

The opening of library week – South African style

Di Robinson

A crisp Johannesburg morning melted into a warm Soweto day, as a busload of librarians, storytellers, poets, representatives from the Johannesburg Municipality, officials from the Department of Arts, Culture and Recreation, members of the Greater Kliptown Community Forum, and organisers from LIASA (Library and Information Association of South Africa) drove into Soweto, the former apartheid-era township outside Johannesburg.

Two police cars escorted us, one in front and one behind the bus with sirens shrieking. Traffic was stopped as we zoomed through red 'robots' (traffic lights), down dusty streets and past rows of neat brick houses to the Kliptown Community Centre.

Kliptown is a deeply meaningful venue as it was here that the Freedom Charter was signed, fifty years ago, bringing together most of the liberation forces in South Africa into a united front known as the Congress Alliance.

The theme of South Africa's Library Week 2005 was 'Opening the Doors of Learning and Culture to All'. These words come from the Freedom Charter, an expression of defiant opposition against the brutality of the apartheid regime and symbolic of the hope of a people yearning for a 'fair go' for all. Denied the same education as white people during the apartheid regime, black people now enjoy universal access to education in the new South Africa. But there is still a desperate need for well-funded, nurturing learning environments: schools, libraries and adult education centres, especially in disadvantaged areas.

The conference opened with a soul-warming performance from the Kliptown Mass Choir. LIASA deputy president Ms Tshidi Makhafa and councillor Christine Walters welcomed the group. Barbara Creecy spoke of the universal problems facing educators, and library and information professionals today — how to develop a love of reading with all the electronic entertainment today's youth have available to them. She also reminded the group of how far South Africa has come in the last ten years — 'banned books' used to be locked away in library vaults or burnt by the apartheid government's security police. Today, any student interested in South Africa's past has access to these historical documents.

The Library Week address was by LIASA president Mr Tommy Matthee, who emphasised the aims of South African Library Week: to promote the different types of libraries and the services they offer; to acknowledge and salute all library workers for their continued efforts to render a quality service to users and potential users; to focus on the importance of reading and the value thereof in building an informed nation; and to reach out to communities, government and strategic partners to assure them of the profession's commitment and role to help create a better life for all.



The Soweto Kliptown Youth Group performing

Formed in 1997 from disparate racial/political library groups, LIASA's mission states: 'The association advocates and supports the provision of user orientated and excellent library and information services that aspire to equitable access to information for all communities (literate and illiterate) in South Africa.' And 'to this end the Association represents the interests and promotes the development of the image of library and information workers in South Africa.'



Dr Graham Duminy (national archivist) and John Tsebe (national librarian) at the launch of Library Week

Challenges facing South African educators and librarians

Only 20 per cent of schools in South Africa have libraries and these tend to be the wealthier schools. Students crowd public libraries after school to get their work done. The teacher librarian is a creature of the past. Even if there is a school library, teacher librarians are forced to teach other subjects and don't find time to organise the school library.

Often untrained staff are running libraries as managers. Legislation needs to be adopted so that funding is organised on a provincial level — separate local and provincial funding systems are not working. Some libraries with inadequate funding are rapidly deteriorating. Funding is also crucial for creating more libraries to serve an educative role in disadvantaged areas.

Local and provincial governments are cutting budgets to the bone, making it difficult for libraries to purchase new stock. Resources are often outdated. Library buildings need maintenance, and limited budgets result in a low priority for such work.

Long-term planning and investment are needed so that LIASA can develop and grow at a grassroots level where the service industry of libraries and information centres is most needed. All South African libraries need to have the facilities to market their services to their users, the community and decision makers — to make an impact and be recognised for funding.

The launch of Library Week was interspersed with poetry readings from poets such as Makhosazana Xaba and Donovan Mitchell, who read from his wheelchair, his paralysis a result of South African police brutality. His motto: 'Let bygones be bygones'. The Zanendaba storytellers inspired us with their richly woven morality tales.

Outside, in the dusty quadrangle, with the Kliptown police looking on, Gauteng Provincial Library Service provided entertainment for the children. Over 200 grandparents, parents and excited children gathered for face painting, storytelling, games and drawing, dancing and stilt-walking, and traditional dance performances.

More than ten years after democracy, South Africa is still a society in transition. There have been many positive changes in that time, including school reading competitions such as 'Battle of the Books' and 'Story Skirmish' to encourage youth literacy.

So much hope for the future combines with a warm, generous and sharing spirit amongst South Africa's people. Any Australian information professionals or educators wishing to volunteer their services can contact Ina van Straten at LIASA +27 012 481 2875 or e-mail ina@liasa.org.za.

ALIA member Dianne Robinson is in South Africa to undertake historical research in libraries and took the opportunity to attend Library Week activities.