

LIBRARIANS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

DANVILLE FOURIE

Senior Librarian, Mitchell's Plain Library

As the Anthony Thompson Award recipient for 2003, I had the opportunity to visit public libraries in and around London, Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester.

The first thing I noticed was how passionate the librarians were. The dwindling number of patrons and the drop in library usage necessitated a process of change and a changed working environment. Librarians were faced with the challenge to include the previously socially excluded. By changing the look of libraries in general, librarians also started to change their attitude. In some of the boroughs libraries were demolished and replaced with modern buildings, and in others refurbishment of the library sufficed.

A new concept is the Idea Store in Bow, London and the word 'library' disappeared. Today the Idea Store incorporates a coffee shoppe, computer centre, small rooms for meetings, and a library. The difference between the Idea Store and a library is that staff members are not desk bound - nobody seems to have a designated post but assists everywhere - even in the coffee shoppe.

The atmosphere is very different to that of a traditional library. Young children walk around with chocolate bars and cold drinks and you'll find young professionals drinking coffee while discussing business. To a librarian from a third world country where the use of the library for educational purposes is much more important than for leisure, the large numbers of books on the shelves with so few people using it, seem a waste.

Partnerships with central government and other organisations are also helping to promote change in the library world. In many instances libraries bid for funds for outreach activities. Other uses of funds are the purchase of books in different languages; providing a mobile service to gypsy sites; and free Internet services. These initiatives were started by librarians who wanted to make a difference in their communities.

In Liverpool libraries young people were taken to bookshops to buy books for their peers. By doing so they included a difficult-to-reach group, and it also resulted in bringing young people to the library. To some that might sound very radical but in order to attract a specific group to the library, something extraordinary was needed. In Liverpool libraries the Social Services Department share the library building. While the parents are having a session with a social worker for instance, the children use the library. This is a subtle and natural initiation into the world of books for children who do not grow up with books in the home. At The Powerhouse in Manchester another

innovative way of reaching this difficult group included the incorporation of the library with a youth centre. The centre also houses a radio station that is operated by young people, a gymnasium, a jobs and career service, social services, a teachers aid service and help with school work.

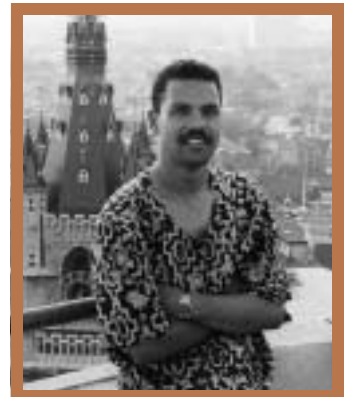
In Mitchell's Plain Library, Cape Town, we also initiated a programme of change. This library had the possibility to reach a wide range of people but we were inhibited by several factors. To succeed we needed change. When we were told that we would not get Internet access in the library, we approached the Shuttleworth Foundation. After discussions, the Foundation donated four PCs to the library. We installed a pre-paid telephone line, and now our patrons are surfing the net, and applying and finding work via the net. We also run a small business corner. Here we advise and refer entrepreneurs to relevant organisations. Questions range from how to start a business to applying for tenders and funding at financial institutions. A much needed coffee shoppe is run by the Friends of the Library on a Saturday. It is the only coffee shoppe in the Mitchell's Plain area and we plan to open it everyday.

The daily usage of the library is very encouraging. Although short staffed, it doesn't deter us from introducing new programmes. In the Children's Library we have schools visiting the library for story hours and projects. For some children that is the only time they can come to the library. We also formed a partnership with the University of Cape Town's student services. Each year they have exhibits on the different courses at the university for first year students. They also advise the high school pupils on subjects they require for university exemption.

As in the UK, change in libraries is essential. We are competing with external factors. Library patrons will not use the service if they can get books and information from elsewhere. Change need not be a negative experience and librarians should not be scared to change. Our profession stood the test of time. We might not need to change a household name like 'library' to attract patrons. We just need to create an awareness as to what libraries can offer the public.

The Anthony Thompson Award opened doors and opportunities for me. It is now up to me to bring about change in attitudes, and convince librarians that they are the agents of real change.

'The first thing I noticed was how passionate the librarians were'



Danville Fourie, recipient of the Anthony Thompson Award in 2003

2003