

## Editorial: Worlds beyond

Katy Ginanni

For several years, Trinity University has had a summer reading program. While everyone – students, faculty and staff – is encouraged to participate, the incoming first-year students are the primary targets so that they may have a shared literary experience. The book for the summer of 2008 is *Three Cups of Tea*, and the program is being promoted more strongly than usual because the co-author and subject of the book, Greg Mortenson, will be on campus during the first week of classes to give a lecture and to meet with smaller groups of students. The book is the story of how Mortenson, a former high altitude mountain climber, became involved in building schools in Pakistan, and later in Afghanistan. I was particularly interested to learn that one of his early supporters and board member of his Central Asia Institute is Julia Bergman, library system administrator at City College of San Francisco.

While reading the story of this remarkable man and the change he has effected in some of the poorest regions of the world, I began to reflect (not for the first time) on the incredible bounty that so many U.S. citizens enjoy. No country is without poverty, of course, but in the U.S. most of our citizens go to sleep with roofs over their heads and food in their stomachs. Compare our unemployment rate (a 2007 estimate) of 4.6 percent to South Africa's 24.3 percent, 40 percent in Afghanistan, and an astonishing 80 percent in Zimbabwe.<sup>1</sup> And in the U.S., a 2003 estimate shows that 99 percent of our population above the age of fifteen can read and write. Compare that to a literacy rate of 90.7 percent in Zimbabwe, 86.4 percent in South Africa, and 28.1 percent in Afghanistan (a 2000 estimate).<sup>2</sup> Given those figures, it is difficult to deny that we have it good here in the U.S.

Some people may read *Three Cups of Tea* or similar tales, and be so influenced by the story that they begin to think, "I'd like to do some volunteer work and make a difference in lives. But I'm a librarian. What can I do?" Well, my friends, libraries help foster democratic societies! In a 2001 report to the American Library Association (ALA), then president Nancy Kranich said that libraries "provide access to information, which

affords all citizens the opportunity to participate fully in their societies."<sup>3</sup> And as librarians, we have skills and experience that can be useful all over the world. In what feels like a very egocentric turn, I'd like to share with you some of the path of my life in hopes that it may open your minds to the possibilities out there.

From almost the beginning of my career in libraries, I've been a serialist. When I matriculated in the library science program at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University in the fall of 1985, one of the first courses I signed up for was basic cataloging. At the time, I had an idea that I might want to go into serials cataloging, and so I was excited to learn the theory of what I was practicing (to a very limited extent; I did some of the preliminary work for title changes, cessations and so forth) in my job as a paraprofessional in the Jean and Alexander Heard Library at Vanderbilt. Little did I know that Professor Marion Kimbrough was not a fan of serials cataloging! We barely touched on serials during the course of the semester. Nor did we in the subsequent advanced cataloging course I took the following semester. I was disappointed, but figured that in-depth knowledge would come later from on-the-job training.

As it turned out, I didn't go into cataloging at all. I was able to parlay my paraprofessional experience in serials acquisitions into a professional position in Alabama. At the time, I was nearly buried by student loans and couldn't afford the luxury of waiting for that perfect cataloging job to come along. After four years at that institution, I moved to a university in Virginia. Not too long after I'd hung pictures in my new office and was starting to settle in, I received an unexpected job offer from EBSCO Information Services. Working for a vendor was not something I had ever considered, but the job sounded interesting and fun. But how could I leave a job after only a few months? I consulted with colleagues, friends and family, and was reassured by all that if I didn't make a career of job-hopping, one instance could be explained and forgiven. After some weeks of dithering around the decision, I finally accepted the offer.

In ways both significant and small, and both personal and professional, working for EBSCO changed my life. But there is one specific aspect that is relevant to what I'm writing here, so allow me to share that with you. Because EBSCO provided more financial support for professional

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94 activity and development than my previous employers, I  
 95 was able to become far more active in professional  
 96 organizations. And because I was involved in committees  
 97 and discussion groups of ALA, I was a regular at the  
 98 midwinter and annual ALA conferences. In 1999, how-  
 99 ever, I decided to take a break from EBSCO and library  
 100 work, and (after a rather long and arduous application  
 101 process) accepted an invitation to serve in Peace Corps.  
 102 During the ALA annual conference in June of that year  
 103 (and prior to my October departure for Zimbabwe), I met  
 104 Jordan Scepaniski, a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer and  
 105 chair of the ALA International Relations Committee  
 106 (IRC). Upon learning that I was headed for Zimbabwe,  
 107 he asked if I'd like to be appointed to the IRC Africa  
 108 subcommittee. As it turned out, my Internet access while in  
 109 Zimbabwe was not reliable enough to participate in that  
 110 committee, but it was that first offer that made me realize I  
 111 just might have something to contribute to the world of  
 112 international librarianship. When I returned to the U.S.  
 113 after an abbreviated term of service in Zimbabwe, I sought  
 114 opportunities to become involved in the international  
 115 library community.

116 In 2001 when ALA's Association for Library Collec-  
 117 tions and Technical Services (ALCTS) was looking for a  
 118 representative to the Serials and Other Continuing  
 119 Resources Standing Committee of the International  
 120 Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), I volunteered  
 121 eagerly. Being approved by the various committees and  
 122 boards within ALA was another lengthy process, but  
 123 serving as an ALCTS representative to an IFLA committee  
 124 was a rewarding and eye-opening experience for me. One  
 125 of the most important things I came to realize is that no  
 126 matter what the World Bank's designation of a country  
 127 (developed, transitional, developing), all of the librarians I  
 128 met during my tenure on that committee had at least one  
 129 thing in common: we all tried to meet the needs of library  
 130 users. And whether a library had had access to electronic  
 131 resources for years or was just jumping into the fray, we all  
 132 experienced the same frustrations and successes in  
 133 acquiring and providing access to those resources.

134 EBSCO also supported my activity in the Library and  
 135 Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) during  
 136 the two years I worked in the EBSCO office in Johannes-  
 137 burg. I was again struck by the similarities, not the  
 138 differences, between academic libraries I served in South-  
 139 ern Africa and the academic libraries I had served in the U.  
 140 S. Most of the librarians I met while working in South  
 141 Africa were dedicated to providing good service to their  
 142 users, and all of the librarians I worked with in LIASA were  
 143 committed to service for their chosen profession. Working  
 144 with those librarians on program planning, celebrations  
 145 for South African Library Week, and other professional  
 146 development activities was a joy and an honor.

147 My second position (of three) with EBSCO gave me  
 148 more opportunity for worldwide travel than I had ever  
 149 hoped for. I served as a training specialist; I did training  
 150 for both EBSCO staff and customers. Because EBSCO  
 151 has offices and customers all over the world, that's where  
 152 my job often took me! During those five years, I trained  
 153 librarians and EBSCO staff from countries in Europe,  
 154 Latin America, Asia, Australasia and Africa. Again and  
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again, I was reminded that librarians around the world 155  
 share similar experiences. The international experience 156  
 and perspective that I gained was invaluable, and for that 157  
 I owe a great debt of gratitude to EBSCO. 158

EBSCO was good for me, but I'm not advocating that 159  
 you kind readers all go out and find jobs with 160  
 commercial entities! If you're interested in international 161  
 experience, it's easy enough to find those opportunities. 162  
 With the help of the Web, a quick and simple search 163  
 reveals dozens and dozens of organizations seeking 164  
 volunteers. I would like to highlight just a few. 165

**Peace Corps** — For those who are more mobile and 166  
 able to make a longer commitment, Peace Corps may 167  
 be something to investigate. Peace Corps is currently 168  
 actively recruiting volunteers over the age of fifty. In 169  
 many countries of service, the volunteers who serve as 170  
 teachers are often called on to develop libraries in the 171  
 schools they're serving. 172

**Fulbright Scholar Program** — The Fulbright Scholar 173  
 Program, administered by the Council for Interna- 174  
 tional Exchange of Scholars, has several programs 175  
 that provide both short- and long-term opportunities. 176

**UN Volunteers** — The United Nations created its 177  
 volunteer program in 1971 "in order to be a 178  
 development partner for the UN system."<sup>4</sup> Among 179  
 their many thematic programs are education and 180  
 information technology. 181

**ALA International Relations Round Table** — For 182  
 those who would like to stay closer to home but still 183  
 participate in international librarianship, the ALA 184  
 IRRT provides a nice opportunity. There are IRRT 185  
 committees and programs at ALA. 186  
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Often, volunteer opportunities require that you pay 188  
 your own way. In some cases you may be required to pay 189  
 for your own transportation, but food and lodging will 190  
 be provided for you. Sometimes you may be required to 191  
 foot the entire bill. It's worth checking with Rotary Clubs 192  
 and other civic organizations; they sometimes offer 193  
 modest funding for volunteer projects. 194

There is no question that work with local organizations 195  
 (professional, civic, church or other) can be enriching, 196  
 rewarding and gratifying. But I also believe that becoming 197  
 more involved on an international level can be those 198  
 things and at the same time promote understanding and 199  
 acceptance of other cultures. And those are things I think 200  
 the world can use right now, even from librarians. 201

## Notes 202

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4. "Who We Are," United Nations. <http://www.unv.org/en/who-we-are.html> (accessed August 7, 2008). 211  
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