

about her life as an activist. In another room, the consequences reforms have for women as health care providers and patients was discussed by Pat Armstrong, author of *Exposing Privatization: Women and Health Care Reform in Canada* (Garamond Press). Pat was on hand to discuss the effects of and to spur action in health care policy, information the United States could well put to use as it struggles with its own dysfunctional health care system. The Toronto Dollar and Local Currencies were discussed by Joy Kogawa, Susan Bellan and David Walsh. Over 200 businesses in downtown Toronto and Riverdale use the local currency and 10% of all Toronto Dollars purchased go to the Toronto Dollar "Spirit at Work" fund to support job creation for low-income people. And then there was a 'zine making workshop, and the launching of the Socialist Resister 2002, and John Saul with his book *Millennial Africa: Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy* (Africa World Press), and Jenny Horsman, *Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence and Education*, and music by Eve Goldberg and the Spadina Road Tabernacle Band, and a whole lot of discussion, seriousness and laughter. And, it was FREE!

I had a chance to talk to some of the vendors at the book fair while I was at it. May Lui, one of the co-managers of the Toronto Women's Bookstore was a representative organizer of LeftWords for the first time this year. The bookstore is struggling with the onslaught of corporate booksellers but is surviving because of a loyal customer base and, I might add, a darn good selection of books. LeftWords offers great exposure for the store, which — as May says — "goes on doing it for the love of doing it." Lois Pike from Sumach Press, a new publisher, was at LeftWords for the second time and is interested in doing it again. Joel, from the *International Socialist* and *Socialist Worker* journals, was a vendor for the first time. He liked it and will return for the next one. So will I. I even won five books for the Alternatives Library. No one was there to claim the winnings for the last drawing, so Matt Adams of the Catalyst Centre held a voice vote at the end of the fair. The library got the prize. It was a guilt-offering because the library inadvertently got left off the list of cosponsors. LeftWords closed with a protest song, of course. A group of us adjourned to a nearby pub where we continued discussing the issues raised during the conference as well as two big issues on everyone's mind — the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the war in Afghanistan. In speaking our thoughts, apprehensions and frustrations, we shared some unspoken common ground where all borders disappeared, where our common humanity was a palpable experience, one that we silently wished for all people.

<sup>1</sup> Catalyst Centre contact information: [www.catalystcentre.ca](http://www.catalystcentre.ca)

## DOCUMENTS

### Letter to the American Library Association Annual Meeting, 6/01

by Dr. Marta Terry

**D**ear colleagues:

I have come here because of an invitation from a group of American librarians headed by Ann Sparanese and the ALA Executive group to share with you some common professional worries and concerns, but above all as a way to help to break the information blockade that my country is suffering, among other things, from the economic embargo Cuba is subject to.

I come to tell you about the worries and concerns of the Cuban *dependent* librarians. I also come to speak about our success and aspirations. I come to speak about our uneasiness regarding the misinformation some, or perhaps many, of our American colleagues might have about our libraries, our country and our way of living. Cuban librarians are concerned that all the disinformation will further deepen the already deep waters of the Florida Strait that separates our two countries.

I come to bring a message of solidarity from those Cuban librarians to all of you who have refused to believe some absurd campaigns of disinformation about our professional practice and our beliefs, and have decided to go see for yourselves, to draw your own conclusions, and then come back and talk loudly and fight hard about what you consider to be truthful and honest.

I also come to thank you all for your interest towards my country and my profession and to try to increase that interest that is giving birth to new relations between the American library community and the Cuban library community. Until very recent times relations between Cuban and American librarians have been scarce and sporadic based on personal contacts among a few of us. Nowadays it is perfectly clear that a different approach is

emerging, just precisely an approach characterized by more understanding, collaboration, cooperation and common professional respect.

I said, at the opening of this presentation that I had come to tell you about the worries and preoccupations of the Cuban *dependent* librarians. It is not a question of my poor English. You have understood quite well. I mean it. I mean that I have come to talk (allow me to repeat it) on behalf of Cuban *dependent* librarians, because we are and represent those librarians who live in Cuba depending (shall I say defending too?) on our socialist society, simple, honest, egalitarian, that society we build every day with our work.

We are those librarians who depend on a child's smile of satisfaction after having read a book of stories (sometimes all worn out because so much use and very little possibility of replacement) and we depend upon the child asking us "Is there another one to be read? I liked that story so much." We also depend upon the thanks the old retired laborer gives us when he has just finished reading for the third time a biography of Napoleon or Abraham Lincoln, or Lenin, or Antonio Maceo because he has already read the Marti biography more than five times. And then the old man tells us "You see *compañera* what I like to know is how things were before, I like to know how those great men were, I like to know all they had to do to build their world.." And how much we depend on the new and young writer who is preparing his or her first book for the David Award<sup>1</sup> and who has consulted us thousands of times about the sound or the correct spelling of some very important phrase in his or her work!

We depend on the bus that takes such a long time to arrive — because there is a shortage of buses and fuel — so that we can reach our library on time which might be one of the 390 public libraries (at least 1 in each municipality and 1 in each province), or one of the more than 3,000 school libraries, or one of the more than 50 university libraries or the scientific and technological units of the scientific centers throughout the country.

Sometimes transportation is not the bus or the guagua. It might also be a bicycle or the ride of some unknown *compañero* or *compañera* with a car, and so we depend on them to be able to get to our job: at the library. We also depend on the lack of electric energy or light bulbs to perform our duty, and when a blackout happens we simply change the positions of chairs and tables and put them near the doors and windows to be able to use the sun's natural light. Or, sometimes we have been obliged to break the unwritten rule of not circulating the library's sole copy of a title, because that

particular title is needed by someone who has to study or read it to pass an examination or conclude a term paper. And so we give the book on loan so that the reader will be able to study it when the electricity is back on, long after the library is closed. And we cross our fingers and wish that book back in our stacks because it might be impossible to replace it if it gets lost.

I have chosen a few examples out of hundreds that happen in the daily work of many Cuban librarians. Those Cuban librarians, who depend on the satisfaction of our users, insist on feeling we and our profession are useful and needed in our society.

But I am sure that if we take out the peculiar and difficult conditions we live under in Cuba which make our work so much different (sometimes full of anguish) when compared to other places, many of you if you are real librarians — and I think you are! — will find those human contact (librarian-user) stories not so strange and alien to you.

There still are other cases we must mention that are not so pressing for you as they are for us: the lack of a title or better the lack of the information our users might need.

Sometimes a user is looking for a title he or she is interested in or he or she has heard of. It may happen that the book is on loan. Well! The user gets frustrated because some one else has what he needs and we only have two or three copies for circulation. But it might be that the book is not in our collections, or that the request is for a scientific or technical journal, or a collection of essays needed by a student or a professor or an engineer and the material is simply not available. And when this happens it is just because we have very few titles and copies because of all the circumstances of the blockade by your government over my country.

The colleagues who have made presentations before me have referred to other details and so I do not think I should repeat those themes. But in the midst of all these arguments and discussions it seems we are taking for granted that the books our people need to read are just novels and political works, and we are forgetting that, in the newly born XXI century, information is the most appreciated resource and that libraries are centers for information and *formation* and the first is an essential part of the second.

Do we have to ask ourselves how many copies of the last edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* can be found in the main Cuban libraries? Or how

many copies of the latest edition of *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*? How many libraries have been able to acquire the Nobel Prize collections that are so much needed by literature students and professors as well as by the general public? How many books of international art reproductions published in the 90's can be found in the public or university libraries in Cuba?

Or let's be more modern — how many CD-ROMs? Has somebody asked himself or herself how Cuban libraries acquire CD-ROMs? Has anybody looked at the reference collections our students have for studying librarianship in Cuba? Has anyone seen the latest editions of the *World of Learning* or the *International Who's Who* in any Cuban public or even university library? Does anyone remember what caused us to launch the *Ediciones R* collection?

We are not trying to arouse your sympathy, we are just opening the window a tiny to show how little freedom the *dependent* Cuban librarians have to acquire information from abroad. Money, as it is well known, is difficult to get but sometimes we do have the money but we do not have the freedom to acquire what we want to purchase directly from the publishing houses, and so already high prices get higher and higher putting purchases out of our reach.

On the other hand, to say "*we have been through*" is quite an euphemism because, no matter what achievements we have made during the last two or three years in the quality of life and the economy of our country we can state that the special period is starting to pass, but the blockade is as intact as it ever was and is even harder after recent laws and bills passed by the U.S. Congress. And I am most afraid that if I write, at this moment, to the editors of *Fortune Magazine* as I did when I worked at the Junta Central de Planificación in 1964, they will answer with the same phrase: "we are sorry but we cannot accept subscriptions from your country."

You may ask: How come you are still there? How can you speak about not having problems with illiteracy, and having hundreds of medical doctors, and trying to be a most cultured people, if you do not have the facilities to acquire the books you need for all that? That is Cuba's big question. How is it possible?

Well, it is possible first of all because the immense capacity of each of us as individuals to sacrifice and because of the social resistance of the Cuban

people. Our daily work of building and rebuilding, of believing in the justice of our cause. And it is also possible because of the solidarity of many people in many parts of the world. Just to return to our profession, for instance, we professors of librarianship and information science at the University of Havana are able to navigate the Internet because we have a fairly well-equipped laboratory to work in. We can navigate but we cannot acquire many articles that the many commercial and non-commercial databases offer. Complete text offering is still very rare. We have found that some authors are generous enough to send us reprints when we approach them just by simple mail

I mentioned that, at these moments, a slow but sure economic recovery is taking place because of the tremendous effort the country is making. We are able to start to renew some titles in our collections due to the gradual recovery of our publishing industry, and some of the very deteriorated public libraries buildings are being reconstructed. The electric energy cut backs have diminished to almost 95%, so they are not a daily problem and library evening hours are being restored. Three years ago the launching of the *programa de la lectura* was made with the same old books and with the new editions that have started to be published by the Instituto Cubano del Libro. In that way we started to fight for the recovery of the reading habits of our population that the long night of the special period was about to make disappear.

New ideas assisted in this work, such as the Minerva Club program that provides library constituents access to some of the primary works of world literature by paying a very small contribution.

During the successful battle for the returning home of Elián González — in which the American people was so determined — it was revealed that the excellence attained within the artistic and political cultures of our people during 40 years of revolutionary fight has fed a new fight to keep alive something we call the battle of the ideas. That battle has a lot of different fronts and only one objective — to make our people more cultured and well-informed so that the revolution will go on being unbeatable. Or, to put it in better words, to make it much more unbeatable still.

Along those lines the schools of art that were responsible in the 70's for the great amateur artists movement have been reestablished. Music, dance, drama, and the visual arts are being promoted as part of big community movement. Entrance to university, careers in education, humanities and

social sciences are being broadened. Computers for primary and secondary schools are being acquired so that in a short period all the young people of the country may have access to these technologies just as youngsters do in what is called the first world and the information society. University-for-All courses (English, literature, art history, etc.) are exploring new ways to reach everyone interested via TV. And what becomes more interesting for us librarians — the library work of the country is being renewed.

Lessening of the blockade? Would it mean that we suddenly have more opportunities to buy the books we need (and shall I add the medicines?) than we had, let's say, two or three months or three years ago? Would it mean that we could buy directly from McGraw-Hill or Macmillan or the University of Chicago Press? Would it mean that we could click Barnes & Noble and get the titles we need? Would it mean that we have all the money needed to acquire copyrights to the best foreign authors to publish them in Cuba and sell them at very low prices in large print runs as we use to, even if those copies cannot be as many as they used to be before the hardening of the blockade and the establishment of the special period?

By no means. We only advance inch-by-inch in our revolutionary struggle.

Up to now we have tried to show a panorama of our difficulties, our realities, our new achievements in fields that may be near to your professional interests as well as to your human heart and feelings of solidarity. It is not my objective to describe the history of Cuban Revolution in such a small space of time. What I want is to make an approach among us, to open a panorama of understanding based on unprejudiced exchange between professional and human based on truth, legality, and respect for the right of each country to live and to defend the project of the society their individuals choose to live in.

We, Cuban librarians and in particular those members of the Cuban Association of Librarians (Asociación Cubana de Bibliotecarios — ASCUBI) would very much like, if it were possible, to launch a programme that would allow American librarians to have access to our literature, to our authors, the established as well as the newest, those of the XIX century as well as those of the XX and the upsurging in XXI. We would like to know what is read about Cuba in American libraries, how many times the computers of American libraries contact our websites to know our own versions of our reality, our opinions, our success in sports, our doctors saving lives in Central America and Africa and Haiti and our people

demonstrating from the Plaza de la Revolución onward. We would like to find ways to be able to enter many small humble American libraries like ours or the immense ones to search catalogues and locate Cuban editions of the works of Ché, the speeches of Fidel, the poems of Guillen, Retamar, Fina, Cintio, Pablo Armando, las décimas de Waldo Leyva o de Alexis Pimienta, the short stories of Heras León, or the essays of Graziella Pogolotti.

We would like to find in your children's collections copies of *El cochero azul o El caballo de coral* for your children to know as ours know about *Huckleberry Finn*.

We would like it if in our catalogues and stacks it were possible to find the novels of Toni Morrison or Gore Vidal or William Kennedy and we could replace in our collections the lost copies of Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* or Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, or the anthologies of American short stories published in 60's or some of the works of Dreiser...

Martin Luther King said he "had a dream." That dream meant equality, solidarity, understanding, peace. The Cuban librarians share that dream and make it ours.

Cuban librarians depend on our collections, on our readers, on the honesty and passion we put in our work. We do not tell our readers what to believe — we tell them *read!* That was what Fidel thought many years ago and we practice the word and the spirit of it. We also depend on the solidarity and understanding of our colleagues everywhere in the world. We need allies in our battle of ideas

I thank you for accompanying us in this great little battle we have fought today.

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<sup>1</sup>The David Award is a literary prize for young writers sponsored by the Cuban Union of Writers and Artists