

The CILIP/ESU Travelling Librarian Returns from South Africa

by Elizabeth Williams*

In fulfilment of the Travelling Librarian CILIP/ESU Award (2014) I visited Cape Town, Pretoria and Johannesburg in March 2015. The objective was to examine the role of librarians in facilitating forms of literacy and related ICT support, both on and off campus. I met with library professionals and academics from Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), the University of Pretoria (UP), University of Johannesburg (UJ) and Wits University. I also met with representatives from non-governmental organisations (NGO's) such as Project Literacy and independent educators who are undertaking stellar literacy drives in local communities and townships. I was there for just over two weeks and it was a packed programme.

Many experiences stand out from the trip; however, to sum it up, I was impressed by the passionate commitment and dedication of library professionals supporting a diverse student body to meet the unique challenges of public life in such a young democracy as South Africa. There are exciting projects on the go spear-heading the information communication



University of Cape Town Faculty Building

technologies of 21st century South Africa and librarians are an integral part of this process. The drive is to educate global professionals to compete at the very top of their chosen professions whether they stay in the continent or pursue careers abroad. It was heartening to see librarians, information science academics and industry professionals working in concert on university campuses to achieve that goal. University campus librarians based at UP, CPUT and UJ campuses, were training students and staff and delivering sessions on topics such as open scholarship, information management, information and computer technologies (ICT) and research, harnessing social media for research, advanced information literacy and information retrieval, digitisation, knowledge management, organisational behaviour and leadership, web trends, knowledge society, leadership and innovation, plus open science, cloud services, virtual research environments, mobile technology, web trends, digitisation and much more.

Another noteworthy innovation in terms of the use of library space, was seen at the Department of Library Services at the University of Pretoria (UP) which has become the first library in South Africa to open a library *MakerSpace*. This is a creative laboratory where people with ideas can get together with people who have the technical ability to make these



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ideas become a reality. A *MakerSpace* is often associated with fields such as engineering, computer science, graphic design and digital art, and although the physical space is important, it is the collaboration between individuals with various and distinct areas of knowledge that is fundamental to fostering this creative environment. I was fascinated to be shown a demonstration of 3D printed body parts! I also met the Director of Libraries at UP - Mr Robert Moropa and his outstanding library team. UP library is engaged with a plethora of ICT initiatives and truly deserves the reputation of an outstanding leader in the profession on the African continent.

While visiting, I met with many inspirational librarians, I had a moving and thrilling visit with the children of a school based in the large Mamelodi township Northeast of Pretoria in Gauteng Province, Sharinda Primary. The UP based librarian who accompanied me, Dr Leti Kleyn, has single-handedly pioneered Foundation Reading Rooms raising money to outfit mini-libraries of reading material and colourful learning resources for the children and staff at various township schools. I met the children who occupied their class rooms in fairly large numbers, for example, fifty-four in one class. They were remarkably attentive and quietly listening and learning from their teacher. Very impressive classroom control!

Later in the week I visited one of the fairly new branches of UJ library in South Western Township, popularly known as Soweto. Soweto is a sprawling metropolis just outside Johannesburg that includes property valued at over R1.2 million owned and lived in by famous personalities to more modest dwellings. I was given a tour of UJ's branch library in Soweto. While there, the campus librarian

Moipone Qhomane-Goliath received exciting news - the Library has been given the go-ahead to transform the roof of the library into a roof-top restaurant catering to students and staff! We went to the roof and the view is truly remarkable.

At the main UJ campus library in central Jozi I received a personal tour from the dynamic UJ director of libraries Dr Rookya Bawa, who also invited me to attend a library organised evening event, a conversation *Race Culture and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions*. This was MC'd by a well-known local radio personality, author and social political analyst. The panel was made up of academics, and public institution professionals. In attendance were nearly 100 students and staff who were also provided with a formal dinner. UJ library facilitates over 100 such events during the year on a variety of contemporary issues.

I also met Steven Le Roux, the CEO of the NGO Project Literacy (PL), founded in 1986. PL



Centre for the Book promotion poster for library week



*Anita Shaw and Mandlakayise C. Matyumza
Executive Head of Centre of the Book*

addresses the needs of illiterate and semi-literate adults in South Africa and delivers a wide range of Education and Training programmes to educationally disadvantaged people by way of education centres, educator training, curriculum development and community outreach. There are various programmes such as family literacy through the *Run Home to Read Project*, adult education and training (AET) enhancing language and communication in primary school children, teaching AET and other learning interventions to illiterate adults, AET and bridging training programmes for youth and adults and much more.

I also had a fascinating encounter with Professor Qin of the Confucius Institute (CI) at the University of Cape Town. He outlined the CI's programmes of Chinese language literacy projects in local schools, educating the next generation of South African children in mandarin proficiency for the 21st century.

My trip happened to fall during national library week and I visited the Centre for the Book - the National Library of South Africa in Cape Town which is housed in an amazing former colonial building. The Centre for the Book is an outreach unit of the National Library

of South Africa. Its mission is to promote a culture of reading, writing and publishing in local languages and easy access to books for all. There, library professionals were gathered to interact with government figures as well as their peers. While visiting the centre I was fortunate to meet the national head of the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA). I also heard about the amazing project work the centre supports and pioneers with local schools. I heard and saw the publication it produces in support of first time authors publishing in the 10 national languages of South Africa. The good news is that there is a massive appetite for books and reading in print and e-format.

I also attended an adult literacy class in Cape Town at a highly regarded High School for Boys. One of the teachers and his wife both have a passion for English and Afrikaans literacy. Their class attendees are mostly African women though there are students from the Coloured Communities* and Afrikaner backgrounds. The teaching and measurable outcomes have proved to be a success. Therefore, these educators have been granted a licence to expand the number of classes. They are fully committed to facilitate the acquisition of literacy to national certification level for individuals from socio-economically challenged backgrounds. This will open opportunities for the students.



*Primary children's reading room at the
Centre of the Book*



*Library help desk library staff foregrounded
University of Johannesburg Soweto Campus*

After visiting the library and speaking with the librarians at CPUT Wellington campus, I sat in on a class led by the Librarian-Teacher on copyright and research ethics conducted in Afrikaans. Surprisingly I could follow the gist of the session. I was encouraged by the interactive nature of the class and lively responses of the students who later surrounded me and expressed an enthusiastic desire to visit the UK ASAP (as soon as possible)!

During my journey, the many libraries and places I visited to expand my professional understanding of the role of the librarian and educators in promoting literacy for the challenges of twenty-first century South Africa, I calculated having spoken to nearly 50 professionals. I learnt enormously from the many friendly South Africans I met while walking around.

Incidentally while there I also launched my



*Ms Moipone Qhomane-Goliath Campus librarian
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new monograph entitled *The Politics of Race in Britain and South Africa: Black British Solidarity and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle*¹ that was a thrill and it was great to meet academics and students from a range of backgrounds eager to discuss the recent history of their country and the international impact their country had on global politics.

I managed to fit in sightseeing. I toured around Cape Town, Jozi and Soweto. I saw the former homes of Nelson and Winnie Mandela and the current home of the Emeritus Archbishop Tutu. I also enjoyed using the ultra-modern fast Gautrain shuttle between Pretoria and the centre of Johannesburg.



University of Johannesburg evening event for students and staff discussion 'Race in South Africa's Higher Education'

*Despite the end of Apartheid this categorisation has been retained as a moniker for people who are of Cape Malay, African and European heritage.

¹Williams, Elizabeth M. *The Politics of Race in Britain and South Africa: Black British Solidarity and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle*. I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd Series: International Library of Historical Studies. Hardback. ISBN: 9781780764207. Publication Date: 2015. pp288. £62.00/\$96.00