

INTERVIEW
with Mrs. Sandra RIOS BALDERRAMA, Library consultant, Former ALA
Diversity Officer
and Mrs. Myra Michele BROWN,
Information Resource Officer, Embassy of the U.S.A.
to Mrs. Eva Semertzaki, Librarian, MSc., editor, "Synergasia" online journal
May 2007

On May 16, 2007 I met Mrs. Sandra Ríos Balderrama and Mrs. Myra Michele Brown, at the new premises of the Information Resource Center in the newly-erected building of the U.S. Embassy in Athens. The interview was arranged by Mr. Vassilis Tsiboukis, IRC Manager, to whom I would like to express my thanks. Mrs. Balderrama is invited to present a paper on "Crossroads signify choices: USA public libraries and multiculturalism" at the Conference of the Committee for the Support of Libraries in Thessaloniki on May 18, 2007. Mrs. Brown is the human resource officer of IRCs in Italy.

***ES.** Mrs. Balderrama, you are invited to Greece to participate in the panel discussion on library services to immigrants and to present a paper at the Conference called: "Libraries as crossroads of cultures: serving diverse groups and needs". Mrs. Brown, you have visited many IRCs in the Mediterranean region. Could you both talk the readers of "Synergasia" about the experiences you got during the years of studying and dealing with multicultural users?*

SRB. I have served in public libraries since 1984. My primary focus has been to provide services to multicultural populations and there are many reasons for this. I, myself, am a granddaughter of immigrants and I grew up bi-cultural. Also, when I became an official librarian in 1986, there was not much material to reflect the world as it really was. There was a lack of picture books for children that reflected multicultural children of the USA and the world. There were no brown-skinned children or faces in the picture books and I felt irresponsible reading to children without having the materials that reflected their image and their experience. Even parents and families of all cultures, including the mainstream culture, were asking for bilingual children's materials or multicultural materials for children. These requests and these experiences started me on a journey which has become a path of ongoing multiculturalism in libraries.

Nowadays library systems and services are more sophisticated. Public libraries serve populations from Latin America, from Somalia, Afghanistan and other Asian countries. Now public libraries in the West and East Coast of the USA have multilingual collections. However, new issues are arising 1) people are entering at new points of entry, meaning, that immigrants are no longer entering on the West or East coasts of the USA. They are living in the Midwest, the Southeast, the Northeast and everywhere else...often where there is work and opportunity for their families and children. So libraries in different places do not have much experience with those users. In addition, there is need for more resources. An Association, called REFORMA (<http://www.reforma.org/>), an affiliate of ALA is the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking has about 800 members. They link up library workers with strong resources in order to serve Spanish-speaking users. We have also found new technologies. We used to say that by the 3rd generation, immigrants would speak English. Now the transition is less predictable and although a 3rd generation person may speak English, they are retaining their language of heritage.

There are some libraries that have a long tradition of serving immigrants and they have varied sources of funding. For example, the Queens Public Library has been serving immigrants for more than 30 years (<http://www.queenslibrary.org/>) Their collection consists of 45+ languages and they offer their online web directories (WebLinQ) in 10 languages. They have programs for new immigrants, and services are spread out through several branches. You will find other models in the Austin Public Library New Immigrant Centers (Texas), the Hartford Public Library The American Place (Connecticut), the Boulder Public Library Multicultural Outreach Services Program (Colorado), Westchester Library System (New

York), Hennepin County Library (Minnesota), POLYTALK (Illinois), Montgomery County Library (Virginia). I have been asked, while here in Greece, how these programs are funded. There are multi-levels of funding. There are city and county (local jurisdiction) monies, sometimes state monies. The IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services) offers significant federal grants to start projects. We also depend more and more on foundations and corporate donors. Groups called the "Friends of the Library" play an important role in fundraising from materials needed, program speakers, to raising money for new buildings. Most librarians, these days, need to know about fundraising and either how to do it themselves or how to find the best consultant or how to create a Development Officer position within the library to coordinate the fundraising efforts.

Libraries use classical approaches to serve immigrants, e.g. partnering with schools and other agencies to provide resources for citizenship, to learn English, to apply for jobs/work, to learn coping skills for acculturation to the USA culture. Public libraries are free places and intend to offer a safe, friendly, and neutral environment to transition more easily. Public libraries try help the adjustment to the USA and at the same time honor and respect the native languages and cultures of immigrants by providing multilingual collections and multicultural programs. newspapers, help them take classes and introduce citizenship in the USA.

MMB. I have been in Portugal, Cyprus, Italy, Spain, Malta and Greece. In Spain $\frac{3}{4}$ of a million are muslim immigrants and try to integrate them. Malta is the worst in integrating foreign populations. The countries of origin are mainly from former USSR and Africa. They live like nomadic people in all countries and they are poorly educated. Libraries are a place where immigrants feel safe. Even in Malta libraries are a safe place for immigrants to go. Africans live in barriers. In Texas, USA the community children from China and Egypt are mixed in schools. They are assimilated and have the opportunity to be to libraries for exposure.

In Italy, libraries have music programs for diverse users. Those programs cross diversities and people behave like peers. I teach them music, we exchange e-mails and I prepare a presentation for students who learn music. In the USA there are relevant programs that engage people. Library reference services outreach libraries.

MMB. I have been in Portugal, Cyprus, Italy, Spain, Malta, Macedonia and Greece. In Spain $\frac{3}{4}$ of a million muslim immigrants, mostly undereducated males, live in Spain. It's a challenge to integrate them. Malta is having the worst issues in integrating foreign populations. Africans live in barracks, away from most of the Maltese. The countries of origin are mainly from Africa. They live like nomadic people in all countries and they are poorly educated. Libraries are a place where immigrants feel safe. Even in Malta libraries are a safe place for immigrants to go. In Texas, USA the community children from China and Egypt came to the Texas Tech University library on weekends for a literacy program. These children go to school with American children. They are assimilated and have the opportunity to be to libraries for exposure to literature, technology and to US culture.

In Italy, I have given several presentations on the history of American black music to high school and university students. Those programs cross diversities and people behave like peers. Several students have kept in touch with me through email to continue our conversation about music. In the USA there are relevant programs that engage people. Library reference services are a form of outreach.

ES. *Which are the difficulties you face in approaching and persuading people to enter the library and use its services?*

SRB. That depends on many factors. It depends on their experience with public libraries in their home country, their experience with or perception of government agencies, their familiarity with English, their literacy level in English or in their own language. Perhaps their language is not a written language but an oral language. All of these factors are not necessarily barriers but they are factors to be aware of and to find out. Each community is unique and each person is unique. There will be some shared cultural traits and maybe even a shared language but economics, education, and reasons for coming to the USA will differ. These reasons should not be investigated but the library workers must have some awareness

of the great diversity within the immigrant experience. They must listen carefully and ask questions delicately – only questions that relate to how they can best be served by the library. If immigration rights are reduced or if anti-immigration sentiment is high, these also impact library use.

At Illinois State Library there is a program called “Polytalk” (<http://www.polytalk.info/about.html>). It is a federal funded program implemented by the Illinois State Library, as I understand it. Their website describes an interpreters network with 75 interpreters that speak 25 languages. These interpreters are available to librarians in the state of Illinois. There is a PolyTalk language kit for librarians. It includes basic phrases and pictures and symbols – for the librarian to begin to determine what language the patron wants to communicate in and/or if the person is more comfortable with pictures and symbols. The aim is to overcome language barriers and to enhance communication. I think their model is very creative.

Sometimes, a barrier for low income immigrants is that libraries are not open in the evenings when they finish work. Library workers must also be sensitive to the role of children as interpreters. Often the child is the person who speaks some English and will be relied upon to do “business” for the family. When interacting with the child as interpreter one must respect both the child and the adults during the interaction.

MMB. In Texas there are students that are proficient in technologies but not literate with databases. That task is easy for a librarian. Librarians can negotiate with students when they come to the library to prepare reports for their classes: to borrow one book with all information about the student’s report or to return to the library if the student cannot find relevant information in this book. Librarians have to build trust with the students. Librarians can combine books and technology for immigrant students. The students are ‘technology natives’ while most librarians are ‘technology immigrants.’ I think it’s critically important for librarians everywhere to respect our users, who come in all ages and from many countries.

ES. *Do you think that it is necessary for librarians to acquire special skills in serving special communities of users and which are they?*

SRB. It is essential to be culturally aware and culturally competent when working with immigrants and within a multicultural population that includes bicultural people, people from various generations, etc...We would like to see more service based education (such as provided by Dr. Lorie Roy, Dr. Kathleen de la Peña, and Dr. Lorna Peterson) and courses that emphasize both the history of service to “people of color” in the USA as well as the historical and contemporary experiences of immigrants. Multilingual and multicultural collection development, management of diversity, cultural competence, second/third language competency, public relations and outreach skills, technological skills as related to pluralism/multiculturalism, the study of information seeking needs/behaviors of global people – are all courses that we would love to see. I would say that, for now, a lot of this education comes about through on-the-job-training at a library where you have a visionary director or administration. Also, librarians, obtain a lot of education at conferences, institutes, workshops, and so on. These are very rich with learning because you are actually exchanging ideas, questions, and thoughts with other librarians and hearing their successes and their experiments. “Web Junction” offer a model of online education re: multiculturalism. It is a central point for webinars, resources, online classes on services to the Spanish Speaking, Tribal Library Services and Services to Native Americans etc...

ES. *As a former ALA Diversity Officer, could you tell us which standards the ALA has set for libraries offering services to diverse group of users and what specific kind of users those standards are applied to?*

SRB. I am attaching my powerpoint for you to look at. Slides 12-14 zero in on some ALA guidelines that we often relay on, which are embedded in the Library Bill of Rights and statements on Intellectual Freedom. The ALA has a number of affiliate organizations and as I

mentioned REFORMA is one of them. On the slides you will see some of the resolutions and work of REFORMA in this area. We also look to IFLA's guidelines on multiculturalism. These association policies, resolutions speak to our professional values. They are not regulatory but of course, the ALA has come to be respected. Many voices go into designing and writing some of these guidelines and they are ultimately voted on by the elected body of the ALA. Another important resource is the ALA Office for Literacy and Outreach which has numerous resources and links to serve "the underserved" which includes ethnic/cultural groups, the disabled.. the homeless, and so on – please take a look: <http://www.ala.org/ala/olos/aboutolos/AboutOLOS1.htm>

ES. What policies, rules, acts or similar documentation is established in the USA, regarding multiculturalism and how those official documents apply to library services?

MMB. I do not know of specific guidance from ALA or other large organizations. However, many library systems have been very proactive and creative in providing services to immigrant communities. For example, the Brooklyn Public Library several years ago offered free diabetes screening on the weekend. Latinos were targeted, as that group has a high incidence of diabetes. The library recruited doctors and nurses who spoke Spanish to participate in this event.

ES. Could you tell us about the users reactions and how they adjust to library services?

MMB. In Texas, I saw many immigrant families using all of the local libraries. The parents took their kids to programs at the public library run by the county and to the university library. For more than 100 years in the US, the library, especially the public library, has been the place immigrants can go for news, for literature and for mostly free services.

ES. Do you have experiences in providing services to handicapped or disabled people or prisoners or any other group of users?

SRB. My front-line experience is dated re: library services to the groups you mention but we librarians keep in touch and share so much information all the time so let me offer you a few contacts and resources: For library services and/or literacy programs to and with the incarcerated or prisoners please go to www.lorieneroy.com and take a look at our new ALA President's website. Her name is Dr. Loriene Roy and she was just inaugurated last week. It is a very exciting time for those of us that have worked on services to diverse and multicultural groups because Dr. Roy embodies through her person and her work – a "spirit of service" to ALL people. One of her platform initiatives is called the Circle of Literacy and there are three groups that will be included: the incarcerated, immigrants (both in the USA and internationally) and indigenous youth. E.Ray James, a recent MLIS graduate is creating a comprehensive website www.literacyinprison.com on services to those on "the inside". One well-known resource for services to the disabled is Rhea Rubin but there are many!

MMB. At Texas Tech University, we had equipment to service users with poor/limited sight. The facilities were very handicapped accessible. I would send students to the stacks when we had users who were wheelchair bound or otherwise disabled.

ES. What could you advise Greek librarians in their efforts to attract diverse groups of library users. The immigrant population is steadily increasing in the last 15 years and the number of disabled people is also increasing, given the rate of accidents, health problems and diseases but also given the extended life expectancy?

MMB. Be proactive. Offering services in the community, like Brooklyn Public Library, really makes people feel welcome and included. Honoring their culture; perhaps having a display about an important Albanian holiday or having a poetry event with Greek and Albanian poetry. All efforts to include and welcome immigrants will be rewarded with regular, satisfied users.

ES. Thank you both for your time and the clarifying replies to my questions and hope that Greek librarians will get some ideas to apply in their libraries.