

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 effected 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'd 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

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94 activity and development than my previous employers, I
 95 was able to become far more active in professional
 96 organizations. And because I was involved in committees
 97 and discussion groups of ALA, I was a regular at the
 98 midwinter and annual ALA conferences. In 1999, how-
 99 ever, I decided to take a break from EBSCO and library
 100 work, and (after a rather long and arduous application
 101 process) accepted an invitation to serve in Peace Corps.
 102 During the ALA annual conference in June of that year
 103 (and prior to my October departure for Zimbabwe), I met
 104 Jordan Scepaniski, a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer and
 105 chair of the ALA International Relations Committee
 106 (IRC). Upon learning that I was headed for Zimbabwe,
 107 he asked if I'd like to be appointed to the IRC Africa
 108 subcommittee. As it turned out, my Internet access while in
 109 Zimbabwe was not reliable enough to participate in that
 110 committee, but it was that first offer that made me realize I
 111 just might have something to contribute to the world of
 112 international librarianship. When I returned to the U.S.
 113 after an abbreviated term of service in Zimbabwe, I sought
 114 opportunities to become involved in the international
 115 library community.

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

134 EBSCO also supported my activity in the Library and
 135 Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) during
 136 the two years I worked in the EBSCO office in Johannes-
 137 burg. I was again struck by the similarities, not the
 138 differences, between academic libraries I served in South-
 139 ern Africa and the academic libraries I had served in the U.
 140 S. Most of the librarians I met while working in South
 141 Africa were dedicated to providing good service to their
 142 users, and all of the librarians I worked with in LIASA were
 143 committed to service for their chosen profession. Working
 144 with those librarians on program planning, celebrations
 145 for South African Library Week, and other professional
 146 development activities was a joy and an honor.

147 My second position (of three) with EBSCO gave me
 148 more opportunity for worldwide travel than I had ever
 149 hoped for. I served as a training specialist; I did training
 150 for both EBSCO staff and customers. Because EBSCO
 151 has offices and customers all over the world, that's where
 152 my job often took me! During those five years, I trained
 153 librarians and EBSCO staff from countries in Europe,
 154 Latin America, Asia, Australasia and Africa. Again and
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again, I was reminded that librarians around the world 155
 share similar experiences. The international experience 156
 and perspective that I gained was invaluable, and for that 157
 I owe a great debt of gratitude to EBSCO. 158

EBSCO was good for me, but I'm not advocating that 159
 you kind readers all go out and find jobs with 160
 commercial entities! If you're interested in international 161
 experience, it's easy enough to find those opportunities. 162
 With the help of the Web, a quick and simple search 163
 reveals dozens and dozens of organizations seeking 164
 volunteers. I would like to highlight just a few. 165

Peace Corps — For those who are more mobile and 166
 able to make a longer commitment, Peace Corps may 167
 be something to investigate. Peace Corps is currently 168
 actively recruiting volunteers over the age of fifty. In 169
 many countries of service, the volunteers who serve as 170
 teachers are often called on to develop libraries in the 171
 schools they're serving. 172

Fulbright Scholar Program — The Fulbright Scholar 173
 Program, administered by the Council for Interna- 174
 tional Exchange of Scholars, has several programs 175
 that provide both short- and long-term opportunities. 176

UN Volunteers — The United Nations created its 177
 volunteer program in 1971 "in order to be a 178
 development partner for the UN system."⁴ Among 179
 their many thematic programs are education and 180
 information technology. 181

ALA International Relations Round Table — For 182
 those who would like to stay closer to home but still 183
 participate in international librarianship, the ALA 184
 IRRT provides a nice opportunity. There are IRRT 185
 committees and programs at ALA. 186
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Often, volunteer opportunities require that you pay 188
 your own way. In some cases you may be required to pay 189
 for your own transportation, but food and lodging will 190
 be provided for you. Sometimes you may be required to 191
 foot the entire bill. It's worth checking with Rotary Clubs 192
 and other civic organizations; they sometimes offer 193
 modest funding for volunteer projects. 194

There is no question that work with local organizations 195
 (professional, civic, church or other) can be enriching, 196
 rewarding and gratifying. But I also believe that becoming 197
 more involved on an international level can be those 198
 things and at the same time promote understanding and 199
 acceptance of other cultures. And those are things I think 200
 the world can use right now, even from librarians. 201

Notes 202

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