

FROM THE ALTERNATIVES LIBRARY

Taking it to the Streets

by Lynn Andersen

At the end of November of this year, Mark Rosenzweig sent out a list of ten points for consideration by librarians and information workers [see p. 71]. He called upon progressive librarians worldwide to share thoughts on the points. In the following article, I would like to reflect on some of the issues raised in these points, as well as offer some program ideas that are meant to address them. It is my hope that this will initiate a sharing of our work and ideas in a way that will inspire and invigorate our library programming.

The 6th point caught my attention because it is very close in text to our mission statement: *The Durland Alternatives Library (DAL) is dedicated to providing free and open access to materials expressing viewpoints and information not readily available through mainstream publications and mass-media sources.* Our collection development policy goes further in directing staff to build a collection that reflects progressive viewpoints. Most libraries have a broader collection scope, but it's necessary to include some direction for the collection of alternative materials in the overall policy. Otherwise it's too easy for those areas to be ignored or discounted. Once we can affect change in the stated policies of our organizations, we'll have a mandate to invigorate library collections with materials that reflect the areas covered in Mark's ten points. As librarians who have given much attention to a progressive agenda, we are well positioned to assist in the expansion of library collections to include alternative, independent, and progressive viewpoints. We can also strengthen our ties to other information workers and develop our solidarity as librarians committed to the broader issues of justice and social change.

One organization that works globally to encourage the exchange of ideas between libraries is UNESCO-UNAL, United Nations Network of Associated Libraries. For information see their website is <http://www.unesco.org/>

webworld/unal/unal_introduction.htm. One of the areas to note is the twinning program that has been instituted by UNAL. It is an opportunity for libraries to design partnerships that will be of mutual support in their work. There are member libraries all over the world. Unfortunately, only two libraries in the U. S. have joined the program.

The rest of this article describes another community outreach program of the Alternatives Library. In the best of all worlds, libraries attempt to serve everyone equally. But in fact, there are many people who are not served at all, either because they can't get to the library, or because the information that speaks to their particular needs is not there.

One group that we are focusing on through DAL programming is that of incarcerated people. The library advisory board has committed time, energy and resources to a number of programs that are aimed at serving imprisoned populations. Beyond basic high school equivalency instruction, the government of New York State has stopped funding education opportunities in prisons and detention centers. This is a phenomenon that is familiar to many of you throughout the United States. Right now, the DAL is working with the staff and an incarcerated group of young men at a maximum security juvenile detention center in our area. The "residents" (the term used by the center) are between the ages of 14 – 21. The facility director welcomes our efforts and has been open to a number of activities that have been created by library staff and board members. In order to better understand the needs and workings of the facility, two of us (one board member and myself) are part of its Citizens' Advisory Board.

We began our programming by helping to increase the facility library collection. The library staff person – unfortunately, there is not a full-time librarian on site – has selected books from those donated to us for our annual book sale. In addition, she has chosen 50 books from our stacks, the first batch in a series of rotating collections we are offering. Each group of books will stay in the facility for 3 months. As we track what gets used the most, we can use that information to identify the areas of interest to the prisoners and expand our collection accordingly.

Another focus of our work at the detention facility is in the area of literacy. I'm working one-on-one with a facility resident as is another library board member. After 3 months, I find the work stimulating and rewarding, more so than I ever expected. I am working with a 16-year-old young man and have yet to figure out which one of us is the teacher and which the student.

Cultural programs have been a component of our work with the detention center. I have done a map and slide-show presentation on Senegal and have another one on Kenya scheduled as I write this. Bringing other parts of the world to these young men has reverberated in their lives beyond the program. So much of our value system is formed by interaction with a diverse cross-section of world cultures. Without that exposure, we are left in a rather pasteurized, homogenized state of being that is of no help in dealing with the complexities and demands of our work and social activities. We can't live fully if we fail to spend time with diverse communities and establish connections with other cultures and ways of thinking. Yet the young men and women who could benefit so much from outside contact, have few options at gaining access to the outside world. In whatever small way we have addressed this lack at the local facility, we have impacted the lives of the people locked-up there. The interest and gratitude expressed by both prisoners and staff has been heart-warming and inspiring.

An important thing to remember when planning programs with prisons and other detention centers is that consistency and ongoing activities are the most beneficial. Many of these facilities get one-time offers from individuals and community groups, but developing long-term relationships with the prisoners and staff, wherever we can, really helps guide activities in ways that are more in tune with prisoners needs. Book donations or other singular offers are important, but personal contact with a prisoner or prisoners over the long-haul, carries the message that their lives are of value, their rights are respected, their ideas and struggles are heard, and, most of all, that there is someone who wants to spend time with them as an equal partner in an ongoing exchange.

As progressive librarians, we can support and share the work we do; help each other to have a voice in what goes on in this world; give voice to underrepresented peoples, at home and throughout the world; and expose the destructive forces that would deny human rights and social justice through print, electronic media and any other means necessary. The points Mark has offered are meaningful to me, not as form, but as catalyst for action. We're not talking about words on paper here, we're talking about getting out there and doing something to move the world in a better direction for the greatest number of people. It doesn't matter if it's in the office or in the street—we've got to keep doing the work and doing it together. I look forward to hearing about the work of other people in who read this and keeping the ideas flowing freely.

DOCUMENTS

Report on the 66th IFLA General Conference, Jerusalem 13-18 August 2000

by Al Kagan

Jerusalem was perhaps the most controversial IFLA venue in the history of the organization. The status of the city is one of the main contentions in the ongoing peace talks. The Palestinian and other Arab librarians boycotted the meeting and instead convened a conference of the Arab Union for Libraries and Information in Cairo. Although IFLA officials stated that they only learned of the boycott fifteen months before the meeting, the Palestinians claim contesting the venue four years ago, one year after the choice was announced. The IFLA Executive Board issued a statement last year stating that the conference "does not confer any particular recognition or status on that venue." This may be a fine theoretical statement, but it was ignored in practice. In fact, the Opening and Plenary Session presumably arranged by the Israeli Organizing Committee turned out to be an explicit showcase for promoting the politics of the State of Israel. A representative from the Israeli Knesset (Parliament) welcomed us to the "unified capital of the State of Israel." This was in Hebrew, so those without headphones for simultaneous translation missed it. The keynote speaker at the Opening Session is usually a government official who talks about libraries, education, or culture in the host country. This was the first time in my knowledge that the speaker was a political scientist who addressed an overtly political topic, the dramatically changed conditions that have led to the peace process. The talk was given by Shlomo Avineri, Director of the Institute for European Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a former Director-General of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The session was concluded with a choir singing Israeli peace songs.

Although the Palestinians were effectively silenced at the official meeting, the Norwegian Library Association took the lead in bringing a Palestinian