

From early flirtation to a long-standing commitment – an IFLA story

I never thought that when I attended my first IFLA conference in Copenhagen in 1997 as ALIA President that I would get hooked for a substantial part of my academic life. It was the first time an ALIA President had attended the conference and as far as I know the practice of the President and Executive Director attending each IFLA conference has continued since then.

Copenhagen was a wonderful place to have a first IFLA conference experience. A small and very manageable city, a country with a deep commitment to libraries, wonderful hosts, and many firsts for me, including my first meeting with the amiable raconteur Norman Horrocks from Nova Scotia, who was with Scarecrow Press at the time, and who passed away recently. He'd spent time in Western Australia at our State Library and when he found out that I was a West Aussie we remained friends. My first meeting with many international names that I knew from the literature and was able to speak to first hand, my first international experience at networking – so valuable in my life as an academic. And my first overseas trip away on my own, without family.

IFLA can be mindblowingly complicated, especially for the newcomer. But I am not one to shadow folks nor be mentored although I did use my network of Australian colleagues to assist me to navigate the IFLA maze. I sussed out its many sections and interest groups and turned up at the Standing Committee meeting for Library Theory & Research (LTR) as an observer. By the end of the Copenhagen conference, I was to stand as a member of the Committee and in next to no time became its Secretary and then its Chair.

During my time in office, I worked with LTR colleagues on the promotion of research to our international LIS community (including through my work with ALIA on its Research Committee), and I worked on joint research projects. As an example of the latter, I was the Australian coordinator for the IFLA international research project on *Political perceptions of the public library* and also for the IFLA international research project on *An investigation of the role of IFLA in promoting change and diffusing professional norms in libraries with a weight on norms, standards and policies relating to lifelong literacy*, lead by Ragnar Audunson.

One can remain on a Standing Committee for two four year terms, which I did with LTR. After that I made the decision to continue my IFLA involvement, but this time as a member of the Education & Training Standing Committee. That four year term is up in 2011, and guess what? I hope to be re-elected to this Committee for another, and my final, four year term with this Standing Committee.

So why the fascination with IFLA when I get little if any financial assistance to attend (though the expenses are tax deductible)? My attendance is work-related so my absence is considered part of my job. So many of the IFLA conferences (I've missed two) are held in the northern hemisphere and in our teaching weeks so my attendance is fly in fly out with little time for sight seeing and tours. So why? Because I've learnt so much from IFLA's conference attendees, some of whom have become firm professional friends and colleagues, its many meetings, sessions and papers, the project work, the very interesting plenary speakers from all over the world, the wonderful cultural events that the local hosts arrange, the beautiful national dress matched by welcoming smiles of the delegates from non-western countries, the amazing libraries that we get to see on library visits - some so very old and stately they bring goose bumps to my arms, others wildly modern and others, like those we saw at the IFLA Durban conference, small, very busy, in remote communities and

so very important. So many wonderful cities and towns to experience, ways of life to watch and learn from, accents and languages from all over the globe to listen to. And ABBA impersonators at the last Gothenburg, Sweden conference to dance to at the Opening Session.

There are times when I despair at the lack of visible political interest in Australia, and quite particularly in Western Australia, for libraries and the work that we do. I work hard on these fronts, though not as hard as others, and feel re-energised to continue the good fight after an IFLA conference. This is because libraries, what they do, what and who they represent and the people who work in them are valued very highly in many parts of the world and the vibes from this appreciation are worth bottling. So I bring enough of this home with me to last me till the next IFLA conference.

But most importantly, what I learn I share with my students. And the only way you can do this with enthusiasm and honesty is to be there and be involved.

So see you in Puerto Rico at IFLA 2011! <http://www.ifla.org/en/ifla77>.

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The Benjamin Andrew Footpath Library

Sarah Garnett has been awarded the ALIA Letter of Recognition for her initiative, The Benjamin Andrew Footpath Library. The ALIA Letter of Recognition is awarded to a person or organisation rendering a significant, special or specific service to: librarianship, libraries or information management; promotion and development of libraries or library services; or demonstration such a service over a period of time.

The Benjamin Andrew Footpath Library was started in 2003 in Sydney following the death of Sarah's friend Benjamin Andrew. The 'library' opens once a week in Sydney's CBD, laying out donated books on the footpath for homeless people to borrow. There are no shelves, no classification systems, no return dates – in fact books are not required to be returned at all.

Around 2000 books, selected based on the wish lists of local hostels, are given away each month through this initiative. The Benjamin Andrew Footpath Library helps some of Australia's most marginalised and disadvantaged community members remain connected and engaged in the society and democracy around them and ALIA congratulates Sarah and The Benjamin Andrew Footpath Library on their achievements.

Sarah will be a keynote speaker at the ALIA Library Technicians Back to Basics conference in Perth next year and will share the story of Benjamin and the library he inspired in her presentation. Visit <http://conferences.alia.org.au/libtec2011/> for more information.

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