

INTERVIEW

with *Mrs. Deborah Jacobs*,

Director, Global Libraries, *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*

to *Eva Semertzaki*, editor *Synergasia*

On August 12, 2010 at the World Library and Information Congress: 76th IFLA General Conference and Assembly in Gothenburg, Sweden, the most remarkable event for the Greek library world took place. The [2010 Access to Learning Award \(ATLA\)](#) was awarded to the Veria Central Public Library by the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation!** The headline of the press release was: **Greek Library Receives \$1 Million International Award for Embracing Technology and Creating Vibrant Community Asset.** What an honor and what an emotional moment for Mr. Ioannis Trohopoulos, Director of the Veria Library, his staff and all of us who were present in the ceremony.

A day after the ceremony, Eva Semertzaki, editor of the *Synergasia* journal who was also invited by the Foundation to attend the ceremony, arranged to meet **Deborah Jacobs**, Director of the Global Libraries initiative of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for an interview. Prior to joining the foundation in 2008, Deborah served as Seattle City Librarian for 11 years and she was awarded "Librarian of the Year" in the *Library Journal* in 1995. Deborah announced the 2010 ATLA recipient on behalf of the foundation in her speech during the ceremony.

ES. *Mrs. Jacobs, for me as a Greek librarian it is an honor to interview you on this special occasion of awarding the Veria Central Public Library for its creativity, achievements and innovative activities. Could you please describe the aims and goals of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation?*

DJ. The motto of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is that every life has equal value. Thus it works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people's health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and in life. Specifically, an initiative of the foundation's Global Development Program, Global Libraries works to open the world of knowledge, information and opportunity for communities around the world. It particularly focuses on public libraries that provide access to computers and the Internet and to adopt technology in libraries that improves the lives of library users who take advantage of these tools.

ES. What is the Access To Learning Award (ATLA) and which are the selection criteria for a library?

DJ. The first time the Access to Learning Award was granted was in 2000. Since then it is given annually to a innovative public library outside the United States. The ATLA recognizes the innovative efforts of libraries in providing free public access to computers and the Internet. The award is presented by the Foundation's Global Libraries initiative and includes a monetary gift of \$1 million (U.S.) to promote the development of new models that increase access to information for people who need it most.

The criteria for selecting a library to receive the grant are based on candidates' innovative efforts to:

- Make computer and Internet access free to the public;
- Train the public in using technology and accessing information;
- Educate staff on technology use;
- Replicate library services to other libraries; and
- Reach out to underserved communities.

ES. What is the procedure of selecting a candidate to receive the ATLA?

DJ. Every public library outside the United States is eligible to apply for the award. You may refer to the Foundation's website (<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/ATLA>) for the application form and for instructions to complete it. The Foundation encourages applications from institutions in developing countries or those working with disadvantaged communities. Preference is given to organizations that actively reach out to understand groups, such as patrons who are poor, disabled, or from minority communities.

An international advisory committee made up of librarians, information technology experts, and foundation staff evaluates applications based on candidates' innovative efforts provide free public access to computers and the Internet. The committee further reviews the ability of the candidate to serve as a model of innovation for other communities. The committee selects a list of final candidates for consideration by the foundation. Following an independent financial and organizational review of the finalists, the foundation selects the award recipient.

ES. Which libraries have been the past award recipients?

DJ. The first ATLA recipient was the Helsinki City Library in Finland in 2000. The next years' recipients are:

1. Proyecto Bibliotecas (Probigua) in Guatemala and Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación in Argentina (both in 2001);
2. BibloRed library network of Bogotá in Colombia (2002);
3. Smart Cape Access Project in Cape Town, South Africa (2003);
4. China Evergreen Rural Library Service Center in China and Aarhus Public Libraries in Denmark (both in 2004);
5. Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha in Bangladesh (2005);
6. Rural Education and Development (READ) Nepal (2006);
7. Northern Territory Library in Australia (2007);
8. The Vasconcelos Program in Velacruz, Mexico (2008);
9. The EPM Foundation of Medellin in Colombia (2009); and finally
10. Veria Central Public Library in Greece (2010).

ES. What was the special thing that the Veria Central Public Library possessed to win the award this year?

DJ. This year the award is presented to the Veria Central Public Library for providing innovative technology and training programs to meet the economic, educational and cultural needs of hundreds of thousands of people in the region of Imathia. The library has emerged as a leader in Greece by offering a range of services and programs for children and adults, for natives and immigrants, and helping other libraries replicate its success. In addition to offering advanced information and technology services, the library has become a vibrant community center that promotes learning and creativity. It particularly focuses on young people through its various programs such as the Magic Boxes which provides children with computers, music stations, indoor and outdoor play areas and diverse activities - from storytelling to arts and crafts.

To date, the library has provided IT training to nearly 3,500 adults in the county of Imathia. In 2009, the library held 60 seminars on creativity, reading and digital skills. Its mobile libraries reach 30,000 people. It serves a total population of 180,000 through a central library, two mobile libraries and a network of newly established branches. Additionally, the Veria Library helped more than 60 Greek public libraries develop their websites and be included in the public libraries portal that it created. For all those reasons it became clear to us that the winner of the 2010 award is the Veria Central Public Library.

ES. How do you anticipate that the Veria Central Public Library will use the ATLA?

DJ. The library has an inspiration that Ioannis Trohopoulos, its director, brought to the people during the ceremony that ensures that he will spread the library services to others in Greece. His story could inspire other libraries to replicate the services. The purpose of the award is not to replace current budget funds but to allow organizations to continue enhancing services and innovations beyond what they currently do.

Thus, the library will use the award to expand its network of libraries, upgrade its IT infrastructure, replicate the Magic Boxes concept throughout the main building of the library and all new branches, and extend its impact beyond the region through websites and social networking.

ES. Do you monitor how the recipient spends the award funds?

DJ. Yes. The award funds must be spent exclusively in furtherance of the charitable purposes of the recipient organization and recipients are required to report to the foundation at regularly scheduled intervals on the use of the funding. The award is a one-time prize and while it may be used to support future activities, it is given based on past achievement and not future projects.

We know that through engagement with our network of previous ATLA recipients and Global Libraries grantees, Veria will continue to share lessons learned and be a great inspiration to others, throughout Greece and the world.

ES. Mrs. Jacobs, at the end I am indebted both for giving me this interview and for inviting me to the award ceremony. As a Greek librarian also, please allow me to thank you for offering a Greek library the chance to become world-wide known in terms of this award. I strongly believe that the Veria Library under the leadership of its skilful director, Ioannis Trohopoulos, will continue to be the model library not only in Greece but also in Europe and elsewhere. Thank you!