International Librarianship

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FOREWORD

Librarianship is a field of learning, of assisting others in their efforts to expand their boundaries and extend themselves. These twelve essays take us on journeys that our colleagues have embarked on to Central America, the Caribbean, Central Europe, Africa, the Mediterranean, and Asia, all in the name of learning and supporting librarian communities in other areas of the world. They traveled for periods ranging from weeks to months as Fulbright Scholars, Fulbright Senior Specialists, Peace Corps volunteers, and as members of a Fulbright-Hays Seminar, with support from grants and professional organizations or collaborations established through local connections and philanthropic organizations.

Their travels were educational, fulfilling, and productive. They designed and launched new services related to reference and library instruction, delivered lectures, taught collection development and research classes, designed training for Peace Corps volunteers, organized conferences, wrote grants and development documents, drafted strategic plans, designed curricula, delivered story times, cataloged collections, edited conference proceedings, and wrote articles for international library publications.

Their experiences led to friendships, new connections, and return trips to continue and expand their work. They bring their wisdom back to us, so that we may learn about the challenges of walking along political, social, cultural, historical, and religious boundaries while respecting the values and expressions of others. And they relate how they prepared for their work. They not only have the requisite technical and practical skills to bring to the new settings, they learn to pack and they study languages, history, literature, and cuisine. They bring patience, trust, diplomacy, and flexibility, and they acquire confidence. They expand their feelings of empathy and their ability to communicate with a wide range of patrons, including local leaders. They have to be independent, and sometimes they are lonely.

They find support, challenges, and sometimes, the unexpected. One librarian worked to establish a new archive at the Steve Biko Centre, only to encounter opposition from South African archivists. Another's
host family discouraged him from communicating with female family members. Yet another found a meaningful message in a sign along a rural road in Cyprus: Library = Democracy + Critical Thinking.

While they appreciate their new friends and colleagues, they return with a renewed respect for the American library. They reflect on the strengths, routines, and innovations of libraries they know in the United States, from advocacy efforts to interlibrary loan, online catalogs, self-service copy machines, circulation systems and policies, Friends of the Library and volunteer organizations, and the comparatively greater salaries of American counterparts. They leave us with advice:

• Be respectful but do not be shy.
• Try to establish a cooperative connection and avoid being perceived as patronizing.
• Leaders of international library development initiatives need to question what they bring to developing countries as outsiders.
• Collective negotiation of timelines and schedules necessitates a calm approach, sensitivity, and flexibility.

Please join me in appreciating these stories, but do not stop there. I invite you to start your own international connections. A fine place to begin is to reach out to a professional library organization, such as the International Relations Round Table of the American Library Association.

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