

**Article Developed Based on Experience in Bulgaria.
Delivered multiple times and printed in CAL Newsletter**

Cooperation through International Partnerships

By

Nancy Bolt

Former Chair, American Library Association

International Relations Round Table

Sister Libraries Committee

September, 2008

Let me share with you some short stories from partnerships between Bulgarian and US public libraries.

The Silistra Public Library in Bulgaria has a US partner library in Aurora, Colorado. Krassi Njagolova visited Colorado and spent five weeks with her partner library. When she returned, she described the successful volunteer program at the Aurora library to the Silistra Library Director, Nellie Stoilova and, though they had never believed a volunteer program would work in Silistra, they decided to try forming a volunteer group, focusing on teenagers. Their Teen Library Volunteer program now has 25 members working at the library.

Silistra and Aurora also decided that they wanted the children in the library to have a better understanding of the cultures of the two countries. They send books and gifts to each other in time to celebrate the American celebrations of 4th of July and Thanksgiving in Silistra and the Bulgarian holidays of Martinitza and Epiphany in the US.

After Nadja Grueva from the Stara Zagora Public Library in Bulgaria visited her partner in the US, the Bemis Public Library, and after some international training, Nadja created a Community Information Database about Stara Zagora which included information about current events in Stara Zagora. This online news has attracted thousands of online hits from Bulgarians living abroad who want information about their hometown.

The Veliko Tarnovo Public Library, after several years of partnership with the Eagle Valley Library District in Eagle Colorado, created the "Eagle" International Reading room. The Eagle Library raised funds to send books in English, and purchase a computer, a desk and shelving for their partner library.

The Razgrad Public Library in Bulgaria held its annual reading marathon. Its partner library in Newton, Iowa posted a video of the library director reading from a book and posted it on YouTube for the Bulgarian library to show.

These are just some examples of cooperative ventures between libraries in other countries – ventures that benefit both libraries and their users.

What is an international partnership?

A Sister or Partner Library is a formal or informal relationship between libraries in different countries. A formal partnership will have a contract or agreement between the two libraries, their parent institutions, and/or their communities. (Examples of partner agreements are available on the CAL website.) The advantage of a formal relationship is that an agreement is signed by the officials in both libraries and that the libraries can involve the parent institutions or communities. This can bring stronger commitment and prestige to the partnerships. In some cases, a formal agreement comes as part of a larger partnership arrangement such as Sister Cities.

Why have an international partner?

There are many benefits to international partnerships. Here are a few:

Increase cultural understanding between countries. US communities are built on immigrant populations – some very old and some very new. US public libraries try and meet the cultural and information needs of their user populations and contact with a home country is one important way to do this. In today's world, cultural understanding is increasingly important. Partnerships allow the library staff to learn more about countries represented by immigrant groups in their communities.

Increased access to published information and artifacts in both countries. Libraries can draw on their partnership to improve their own collections and can offer their own language resources to libraries in other countries.

Learn new library services and technologies. Many partnerships involve travel between the library staff in the two countries. These visits allow library staff to learn how libraries in different countries address similar issues and problems. New ideas cross international boundaries and can be adapted for implementation.

Broaden the view of the library profession in both countries. Attendance at library conferences and online interaction allows staff in both libraries to learn the issues that are important in other professions. One country's solution to a professional problem can sometimes be of use to another country.

Share information, expertise, and training between libraries. All aspects of library service can be discussed and shared. Online and on-site training programs can bring new skills to library staff.

Change the image of the library in the community. International partnerships can bring recognition from the community and community leaders that the local library reaches beyond its own borders to get information, resources, and understanding.

Here are what some current partner libraries say about the benefits:

Crandall Library, in Glen Falls, NY *“The residents of both communities have developed an appreciation of each other's culture and an understanding of each other as people.”*

Crawford County Libraries, Michigan and Shetland Library, Scotland: *Our sisterhood is in the first stages of development. Crawford County Libraries are celebrating the sisterhood with month long activities including a Scottish Storyteller, Celtic Music concert in the park, Shearing of Shetland sheep, tartan display, UK Shetland ponies to the outreach programs including day cares and nursing homes. We are also sending books from our local authors including Paleo Joe, and Jonathan Rand to be shared with the youth across the sisterhood. We will be reading Ann Cleeves, Raven Black which is a murder mystery based on the Shetland Islands. We will be creating professional relationships with peers throughout the library systems. This is going to be an ongoing relationship and we are thrilled.*

Highland Park, Illinois and Ferrera, Italy: *The library's participation in these events has brought people in to the library, earned coverage in the newspapers and in newsletters, and has been a way to get to know townspeople involved in various organizations. Participation also has been stimulating for staff ,who have discussed the difference between the libraries and what they can learn from each other.*

What kind of activities do partner libraries do?

The range of activities partner libraries can engage in is only limited by the creativity of the library staff. Here are some typical activities:

Exchange Library Information: *maintain regular contact between library staff; *share basic information about each library; *share long range plans, public relations documents, and programming ideas; *exchange staff newsletters; *send

a scrapbook, slide presentation, CD, or link to a YouTube video to your Sister Library; *set up an evaluation mechanism to help both libraries celebrate their successes and learn from their experiences.

Exchange Library resources: *genealogical information if appropriate; *local newspapers, cultural materials, bibliographies, artifacts; *books based on a profile of what the Sister Library wants; *agree to answer relevant reference questions for each other; *agree to provide free searches and electronic ILLs to your partner.

Share library training programs: *share access to web-based online training programs; *share training materials, syllabi, handouts, workbooks.

Share library programs and exhibits: *create a bulletin board display with photos of your Sister Library, its staff and users; *hold real-time discussions or participate in each others programs through Skype; *organize a cross-country “read the same book” discussion for teens or adults; *pick a specific topic to focus on such as health or art and share resources and programs; *exchange children’s artwork and do displays in both countries with photographs of the children.

Share cultural events: *celebrate each other’s national holidays and displays and programs; *schedule native speakers who are living in their partner country to give in-person presentations and slide shows; *sponsor displays of quality arts and crafts or historical documents from your local community.

Assist in library development: *agree to provide free searches and electronic ILLs to your partner; *offer to purchase resources that are difficult to purchase in your Sister Library’s country; *assist with solving a library or community problem such as health care or art preservation by donating your library’s resources and expertise.

Bring recognition of the partnership thorough publicity: *publicize your Sister Library status via your library newsletter and at speaking engagements at NGOs like Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, and library association meetings; *give interview and photo opportunities to media and share these with your Sister Library.

Develop personal contacts: *organize a pen-pan (now key-pals) for library staff and users to learn about each other as individuals; *arrange for exchanges between library staff; *organize a delegation of staff and community members to visit the Sister Library.

How to find a Sister Library?

In Colorado, there are always opportunities to find a partner in Bulgaria. However, many libraries have large immigrant communities and having a sister library from the home country of some of these immigrant groups could provide a close connection with home.

There are several ways to find a Sister Library.

One way is to go through the American Library Association's International Relations Round Table, Sister Libraries Program. These connections do not have to always include a US library. Sister Libraries was created in 2000 to encourage partnerships across country lines. Overtime a database has been created and kept up-to-date by the Committee. The current wiki includes the following information:

- Success stories with ideas of how libraries formed their partnerships, an indication of some partner activities, and a contact name for the partnership
- Reasons why you might want to be a Sister Library
- An advance planning checklist to help you get started
- Suggestions on how to find a Sister Library
- A directory of libraries seeking a Sister Library and how to submit your request to be a Sister Library
- Suggested activities and a list of resources

Another way to find a partner is to participate in an existing Partner program such as Sister Cities (www.sister-cities.org) Many municipal administrations around the world have formed partnerships with Sister Cities in another country. There are already 29 Sister City partnerships between communities in Spain and the US. There are many advantages to building on this relationship. First, a relationship with a municipality in another country already exists. All that is necessary is to add the library to the existing activities. Second, there are other municipal functions that are already cooperating so that information is available about the other country's partner. Third, the librarian may be part of a delegation that visits the Sister City and thus the Sister Library. Finally, participating in a municipal activity can bring positive attention to the library.

More ways of finding a partner include:

- Find people or NGOs in your community that have relationships with other countries
- Visit libraries in your travels and meet their librarians and staff
- Make contact with international students and visitors and international visitors to library conferences

How to get your Sister Library Partnership up and running

First, decide what you want from a Sister Library Partnership and how much time, effort, and resources you are willing or able to commit to it. Do you want

to receive resources from another country to meet the needs of a specific population in your community? Do you want to participate in a broader cultural exchange program such as Sister Cities? Are you interested and willing to help a developing library in a third world country? A formal Sister Library Partnership would involve getting permission from the library governing authorities and possibly the municipal authorities. Make sure the Sister Library initiative is supported by more than one library staff member and that library staff are excited about the possibility. To the extent possible identify the financial resources available for the Sister Library Partnership either from the library, from the partner institution, or through fundraising activities. NGOs and other organizations that represent the interests of the partner library are often willing to provide some financial support.

Ten tips for a successful Sister Library Partnership: Helpful hints and pitfalls

- Each library needs of a primary contact who is excited, enthusiastic, willing to commit time to the Partnership and who enjoys spending time working with people from another country. This is usually NOT the library director. While the director needs to be supportive of the program, he/she usually does not have time to personally devote to the partnership.
- Frequent communication is the most important ingredient in a Sister Library Partnership. The primary contacts and other members of the library staff should be in frequent contact. Sometimes one partner is reluctant to communicate with someone in another country, particularly when the partnership is between a library in a developed country and one in a developing country. Persistence in pursuing the partnership is critical. Don't wait months for your Sister Library to respond; send another message. Try to e-mail your partner at least once a month. Talk about anything, even if it is just about the weather! Frequent communication builds a strong partnership; like any friendship, it will grow with the small steps.
- A common language needs to be determined and used. With languages as prevalent as English and Spanish, this is not usually an issue but it can be if one of the countries has a less common language (such as Bulgarian, or an Arabic language) where there might not be library staff members who can communicate.
- Time is often cited as the reason for lack of communication. Both partners should get in the habit of communicating regularly, even if there is nothing really important to communicate about. Short messages about library activities, or the weather, or personal events can sustain the partnership.

- Sister Library Partnerships need to have a feeling of equality even if one of the library's resources is more abundant than the partner. Even poor libraries need to contribute to the partnership, even if it is less than the more developed library. Sometimes libraries in developing countries also expect more than their Sister Library can deliver, such as equipment and significant print/electronic resources. The scope of the partnership should be clear.
- It takes money to make the partnership work. Funding is needed for sharing resources and ongoing program activities. Funds can come from the library, partner institution, donations from interested NGOs, and fundraising activities. If the project is of a large enough scope it may be eligible for a grant.
- Trust may build slowly. There may be some doubt that one of the partners is truly interested in the partnership. This is why ongoing communication is so important.
- More than one library staff needs to be involved. Sister Library Partnerships have failed when the primary contact finds a new job or takes an extended leave for health reasons.
- Put together a formal agreement that includes: *goals of the Sister Library Partnership; *primary and secondary contacts; *some indication of activities (though this should grow overtime); and, *expected reasons or benefits of the Sister Library Partnership.
- Face- to-face visits promote understanding and friendship but are expensive for both sides. However, it is these visits that can bond partners in a way e-mail and postal mail cannot.

Conclusion

Libraries from around the world have benefited from Sister Library Partnerships. They bring information, recognition, a sense of accomplishment, and global understanding.

Some Resource Links

ALA International Relations Round Table Sister Libraries Committee

http://wikis.ala.org/sisterlibraries/index.php/Main_Page

Find a partner, view success stories, and get helpful tips.

Sister Cities International

<http://www.sister-cities.org/>

Discover if your city has a Sister City.

Southeast Florida Library Information Network (SEFLIN)
(<http://www.seflin.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=intact.activityList&>) SEFLIN and its
members have multiple Sister Library Partnerships.