

## Access Interviews

### An Interview with Jane Mirandette

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Encompassing a wide range of responsibilities, access services means many different things to many different people, with global variations in what it means to the end user. This particular interview is an attempt to shed light on the global perspective on access to information. Perspectives from all viewpoints are welcome. If you know anyone with an interesting perspective on access services, or if you yourself want to be interviewed, please write me at [june.power@uncp.edu](mailto:june.power@uncp.edu) and tell me why.

### Meet Jane Mirandette

My first two interviewees for this column were both librarians, but the longer you work in libraries the more you realize that there are many people who work in and advocate for libraries that are not library professionals, but nevertheless deserve recognition for their contributions to our field. Jane Mirandette is just one such individual. Ms. Mirandette is the President of The Hester J. Hodgdon Libraries for All Program, a non-profit organization established to support the SJDS Biblioteca Movil and to promote lending libraries in Nicaragua. The mission of the organization is “to solicit funding and provide support for the continued development and success of the first public lending library in Nicaragua, to provide the means and encouragement needed for other lending libraries throughout Central America and to promote the activities of book mobile projects serving outlying regions.”

Libraries for All began when Ms. Mirandette moved to Nicaragua upon retiring and decided to open a bed and breakfast, which she still operates. As part of her services to her patrons she provided multilingual books because her clients were both Spanish and English speakers. She noticed that her staff would read the books on the patio, but never borrowed them. Finally one day Jane said, “You know, why don’t you take them home?” Her employee looked at her, gasped, and said, “No, you can’t loan books.” When Jane inquired about why books couldn’t be loaned she was told it was because they would get stolen. She there is a “rigid concept in many third world countries that to loan a book is to lose a book.” There were a number of national libraries in Nicaragua, but they were non-lending. This discovery compelled her to do something about the fact that the town she lived in had no books available for borrowing.

**JM** There were no books for children, there was no way to read to your children at night, there was no way to get the information if you couldn’t afford the book in school, and there were only three or four bookstores in the whole country. The wealthy people had books - they got their books when they went to Miami, and they got their books on Amazon.com, or when the kids went to grandma’s. The English speaking schools, which are where everyone who has money sends their kids, had books. But for the average person, not even the very poor person, but the average person had no access to information or books for their children.

Determined to rectify this lack of access to information, Ms. Mirandette began loaning her books to people in her town. “I worked with loaning just the little books I had, and then I got more books.” From that small start, the program has blossomed into 12 libraries across Nicaragua, and a 13<sup>th</sup> library is in the planning stages. Libraries for All in Nicaragua now has over 12,500 books in the main library and over 8,000 books in the mobile projects. They service over 4,000 families in the main library and over 3,500 children have library cards. In the mobile project, they have another 3,000 books. The program has also

expanded into Guatemala, which now has five lending libraries. According to Jane, “a lot of this expands beyond books in the hands of children – it really opens up the world to communities.”

### **Could you imagine learning physics or social science without your book?**

**JM** One of the things that happened a year and a half ago, was that the head of the school department, the director of schools in our area, came to me and said he knew that we bought books and would we mind buying copies of the books that are the school curriculum because, and I wasn't aware of this, over half the children in most of the schools didn't have textbooks.

**JLP** How are they supposed to learn if they don't have the book?

**JM** Exactly! Could you imagine learning physics or social science without your book? Of course, we are not wealthy so we couldn't supply books to all the children, so what we did was supplied six or seven copies of each book and we have class study time in our library. We actually had to expand where the tables are in the library to accommodate the high school and middle school students that come to study in groups. Studying in groups has become something that was never done. That's just one little way the paradigm is shifting.

The local community has a strong base in the fishing industry. Even traditional activities such as this have been positively affected by Jane Mirandette's pioneering efforts.

**JM** The fishermen discovered the books and they will go out to sea for 10 days at a time or 15 days at a time, and what they started doing about three years ago was borrowing. Two or three guys would be in charge of borrowing the books. They would put them in Ziploc bags to keep them dry and what started to happen was competitive fishermen would go fish in their own areas during the day but anchor in the same place at night and share the fuel to make light so that they could all read. Providing books, providing information really jumps starts a whole community.”

When asked about the future of Libraries for All and how the mission was developing, Jane spoke of the desire to see the proliferation of libraries, but emphasized the need to focus on sustainability, while at the same time maintaining fiscal responsibility with grant monies and charitable donations.

**JM** As we grow, and as we recognize how successful what we doing is, it becomes so much more important that it not fail - that we maintain it financially. We are very frugal in what we do we do, everything is very grassroots. People send us things; people supply what we need in crafts. There are several women who send us those things. American Airlines ships for us with their ambassador program. Right now, we are in the middle of our annual matching funds with British Petroleum. An employee there works with us to help us get the financial stability we need. I'm also looking for a private foundation to take us on. We are a 501c3, which is an IRS bonafide charity. We have over three years of tax returns, and we have all of our financial papers. It's

very transparent, very clearly done. So that's our biggest goal – to find financial stability with some sort of foundation that can help us.

I also asked Ms. Mirandette about what lessons had been learned throughout the process of opening the dozen libraries in Nicaragua, and how the program had changed between opening the first and twelfth libraries.

**JM** One of the things that I started doing is that I do more speaking, and so I'm less involved in the hands on and have recognized how important it is to empower the people that work with you to do the jobs themselves and not try to micromanage. I think it's true in whatever field people are in where they have a foundation. There is a paper actually that two of us wrote last year for the American Library Association poster session called "Seven aspects of sustained ability." One of the things we learned is that you need to be transparent in your finances. I think the most important thing I learned is that you never impose. We don't knock on doors and say "would you like a library?" We can barely handle the flood of people asking us. So knowing your target market and knowing that they want what you're providing is probably the most important thing I learned. Programs like ours evolve naturally, and what has evolved to this point has included these other groups which find their own funding and do their own promotion - all we do is supply experience and expertise. I'd like to see us expand into community centers and teaching facilities all over Central America. They need English classes that don't cost a lot. Everyone needs driver education; everyone needs more education in every field, particularly literacy. If the countries in Central America are going to rise up, it will because everyone will have marketable skills.

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I inquired of Ms. Mirandette about the relationship her libraries had, if any, with the governmentally operated libraries of the country that were not providing lending services.

**JM** There are 143 libraries in Nicaragua. When I first joined ANIBITA, the national library organization, there were 142, and none of them loaned books. It took them two years to accept us because we were loaning our books. Now seven of those libraries have some sort of lending, not necessarily a full lending program, but they are much more active in lending, which we have been able to help with. They have a campaign with the American Library Association where they are trying to inspire literacy by having people come to the library for story hour. We just gave a class on story hour and raffled off books. We had all the powers at be - the bankers, lawyers and Indian chiefs at our inauguration of this ALA program called "In your library - In your bibliotheca," and 43 of the 143 libraries joined the campaign to inspire literacy. The main speaker, the minister of

education at the time, said he envisioned the day when we could all loan our books and half the audience turned and looked at me and grinned.

As with any non-profit organization, these wonderful programs and services don't materialize out of thin air, but are supported entirely by the financial support of donors and the work efforts of volunteers. One thing Libraries for All is in need of is assistance with grant writing, an ongoing and detailed process. They are currently looking to write grants for two new projects. One is the compost to computer project, where money is raised to purchase computers from the sales of compost. This would allow for the expansion of computer classes into larger programs. Internet access for the libraries would also require writing a grant to bring the idea to fruition. According to Ms. Mirandette, the North Americans who live in the area buy satellite dishes for their Internet access, but it is not publicly available. Libraries for All is thus in need of someone to write a grant for the money it would take to provide public Internet access through the library and also to provide equipment and access in the school. Volunteer efforts in the Nicaraguan libraries are also crucial to the success of the program. Libraries for All volunteers come from library schools, Spanish classes, and other college programs. Some classes have held a drive for books or stuffed animals for Christmas, and other institutions have held fundraising drives.

**JLP** What the most imperative pending support needs for Libraries for All?

JM I would call fundraising drives a major need and then grant writing, if people wanted to do things other than send a check or send a book. Money is more valuable to us than a book, because we can get really good discounts, we can buy what is required and needed, and we can get them shipped. Librarians ship us books that they don't need anymore and [often] we have to pay the shipping for those.

The importance of fundraising and grant writing is underscored by their success in writing a grant that enabled them to obtain the funds to purchase a van to deliver books.

**JM** We got a grant written two years ago. We have one truck, and we are looking for a second truck. We now go to 27 communities and we want to bring it to 35. We have requests to go to 35 communities, but we would need a second truck and more money. One of the things that is important to note in any organization, and of importance to us, is that because we are in a country like Nicaragua there are a lot of people who come and try to help with wonderful ideas and enthusiasm, but they don't plan it out and they run ahead of themselves and they fail. And for every organization that fails, it's another disappointment for people who already had disasters in their lives. So I don't run ahead. I'd love to do 35 communities but I know I'm not big enough to sustain it. So the keyword is sustainability – not to run ahead to what you know you can't maintain. In our application for new libraries, one of the questions is how is it going to be maintained, who is going to run it, what the vision for maintenance in the future is. Without that we don't even give 100 books because the books are too precious.”

This truly amazing effort can be more fully explored by visiting its web site, located at [www.sjdsbiblioteca.com](http://www.sjdsbiblioteca.com).