

IMPRESSIONS

Taking libraries to the people



CONFERENCE



RONEL MOUTON

Regional Librarian, Swellendam

Mpumalanga was hot, the fires still smouldered when we landed at the new airport. Our hired car was ready and the accommodation arranged. What I will remember from this conference, however, were the many people stranded without transport or accommodation, though it was paid for in advance. Some slept in the foyers of hotels the first night, some were given a lift on the back of a bakkie after a very long wait at the airport. The logistical problems were a topic of conversation wherever small groups were gathered.

Speakers

However, the conference eventually got under way and Tommy Mathee (chairman) in his opening speech stressed the importance of libraries in communities. He emphasised that more libraries are needed and said that the only reason why communities do not cry out for library services, is because at this stage basic services such as water and housing are of greater importance.

A representative from the office of the Minister of Education in Mpumalanga indicated a vested interest in libraries because of their important role in education. Fear of books was referred to as the 'illiteracy of the literate'. The challenge is to make people love books, to encourage reading as opposed to watching television and the use of the Internet, to overcome the drain on library resources as result of theft, to provide enough relevant material and, finally enough libraries.

The national librarian for Cuba Mr EA Matos, provided some statistics but what impressed me most was his discussion on the cooperation between their schools and libraries to bring about cultural

transformation. Books are also very inexpensive which ensures that most people can afford them and according to Matos illiteracy has been eradicated in Cuba.

Doctor James O'Daniel, president of the Nigerian Library Association, stressed that information is power and important for democracy. Librarians have to share information through mentoring. He said that people are thirsting for information and that knowledge empowers.

According to Professor Archie Dick from the University of Pretoria there is one library for every 25 000 people in South Africa and that the 1 800 libraries currently in operation are very unevenly distributed. Even though more libraries are needed, there are still threats of closure with 'legitimate' sounding reasons which in actual fact is simply a pretext for saving costs. He said that in Tshwane there is no consultation with the community before a library is closed. He made three recommendations:

- ❖ libraries need Friends of the library to prevent closures and obtain equipment
- ❖ library workers have to lobby for a public librarian's act because they deserve protection through legislation
- ❖ librarians should actively support an organisation such as the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA).

PACLIG

I was surprised at the attendance of municipal council members at the Public and Community Libraries Interest Group (PACLIG) meeting. When the activities of the various provincial branches of PACLIG were discussed, it was obvious that LIASA is very active and it was apparent that more librarians will have to join LIASA for the organisation to really have an impact on various levels. Librarians should promote LIASA and their professions to their local councils and elsewhere.

Flippie van der Walt was the recipient of the Public Librarian Award 2004. His experiences during his professional visit to the city of Würzburg in Germany was really interesting and one of the highlights of the conference. Some interesting facts about the library are:

- ❖ library staff views suggestions and complaints as a serious matter
- ❖ the circulation desk is a self-help station although staff is available if help is needed. After each transaction, patrons receive a slip similar to a tillslip on which the items issued and the most recent history of borrowing is indicated
- ❖ patrons do not have to scan every barcode of every item as each has a transponder. When the bag of books is moved through the desk, the items are registered as issued or returned. Books are not stamped
- ❖ the loan period is one month and a person may borrow a maximum of 90 items per person
- ❖ there is a 'new book wish list' from which titles are immediately evaluated and bought



Left: The Conference Centre in Nelspruit with lovely views of the hills of Mpumalanga

Below: Ronel Mouton, regional librarian, Swellendam region; Tessa Caroline, assistant director: Selection; Christelle Lubbe, librarian, Milnerton Public Library and Faldelah Davids, librarian, Hout Bay Library during a visit to the famous Sudwala Caves



- ❖ the library has barcoded umbrellas available for issue on a rainy day
- ❖ there is a special area for pets
- ❖ the Internet stations have slots. Cards with access time can be bought and unspent time can be cashed in
- ❖ fines can be paid with a credit card
- ❖ the children's library is well decorated and has a computer playstation where children can play
- ❖ patrons are very disciplined. Failure to return books in Germany can result in a jail sentence
- ❖ read more about his visit on the web site www.goethe.de/librarian2004. See also page 46.

Workshops

Anne Tuson described how their Institute for Training and Education for Capacity-building (ITEC) Community Library functions, how donations are acquired and how children and members of the community are encouraged to take ownership of their library through participation in running the library and other activities. She runs the community library without any funding, only a building and the liberty to do what is required. Although it is a very small library with only one librarian, funds still have to be raised. The library provides Internet access on two work stations; and despite the lack of staff standard activities such as book discussions, competitions, reading clubs, story hours, literacy projects, et cetera are part and parcel of the library's programme. This library is a model of sustainability in a community without any official funding.

Jean Williams from Biblionef provided information on the many ways in which books are supplied and maintained in the most remote rural areas (mostly children's books).

These small libraries come in many shapes and sizes such as Wheelie wagons, suitcases, box libraries, crates, toyboxes, container libraries or sometimes just a few shelves somewhere. Her enthusiasm is clearly what keeps her going because funds are limited and they are inundated with requests for books. Biblionef has received funds from the national lottery but the greatest drawback is the lack of commitment and sustained involvement in libraries. There is a great need for volunteers. Therefore they only supply books in a community that is very active.

Jane Sharka, a school librarian from a school in the State of Illinois, America opined that children and teachers do not realise the worth of a librarian. Her reply to a question from the group whether she has the answer to poor teachers' cooperation with public libraries in handling the projects learners have to do, was simply that she has struggled with the same problem for the past 30 years. She said that it is the responsibility of librarians to interact with schools, learners and the public in such a manner that a more positive reaction is elicited. At another session, she shared information about a study that proved that learners with access to better resources and more and better-trained library personnel, achieve better results.

Mr R Lonsdale from the University of Wales said that the Internet helps to make libraries and material accessible to a larger group of individuals and that the Internet is an agent in the promotion of reading. He encouraged the use of web sites to lure children to read and write stories themselves. Web logs are journal web sites that children use to communicate with each other and

librarians about their reading preferences as well as comments. On some web sites children can create their own virtual fiction or have discussions about fiction they've read and read reviews about titles they are interested in. He felt that web sites for children ought to be visually stimulating.

Conclusion

I would like to recommend that all librarians endeavour to attend a LIASA conference. Some workshop sessions are more interesting than others, but the interaction with other librarians, the exchange of ideas, information on new technology and the boost in morale is precious. I was impressed and filled with renewed hope for the future of librarianship as a profession.

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