

Notes from a

BIG country . . .

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Librarians gather in Portland

I had the privilege to attend the Public Library Association Conference (PLA 2010) in Portland, Oregon this year. I had my doubts about the endeavour when I had to use Google Earth to find out where Portland was and I worried about my internal clock when it took more than 22 hours to get there. I must admit I was quite apprehensive about going through Customs and baring all in front of a woman in uniform. I should have known that I had nothing to worry about. I was in a big country where people understood English and reliable public transport was a way of life.

The conference started on a high note (library songs sung by delegates) and continued right through the week with the type of energy usually found at story hours. At most other conferences the librarians are treated as a whole, and academic, school, private and public librarians are grouped as one, regardless of where they work. This conference addressed the unique challenges, hopes and problems that can only be experienced in a public library. I felt so at home, I even considered raising my hand and sharing my own experiences as a public librarian in South Africa.

The conference was mainly a platform for public librarians to share valuable ideas/suggestions to cope with changing environments. Best practices were suggested, problems highlighted and programme ideas were in abundance. The general atmosphere of positive energy and sharing of opportunities was taken for granted. I had to smile secretly - all public librarians really have a unique sense of humour that they cannot suppress, especially if you put three thousand or so in the same building. It took us only a few hours to find the library rhythm and we fitted right in. We were

quickly identified as non-American and I was asked the seemingly harmless question that took me a while to answer: 'Are you a Boer?'

I always thought that the public libraries in the United States of America have all the answers, and it was quite a shock to discover that they had similar, and even worse problems than in South Africa. Public libraries have to constantly do more with less. We seem to forget that most public libraries, regardless of their location, are experiencing the same problems and situations on a day-to-day basis. It was an eye-opener to realise that we had travelled half way around the world only to hear about budget cuts in public libraries and how to provide an effective service, regardless. Libraries need to find a balance between the internal and external demands placed on staff and the increasing needs of their patrons. Stress and burnout soar as library professionals cope with not only their own challenges, but also those of the people they serve.

I would like to share the most interesting sessions I attended (well, interesting to me, anyway).

On the first day I attended a session called *From not to hot!*

Forget sitting through a lecture about statistics and new research. This session gave tips on how to turn your unknown or mediocre library into the place in the community where everything is happening. They had a few mind-boggling ideas that any traditional librarian would frown upon. Just imagine the following:

'I should have known that I had nothing to worry about. I was in a big country where people understood English and reliable public transport was a way of life'



- ★ don't stock reference books - 'this way you know who steals the books instead of it being stolen anonymously'
- ★ weeding - 'is not just for collections - also weed your patrons'
- ★ don't be afraid to show the 'bad apple' the door; this will set the tone of the library.

They even shared the secret formula for Sensational Customer Services (SCS)



Tip of the day: Show love to the happy customer; show diligence to the semi-unhappy; show the door to the perpetually unhappy or harmful.

Another session was *Advanced Black Belt Librarians - (the top 10 security issues in public libraries)*. I suddenly realised the big difference between South African and American libraries: the Americans take security in all their libraries seriously. They even have security experts that advise and train library staff and management on how to deal with problems. To name a few:

- ★ keep rules simple and direct so that it is easy to follow
- ★ 'no' must mean 'no'
- ★ all staff must be consistent in executing security and rules
- ★ get documentation in order - you need proof of events
- ★ update security procedures timeously - every library must have custom-made procedures
- ★ train all staff effectively and hold them accountable for decisions
- ★ lack of effective security staff - must have a uniform, be visible and great communicators.

Tip of the day: It is all about communication, rather than confrontation. Be aware of surroundings at all times.

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Tip of the day: Be assertive, be objective and do not take anything personally.

As part of our tour we visited the following libraries:

- ★ Central Library, Portland, Oregon - the library with the friendly and helpful staff
- ★ New York Public Library, New York - the library without books
- ★ Fisher Fine Arts Library, Philadelphia - the library that looks like an art piece
- ★ Van Pelt Library, Penn University - the library with knowledge

oozing out of the walls

- ★ Library of Congress, Washington DC - the library that I will never forget ...

To touch the first **Jungle book** written by hand; to see an original **Gutenberg Bible** printed in the 1450s; and to take a stride with Charles Dickens's walking stick, are things that only a fellow librarian can understand. And this all happened to me.

I left most of my clothes in New York and brought back a suitcase full of autographed books. I turned tourist and went to a Broadway show, paid for bookmarks with a logo and ate a corn dog. I took a ride in a yellow cab with a cabbie from Nigeria and I am still watching every American movie for a familiar beacon. I have experienced America and I have touched their treasures. What more can a public librarian ask for!



◀ (Ltr): Christelle Lubbe, senior librarian, Central Library; Emma Bezuidenhout, first officer, library and information services; and district one manager, library and information services, Carmen Holzman, in Portland where the Public Library Association Conference was held

► The Library of Congress in Washington



▲ Carmen Holzman with Karen Kingsbury, an award-winning author from Washington State on Christian books

► Christelle, Emma and Carmen at the Philadelphia Franklin Institute

