

# Job <sup>of a</sup> Lifetime

Danianne Mizzy

## World library partnership

This month, "Job of a Lifetime" looks at what might be your academic leave of a lifetime. World Library Partnership (WLP) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to "advocate for sustainable, community-based libraries in developing areas of the world." Its Inform the World (ITW) Library Skills Exchange program partners pairs of international volunteer librarians with local librarians in Central America and South Africa. The four-week program is designed to allow the librarians "to bring their expertise together to create unique answers to the information needs of rural communities."

I spoke with three volunteers about their experiences. Arlie Sims, head of reference and instructional services at Columbia College-Chicago, worked with Vilma Yamileth Ordóñez at the Concepción de María Public Library in Honduras, which has its own building. Kara Malenfant, university information librarian at DePaul University, worked with educator/librarian Lucy Makaula and Principal Gladys Maseko at the Tenteleni Primary School in the town of KaNyanzame, Mpungalana Province, South Africa. There the teachers gave up their staff lounge to provide a room for the library. Veronda Pitchford, coordinator of membership services at the Chicago Multitype Library System, was a recipient of the Elaine Christian fellowship, which supports the participation of African and African American librarians in the program. She worked with Assistant Principal Khombie Gumede and

Principal T.E.H. Mdletsche at the Manzibomvu Primary School, KwaZulu Natal Province, South Africa, where the library was housed in part of a regular classroom. Coincidentally, Pitchford and Malenfant both worked with Nancy Bertholf, a school librarian, as their WLP volunteer partner.

### It's truly a partnership

Malenfant, who had previously worked as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Armenia, had a lot of questions when first considering the ITW program. "I wanted to make sure it was going to be a real hands-on, grassroots, local-level development project, and that I'd really be able to accomplish something," Sims stated, "It's not a charity sending librarians to tell them how to do things in their part of the world, but rather a chance for librarians from developed countries to work as a team with librarians from countries with fewer resources [who are] facing different kinds of challenges. We can use our professional experience in conjunction with the local librarian's knowledge of their community. It's truly a partnership."



Arlie Sims, head of reference and instructional services at Columbia College-Chicago; Kara Malenfant, university information librarian at DePaul University; and Veronda Pitchford, coordinator of membership services at the Chicago Multitype Library System.

### An adventure worth having

When asked about their preparation for the experience, Sims described, "At the beginning we attended four days of intensive training, three of the days together with the community librarians. They taught us about the communities where we would work, and together we learned

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particular skills appropriate to those kinds of libraries and settings." Malenfant said that she was initially intimidated by the prospect of having to process and catalog books. "I'm a reference librarian. What do I know about processing books? But between the intensive training and the wonderful manual *Libraries for All*, which contains step-by-step instructions, it was fine."

They all experienced some level of culture shock, and the physical conditions required an adjustment. Pitchford explained, "I don't even go camping," but she adapted to carrying water, using an outhouse, and sometimes doing without electricity. Sims confided, "It's pretty scary to get into an SUV, leave the other volunteers behind, and go off into the mountains not knowing what you're going to encounter. But once I got involved in the work of the library and the community, all that disappeared into the background. Being involved in family and community life is a priceless part of the experience. It was an adventure worth having."

### Projects and accomplishments

Each set of volunteers develops the projects they are going to undertake with the community librarians. The idea for a survey came from the community-based library committee at Concepción de María. "We developed a library survey to get feedback from the community about what kinds of materials they wanted," said Sims. We went out into the community, to the churches, the schools, the community cooperative, the health clinic—all the places where people meet—and asked for input. At the same time, we talked about what the library could do and communicated that the library was there for the community. The survey was very successful."

Sims also talked about the importance of the library. "It was moving for me to see how proud people were of this resource in their community and how excited they were about the possibilities. People are able to come into the library, to this very small collection, and many times find something quite useful with the help of the librarian. It was really quite touching to hear people say, 'You mean I can really take these books home, and read to my child, and

bring them back next time I'm in town?' This was significant because they might have to walk for hours or take a bus to get there from their rural community."

Pitchford participated in a number of projects, some of which involved the teachers as well as the students. "We worked with the teachers in the school on incorporating resources into the school curriculum, since many of the teachers did not have any exposure to libraries themselves. We tried to let them know that it was their library too, with resources to help them with their teaching. I also really enjoyed working with the kids, reading to them, connecting with them, and showing them books in their home language."

Among other projects, Malenfant is duly proud of having all 1,000 students visit the library within just 3 weeks. She explained that, "Previously, the teachers did all the book selection for the students. We educated the students about the proper care of the books and how to select a good book, while at the same time working

with the teachers to explain why it was important to let the students choose for themselves. Hopefully the teachers saw that they can be trusted and will continue the practice."

### Lessons learned

Malenfant mentioned learning about the South African idea of Ubuntu, "You are a person through other people." This seems to sum up the insight that all three brought away from this powerful experience. For Sims, "The best resources there were the commitment of the people—not just the library staff but the whole community—and the books. Librarians there had great strength in hooking people up with resources available in the community. I learned how much librarians have to offer to the world, even with fewer resources." Pitchford said, "How important human resources are. You don't always have to have the best computer." Malenfant described it as a return to the simple, basic principles of librarianship, "Helping people to enhance their education and their lives through reading books."

Through their work these three volunteers clearly fulfilled the WLP mission to "empower individuals and enrich communities." ■

## ITW Library Skills Exchange

### Where:

Central America and South Africa

**For more information, visit:** [www.worldlibraries.org/](http://www.worldlibraries.org/)