several programs that provide both short- and long-term opportunities.

UN Volunteers — The United Nations created its volunteer program in 1971 “in order to be a development partner for the UN system.” Among their many thematic programs are education and information technology.

ALA International Relations Round Table — For those who would like to stay closer to home but still participate in international librarianship, the ALA IRRT provides a nice opportunity. There are IRRT committees and programs at ALA.

Often, volunteer opportunities require that you pay your own way. In some cases you may be required to pay for your own transportation, but food and lodging will be provided for you. Sometimes you may be required to foot the entire bill. It’s worth checking with Rotary Clubs and other civic organizations; they sometimes offer modest funding for volunteer projects.

There is no question that work with local organizations (professional, civic, church or other) can be enriching, rewarding and gratifying. But I also believe that becoming more involved on an international level can be those things and at the same time promote understanding and acceptance of other cultures. And those are things I think the world can use right now, even from librarians.

Notes

2. Ibid.