

# American Embassy Libraries

MARK DOBSON

Country Library Director, US Embassy

A parliamentary researcher requests information on United States (US) legislation on foreign funding to political parties; a Member of Parliament needs the text of the Accounting Reform Act as signed into law; a reporter asks if it is against the law in America for the Central Intelligence Agency to use journalists in covert intelligence operations; a businessman asks for a US company's telephone number while a traveller asks about the top tourism attraction in Idaho: another typical day at the American Embassy libraries in South Africa.

Providing balanced and authoritative information about the United States of America (USA) is the aim of the librarians at the American Embassy and its consulates-general. And while we focus our time and resources on serious, in-depth queries, we spend a fair amount of time on basic information and quick facts.

Though we have all the traditional tools of the librarian's trade at hand - reference books and periodicals - our high-tech libraries in Pretoria, Johannesburg, Soweto, Cape Town and Durban take advantage of a host of electronic databases, CD-ROMs and web pages to answer queries profound and mundane about the US and issues related to the US quickly and thoroughly.

## Background

American Embassy libraries in South Africa fall under the Office of Public Affairs at the US diplomatic mission to South Africa. Our libraries are part of a broader programme aimed at fostering mutual understanding between the peoples of South Africa and those of the United States. (For simplicity's sake, let me say that when I refer to American Embassy libraries, I am automatically including our libraries in Johannesburg, Soweto, Cape Town and Durban.)

How do we do that? By bringing people



## in South Africa

together from all professions and walks of life. We believe that is the basis for establishing meaningful dialogue and increasing long-term understanding. For South African library professionals, that means sharing skills and ideas at Embassy-sponsored training workshops on advocacy and grant writing proposals. It means providing American resources to libraries, like our donation of a collection of American law books to the Constitutional Court. It also means funding exchange visits of South African librarians from the National Library, Medical University of Southern Africa (MEDUNSA), University of South Africa (UNISA) and librarians from US to discuss relevant professional issues.

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## What ever happened to USIS?

American Embassy libraries have existed in various forms over the years. Many will remember US Information Service (USIS) and wonder what happened to the agency that organised Fulbright scholarships, professional exchange programmes to America for South Africans, and visits to South Africa by academics, musicians, dancers and artists. In 1999, USIS merged into the US Department of State and emerged with a new name - the Office of Public Affairs of the US Embassy - and continued its business of culture and information work - including library services.

In doing so, American Embassy libraries everywhere continued their transformation process from USIS public libraries into information resource centres (IRCs), whose users changed from the general public to targeted audiences like journalists, academics and government officials. General reading and lending collections were donated to local institutions and USIS library staff was trained to use LegiSlate and other electronic databases.

In South Africa we have a bit of the old and the new: the lending libraries in Cape Town, Durban and Pretoria were transformed into IRCs, while our library in Johannesburg and the satellite centre in Soweto remain open to the public.

## Pretoria - the mother ship

On a typical day in the American Embassy in Pretoria, four librarians hunch over their computers or talk into their telephones. Most of the in-depth reference work is done here, where the bulk of the reference resources - print and electronic - are concentrated. Serious researchers visit the library by appointment, though we encourage our clients to contact us by telephone, fax or e-mail first. In answer to a query, senior reference specialist Helen Savva, reference specialist Sean Newman (who wears another hat as embassy webmaster)



△ The Soweto Satellite Centre is constantly in use and received a \$75 000 upgrade of equipment, furniture, new books, CDs, videos and DVDs last year



◁ The Durban information resource centre boasts a new library

△ Above journalism students from the Durban Institute of Technology are receiving database training

◁ The chief librarian in Cape Town, Amy Bell Mulaudzi, and her assistant, Thundeza Matiwane



or librarian Ruth Koko may prepare a comprehensive package of information. If unable to answer a serious, in-depth query about the US with our own resources, we can refer it to our headquarters in Washington, DC, where reference librarians are on standby to help American Embassy libraries worldwide.

Our electronic databases include EbscoHost, ProQuest, Lexis-Nexis, Factiva, GaleNet, CiaoNet, First-Search and Books in Print. These are supplemented by CD-ROMs such as West's US Code Annotated and Code of Federal Regulations, and a collection of general and specialised encyclopaedias, directories, dictionaries and other reference works.

I lead the Pretoria IRC team and, as country library director, coordinate the embassy's countrywide library programme. An American information resource officer (expected to arrive this year), who has Southern African responsibilities, is also based in Pretoria.

### **Johannesburg - public access since 1940**

The American library in Johannesburg opened its doors to the public in 1940. This spacious public access library on the third floor of the 1066 building on the corner of Harrison and Pritchard Streets houses a collection of about 5 000 books, 700 videocassettes, and 50 periodicals. Visitors may also search the ProQuest full-text journals database or conduct research on the Internet. Mandla Ngubeni, Moses Mafora and Vusi Kaunda assist chief librarian Selaelo Ramoleta. (Selaelo and her colleagues also have responsibility for the Soweto Satellite Centre.)

### **Soweto Satellite Centre - a bit of living history**

In 1975 USIS set up a small library in two small rooms on the top floor of the YMCA building in Orlando East. These were the dark days of apartheid and, during the student uprising of the following year, many people found not only a safe haven in the library, but also access to information not readily available in a censored country, such as US civil rights movies and books by and about Martin Luther King, junior and

'-If these walls could talk, they would tell difficult and disturbing stories about lives lost and dreams deferred, but they would also tell heart-warming stories about the connection between the flow of information and the struggle of a people to be free... They would tell you that this (Soweto Satellite Centre) was one of the few places where South Africans could gain access to information and materials about the United States that was otherwise unavailable.'

Ambassador James Joseph (1999)

Malcolm X. Some of those visitors are now prominent authors and publishers, journalists and photographers, and members of parliament.

In 1987 the library relocated to the Ipelegeng Community Centre in White City, Jabavu. In recent years a growing appreciation of the library's symbolic value as the only foreign diplomatic presence in Soweto, as well as its potential informational and cultural role in South Africa's largest conurbation culminated in its re-launch in 1999. Speaking at the time, then-Ambassador James Joseph said: 'If these walls could talk, they would tell difficult and disturbing stories about lives lost and dreams deferred, but they would also tell heart-warming stories about the connection between the flow of information and the struggle of a people to be free.

'They would tell you that this was one of the few places where free discussion and the sharing of ideas could take place without fear of retribution from the authorities. They would tell you that this was one of the few places where South Africans could gain access to information and materials about the United States that was otherwise unavailable.

'They would tell you that this library has also been the setting for the observance of Black History Month and Fourth of July

celebrations, for poetry readings and quiet conversations about how to create a new and different South Africa.'

Last year saw another major step forward for the Soweto Satellite Centre: a \$75 000 upgrade will bring up-to-date computer and audiovisual equipment, new furniture, and a significant injection of new books, CDs, videos and DVDs to the centre.

### **Durban - small is big**

In March 2002, the Durban information resource centre along with the US Consulate-General moved to new premises, and is now located at the top of the Old Mutual Building in West Street in the central business district. The IRC, run by librarian Thula Hlongwane, is deceptive in appearance, as the small print collection belies the wealth of information available through such databases as Lexis-Nexis, GaleNet, ProQuest and FirstSearch.

### **Cape Town - parliament's partner**

Since joining the IRC in Cape Town a few years ago, chief librarian Amy Bell Mulaudzi has fostered a strong relationship with parliamentary researchers (including the Parliamentary Research Unit, the Library of Parliament and political party researchers), keen to compare South African legislative initiatives with American law, as well as to find out more about how the US Congress functions. In response, the Cape Town IRC developed a fortnightly electronic newsletter, *Currently in Congress*, highlighting current events in the US House of Representatives and the Senate. Working with Amy in the Consulate-General on the Foreshore is Thundeza Matiwane.

### **The future**

American Embassy libraries are continuing to evolve to meet the changing needs of their clients. The present Under-Secretary of State for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy is revisiting the idea of more open and public access to embassy libraries and the need to expand the libraries' reach to broader audiences. Sounds familiar? As the saying goes: what's old is new!