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Impact of the Bookmobile to Cuba Project on Library Outreach Services

in Granma Province, Cuba

By Rhonda L. Neugebauer and Dana Lubow

Submitted May 28, 2011

The Bookmobile to Cuba Project has promoted cross-cultural literacy, advocacy and international exchange between the United States and Cuba. The project helps to level the playing field for the Cuban library professionals as they research and address changing user needs, establish service and collection goals, build collections and add new materials, plan and implement services for outlying towns and regions, and bring library, consulting and reader promotion services to the people of the province of Granma.

Since the 1959 revolution, Cuba has prioritized education and literacy. As part of this effort, Cuba built hundreds of schools all over the island, and placed a library in each one of them. Also since 1959, Cuban librarians have actively expanded library services to every province and developed a dynamic and robust library profession dedicated to cultural expression and celebration. Cuban libraries are greatly valued as institutions that collect, preserve and disseminate the intellectual and cultural heritage of the country and its many institutions and activities. Librarians carry out extraordinary professional work in Cuba even with their limited economic resources. These librarians – in various types of libraries -- inspired us with their dedication to their users and their commitment to continuous study of user and community needs. The strong reading interest and love of reading among the Cuban people further inspired us to see if we could help librarians and the communities they serve.

Sending a bookmobile to Cuba was fulfillment of a “dream” that came about after Rhonda Neugebauer visited Cuba in 1989 and learned of the librarians’ struggles with obtaining resources. The Cuban librarians inspired her with their work ethic, their professional collaborations, their frequent community needs assessments, and their research and service orientation. During early visits, she learned first hand about the educational system, the literacy campaign and the building of schools throughout the country -- including in the hard-to-reach mountainous rural areas that may have no paved roads and no bridges at river crossings. During these visits, Cuban librarians reported that even in those far-off rural schools, there were library materials in each school and a librarian assigned to every school. And, these rural libraries were supplied with materials by the librarians at the Provincial Library – though sometimes the libraries were located in a small rural school building and the library materials consisted of a box of books exchanged regularly by staff from the provincial library.

Bookmobile to Granma Project (Footnote 1)

This Bookmobile to Granma Project started as a dialogue between U.S. and Cuban librarians. The Cuban librarians had been isolated from U.S. librarians by the U.S. government-imposed blockade of Cuba since Feb. 7, 1962. This trade and travel blockade imposed unilaterally by the

U.S. government is used to aggressively confront the Cuban revolution in order to bring about its demise. The U.S. blockade and accompanying overt and covert destabilization efforts against Cuba continue to this day. These plans have been codified into U.S. State Dept. policy by Bush-appointed officials in the report of the Commission on Assistance to a Free Cuba. Issued in 2004, this report identifies plans to further destabilize and then topple the Cuban revolution -- a top objective of the Bush administration. This extremely controversial report outlines plans to “help” Cuban libraries transition to a pro-U.S. regime using the goodwill and positive intentions of U.S. librarians and their commitment to intellectual freedom.**Footnote2**

Both Dana Lubow and Rhonda Neugebauer had organized librarian delegations to Cuba in order to visit libraries and meet colleagues. Everywhere they visited, Cuban librarians shared their very moving stories about the challenges they face serving their patrons and meeting the demanding and diverse reading needs in a nation that boasts the highest literacy rate in the Americas. Librarians in Cuba have duties very similar to librarians in the U.S. They are in charge of building and preserving collections that serve patrons’ needs for educational, research, informational and recreational reading materials and for providing library services to distinct populations and a variety of locales.

The U.S. economic and trade blockade has impacted Cuban libraries and severely restricted their ability to obtain basic supplies, and to purchase published works and other library resources. The cutoff of trade and contact has had an especially negative and limiting effect on Cuba’s libraries, its publishing industry, its acquisition of monographs and serials, and its purchase of foreign materials as well as licensed electronic resources. In essence, the United States government blockade has isolated Cuba from U.S. and the world’s librarians, information provider industries, publishers, and electronic vendors. This situation for Cuba is not faced by any U.S. library or any other library in Latin America. Cuban librarians cannot buy books/journals or services from U.S. publishers, vendors, utilities, or any publisher that has a branch in the U.S. or that does business with a U.S. subsidiary. This includes a ban on the purchase of several worldwide products such as OCLC (the world’s most comprehensive international bibliographic utility used internationally by most libraries for cataloging and searching), which has asked for permission and has been denied attendance at library conferences in Cuba. Foreign exchange currency is scarce for libraries, and the U.S. Treasury Department, Office of Foreign Asset Control (the body in charge of enforcing the U.S. blockade and the travel restrictions to Cuba) has gone to great lengths to “discourage” U.S. library vendors to forego any business with Cuban libraries, information centers or archives.

Because of the limits on information, and because of the stiff penalties that the Cuban reading public has endured, it is challenging to help Cuban libraries while overcoming these U.S.-imposed obstacles. Given the fact that most if not all U.S. librarians who travel to Cuba want to help Cuban libraries, and most of all, want the US to stop the aggressive, punitive and unjust blockade which also has hurt Cuban libraries’ development and buying power for over five decades.

To define the project, Dana Lubow returned to Cuba in January 2006 and met with the Director of the Jose Marti National Library, Dr. Eliades Acosta Matos. They discussed library needs in Cuba and Dana asked if the library system could use a bookmobile. He immediately and enthusiastically said, “Yes! We can send it to Granma.” And, with this information, Lubow returned home to launch the project. Within a few months she purchased, on E-bay, the 25-year-

old bookmobile from rural Missouri. Then, she drove it to California and began needed repairs, painted its colorful design and filled it with 70+ boxes of Spanish-language adult and children's books for the long journey to Cuba.

The Bookmobile has the capacity for over 3,000 books on its built-in shelves and that is how many items were sent. To fill the Bookmobile, contributions were requested from librarians, library associations, progressive groups in the U.S. and Great Britain, and trade unions and Cuba solidarity networks. What was received in response to the call for support were cash donations and dozens of book donations. Many individuals bought books from the customized "ALibris Wish-list." Generous librarians and supporters sent packages from many states and foreign countries. And, these donations tallied over 75 boxes of reading materials for children and adults, interspersed with puppets and mechanical replacement parts for the Bookmobile.

By July 2008, the Bookmobile was ready to be sent on the Pastors for Peace Caravan as an addition to their annual travel challenge to the U.S. blockade. Pastors for Peace, a New York City-based humanitarian organization, has been at the forefront in taking people-to-people medical supplies and humanitarian aid to Cuba – in spite of the U.S. blockade. The Bookmobile to Cuba Project joined the Pastors for Peace Caravan and because of their people-to-people mission and to challenge the decades-old U.S. blockade with a bus full of books. As academic librarians, we see the blockade as a violation of academic freedoms as well as being punitive to the Cuban people and their libraries. The Bookmobile was sent as part of the travel challenge.

Footnote 3.

The Bookmobile Operations within Outreach Services

In late 2008, we received word from Granma Provincial Library Director, Rebeca Brull, that the Bookmobile had arrived in the summer and been placed into service on Oct. 20, the "National Day of Culture" in Cuba. A widely-attended inauguration celebration was held for the Bookmobile in a large park with hundreds of attendees. Brull and Margarita Bellas, the President of ASCUBI, the Cuban Library Association, presided over the ribbon-cutting ceremony that included a special dedication, poetry, singing, and a newly-prepared dramatization of the book, "The Most Important Building in Town" (the library), by Gary Hurle, an Australian author, which was included in the bookmobile boxes/shipment.

In preparation for its debut, the Provincial Library staff studied the needs of surrounding rural communities in planning bookmobile scheduling, services and activities. It was decided that all of the books donated by "Books for Cuba" would stay on the bookmobile (and not be integrated with the public library holdings). That decision meant that all the brand new, colorful and glossy books were kept on the Bookmobile for use in the underserved rural schools and communities, "where they would make a huge difference," according to the librarians.

The "1868 Provincial Library," located in the southeastern city of Bayamo, has five main outreach/extension programs that serve the community of readers of the province in a variety of ways. The Bookmobile became the newest component of the program. Moreover, the library made a significant investment of professional personnel (librarians, driver/mechanic), gasoline, research and planning to initiate the program. The five outreach programs are:

1. **Mini-libraries:** The mini-library consists of about 20-30 titles that are deposited at heavily-trafficked community locales such as Work Centers, Prisons, Maternity Homes, Senior Citizen Homes and other centers. In each mini-library one worker is chosen to be responsible for the books and acts as librarian for the materials.
2. **Caja viajeras:** These “Travelling Boxes” of books are taken to far-off schools and community centers and rotated regularly among those locales.
3. **Punto Fijo:** These “Fixed Point” Libraries,” established during the 1990s Special Period, were created to serve communities that were very far from the main library but close to the city. The librarians collaborated with the Union of Young Communists (Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas), which provided access to the reading collections located in the towns’ Recreation Centers.
4. **Sala de Lectura:** Reading Rooms set up in the homes of community members.
5. **Bookmobile:** Primary outreach to rural communities and schools.

Once the Bookmobile was received and the mission for its service was developed, the Library Administration coordinated with two outreach librarians, to develop specific objectives for the services of the Bookmobile and its staff. By putting the Bookmobile into service to directly support rural schools and communities, the Extension Services of the Granma Provincial Library were greatly expanded their geographic coverage in the Province. The Bookmobile librarians describe the improvements to their primary services that the Bookmobile enabled as the following:

1. Increased reader support services and reader development;
2. Improved promotion of the “book” and reading and to places where individuals have limited access to library facilities;
3. Provided offerings of greater variety and diversity of literature (foreign authors in translation, foreign presses and publishers)
4. Expanded support of literacy, continuing education and life-long learning efforts.

Impact of Bookmobile on Library Services

The Bookmobile, placed in service to support the Library’s rural community outreach and to support schools in the region, has had a tremendous impact as one of the cornerstones of the 1868 Provincial Libraries’ outreach program. With this brand new mobile collection of books, all of which were published outside Cuba, Granma librarians were able to offer new outreach activities to areas of the province that lacked library services, including neighborhoods far from a library building/branch, schools in rural countryside settlements, and community and worker centers. While visiting the communities, the bookmobile collection is also used to make special loans to teachers, social workers and parents for instructional and personal use. The teachers were especially delighted to use the materials in their

classrooms for teaching as well as for self-education. Among the most popular topics for checkout by adults were books about health and parenting issues.

Visits of the Bookmobile to Communities

As a vital part of regional extension services, during the school year the Bookmobile follows 11 regular routes into the countryside and makes 21 pre-scheduled stops each month on a standard rotation during the school year. Then, during the summer, the Bookmobile follows different routes and covers at least eleven additional locations, which include more distant locales and municipalities. When possible, the Bookmobile also is set up for all-day appearances at public events, neighborhood events and the annual book fair. The Bookmobile and Provincial library staff regularly participate in celebrations, such as Reading Festivals and Contests, the Day of Culture, Day of the Book, Essay Contests, and Book Presentations.

During research visits to Granma, Lubow and Neugebauer were able to accompany the Bookmobile and librarians on their daily trips or “recorridos” to the schools and communities that checked out the books on the Bookmobile. Every day we boarded the Bookmobile and headed out to a school or community on the routes served by the Bookmobile during the school year. Each day, there were several stops. And, at each stop school personnel, students, parents and community members met the Bookmobile and librarians with their loaned books, browsed the shelves for new titles and consulted with librarians about promotion of reading and literacy.

In a typical visit, the Bookmobile rapidly filled with very animated students using the collections, browsing, doing check-in/check-out, talking with teachers and librarians, sharing new titles they discovered with friends, laughing at storybook characters, puppets and photos, and chatting with the parents and community members and the visiting US librarians.

On a research trip in January this year, Lubow and Neugebauer were able to observe the use of the Bookmobile first hand by its primary users for the entire week. As donors, they were thrilled to see how excited the children were when the Bookmobile arrived. Several students shouted, “El Bibliobus” to their friends and ran to the Bookmobile from across the yard. In other schools, students waited patiently, books in hand, until their teachers signaled it was their class’ turn to return their borrowed books and look for new ones to check out.

The children’s enthusiasm for the Bibliobus visits was visible at each stop. They were intrigued with the books that they’d “never seen before in Cuba” and they expressed absolute joy in sharing their new discoveries with classmates, siblings, parents, teachers and friends. We saw this scenario repeated time after time. The students were especially enamored with books about “Clifford, the Big Red Dog” and the “Magic School Bus” series. Also, because the donors were present this time, at almost every stop they were treated to a welcome program with introductory remarks by teachers and students, with poetry readings, songs, dance, tributes to the Cuban 5 and oral book reviews from students who told personal stories about “what I learned from my library book.” “El entendimiento que tuve con el libro fue.....” Every one of them “learned something” from their book and shared their personal “connection” with the story.

Circulation

Daily usage and turnover of the 1500 children’s books on the Bookmobile is very high. The Bookmobile schedule is organized around the lending of the books. At each stop, a large number

of titles are checked out and others are returned. The number of users varies depending on the number of students, teachers and community members who arrive to utilize the Bookmobile, or who are affiliated with the local school.

The researchers learned how well utilized the bookmobile's children's collection truly is, and they were surprised to find out how few children's books remained on the Bookmobile at the end of the day. The shelves were nearly empty, because the collection was so heavily used by the students. Only about a quarter (fewer than 400 titles) remained on the shelves at any given time. When sent, the Bookmobile was **full** of books, but its great success at circulation meant that the Bibliobus was nearly emptied of its 1500 colorful children's books. Of course, this need propelled a new project to "Refill the Bookmobile" (i.e. obtain more children's books), which has become quite critical now that the books are showing wear and tear.

Statistics documenting the bookmobile use are quite impressive, especially when compared to the 1868 Library's other outreach programs. The librarians provided statistics demonstrating the high number of users, monthly circulation figures, special programs offered, as well as the ages of all users. For example in one month, there were nearly 200 new users registered, almost 3000 items were loaned, and over 1000 readers were served. The total number of circulations for the first active period of service of the bookmobile, from Sept. 2009 to Dec. 2010, was close to 15,000 volumes. "Services offered" by the librarians was close to 22,000. These activities included: book talks, encouragement of reading games, programs for students and Bookmobile users about books, reading and literacy, consultation with individual teachers on instructional materials and with school administrators about library materials and curriculum development.

The Bookmobile's dedicated librarian, Lucy Cabrera Matamoros, stated that the Bookmobile has increased programming with the schools and has directly benefitted students and teachers, as well as the schools' curriculum as a whole. One advantage has been coordination of education-related professionals and the establishment of dynamic work relations "networks" set up between librarians and teachers, and librarians and school administrators. Also helpful were studies done to identify specific needs of the students and communities they serve. They used interviews and other diagnostic tools to prepare customized work plans for the different populations that the Bookmobile serves.

Consultation

While librarians assist students in renewals, other users await assistance and consultation. It is common for the librarian to know the teachers and the staff of the school, including many of the students, parents, school volunteers and community officials. The teachers are eager to use instructional materials from the Bookmobile to supplement their classroom teaching -- including world and astronomy atlases, vocabulary lists, encyclopedias and reference works. These materials are sometimes loaned to a school on the Bookmobile route for the entire semester. The books on loan to schools may be placed in the school's library or in a teacher's classroom. Nonetheless, they are heavily used for teaching, lesson planning (using maps, graphics and photos), and other instructional activities.

Bookmobile Librarian, Lucy Cabrera Matamoros, also engaged in storytelling at some school stops. At one school, in her lesson, she described the development of the J sound throughout history. She told the students the story by involving them in the story of a Giraffe, which, in

Spanish, begins with the Letter J. She also played word games and asked students questions about their books and reading activities. The students' answers were lightening quick and exceedingly enthusiastic.

Coordination with Neighborhood and Mass Organizations

In addition to their work in the Main Library, the Bookmobile librarians work with and through the local mass organizations to get to know community needs and to establish services that coordinate with the goals and plans of the organizations within the community. Social and mass organizations are widespread throughout Cuban society. The mass organizations link the party with the masses including with the people in general whether they are workers, men and women, seniors, youth or children. The mass organizations also provide input on the feelings, problems and opinions of each sector of the population to the elected leadership of the Cuban government. All of these organizations and/or their representatives have a role in supporting and guiding the work of the bookmobile.

Building Culture through Libraries

Administratively libraries fall under the Ministry of Culture and are viewed as cultural institutions. Culture plays an intrinsic and vital role in many facets of Cuban society. The Bookmobile librarian, Lucy, put it this way: the Bookmobile has given us the possibility of participating in the community's culture and society, by:

1. Spreading/building "culture" into diverse areas, especially into the countryside (this in keeping with their cultural mission to enrich the life of the community);
2. Getting to know reading preferences within the community areas;
3. Serving Bookmobile users with high quality books, reading topics and materials, and promoting other cultural activities;
4. Expanding to additional geographic areas of coverage for library services and hence culture;
5. Improving general continuing education opportunities in culture; and
6. Supporting the students in their use of texts to supplement their schoolwork and intellectual projects.

The bookmobile has its own Cultural Promoter (called "La Promotora"), Marelis Gonzales Rodriguez. As a Cultural Promoter, she connects the work of the Bookmobile with the work/activities of mass organizations, and serves to organize and facilitate activities that help the community. She is expected to promote, organize and mobilize the participation of community members in their own cultural development. All cultural activity that the cultural promoter promotes contributes to enriching the cultural knowledge and quality of life of the communities. So, as a Cultural Promoter on the Bookmobile, Marelis, has the job of continually promoting use of and improving access to the Bookmobile services, collections and reference and teacher consultations. All of these activities enhance the cultural development of the communities served.

The functions of the cultural promoter, or “La Promotora,” were provided by the librarians. They are:

- To carry out participatory diagnosis of the community and promote socio-cultural research using the results to identify and move toward satisfying the expectations, needs and demands of the population;
- To participate in the preparation, execution and evaluation of socio-cultural processes, in programming, at events, and in the promotion of activities with the objective of strengthening the cultural values existing in the community;
- To work with schools to improve the overall cultural development of the community;
- To promote the talent of artists and intellectuals within the community; and
- To participate in the design, control and evaluation of the cultural programming of the locality and carry out studies about its impact.

According to the librarians at the Provincial Library in Bayamo, the Bookmobile has had an extraordinarily positive and meaningful impact in the Granma Province and has received an enthusiastic acceptance by the people it serves. The patrons of the Bookmobile highly value its contents and services, and are eager for its monthly visits. Teachers and administrators consider the Bookmobile collections as vital curriculum additions. The Bookmobile is also seen as a gathering point for the communities. And, according to the teachers, the children consider its visits “todo un acontecimiento” (a happening) when it arrives in a community or school.

And, for the Cuban librarians, the Bookmobile has become a welcome addition to their arsenal of professional tools to promote literacy, reading, education, self-improvement and community development throughout the countryside and into remote rural areas where municipal libraries cannot always regularly reach. And, as we witnessed, the library outreach programs, especially involving the Bookmobile, have signed up many new and very happy end users.

Footnotes

1. For more information on the Bookmobile project, Lubow and Neugebauer created two blogs that describe the project in detail and report on the route it took to Cuba over land and by sea.

Bookmobile to Cuba: from Gentry to Granma Project

(<http://bookmobile.wordpress.com>). This is the story of how the project was organized and contains a beautiful scrapbook and a list of books donated.

Travel Log: Bookmobile on the Road to Cuba (<http://www.travelpod.com/travel-blog/danalubow/1/tpod.html>). Report with photos on the Bookmobile’s travels to Cuba, driven and reported by Lubow.

2. This notoriously provocative plan was made public in May 2004 and published by its authors in the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba (<http://www.csfc.gov/>). The report proposes using U.S librarians, the American Library Association and the Institute for Museum and Library

Services to Cuba to help in the transition. The Commission did not consult with any leader from either of these organizations. The report states on page 109: "Cuban libraries and information centers can benefit from modern information technology, and their staffs can be trained or retrained to provide modern information services for a free society. Foreign assistance providers and Cuban experts could cooperate in revitalizing Cuban libraries. Organizations such as the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the American Library Association, and other interested private sector organizations should be encouraged to support this endeavor." p. 109

3. Since its first caravan in the 1980s, the Pastors for Peace has sent approximately 2,500 tons of humanitarian assistance, more than 60 school buses and over 30 other vehicles including ambulances, trucks, pickups and cars to Cuba. About 3,000 people have traveled during that time period with them as well – challenging the travel ban of U.S. citizens as well as the economic blockade.

Note:

New Young Adult Book Project (<http://yacubaproject.wordpress.com>). Organized to benefit the teens and young adult readers at the Ruben Martinez Villena Provincial Library, located in Old Havana. In collaboration with the children's librarian at the Provincial Library, we selected award-winning and nominated Spanish-language young adult books, helping fulfill the reading needs of young adults in Old Havana. These titles for the Old Havana Provincial Library will be sent to Cuba in summer 2011 through the 22nd Annual Pastors for Peace Caravan.

Rhonda L. Neugebauer Biography

Rhonda Neugebauer is Latin American Studies Bibliographer at the University of California, Riverside Libraries. She has organized several delegations of U.S. librarians to visit Cuban libraries and has hosted Cuban librarian visits to the U.S. As part of the delegations, she met with dozens of Cuban librarians doing very similar professional work. During those visits, she also acquired library materials for several different US libraries, presented papers at conferences, researched Cuban librarianship, and conducted research on the U.S. Dept of State's "Independent Libraries in Cuba Project," a U.S. State Dept. creation that is generously financed and promoted with U.S. tax dollars.

Dana Lubow Biography

Dana Lubow is Bibliographic Instruction librarian at Los Angeles Valley College. Since her first trip to Cuba in 2000, Dana wanted to help Cuban libraries. Since then, she began helping by sending books. For years, after attending both national and international library conferences, she would ask and receive free donations of exhibitor's books and mail them to various Cuban libraries, including the Universidad de la Habana, the National Library of Science and Technology (IDICT), and the National Library of Medicine. She did this because she saw how well-worn the Cuban collections were and was told how few resources the libraries had to adequately develop their collections.

