

Public Libraries Reach Out to New North Carolinians:

Meeting the Information Needs of Immigrants and Refugees

by Lena Gonzalez

So Dowada, *bienvenido*, *chao mung* ... North Carolinians find many ways to say welcome, as seen on a banner hanging over the circulation desk at a branch of the Greensboro Public Library. Such a banner points to the great shift that is taking place in the population of immigrants and refugees in North Carolina. While we have new residents from numerous countries including Somalia, Bosnia, Vietnam, and the Ukraine, the burgeoning Hispanic population has hit a critical mass. According to Faith in Action Institute, the population of Hispanics in North Carolina increased from 76,745 in 1990 to 315,001 in 1998.¹

The spectrum of literacy skills and socioeconomic backgrounds for immigrants and refugees is as diverse as within the citizenry of this country, but in addition to distinct cultural differences, over 60 languages are spoken in the homes of our school children in some North Carolina counties.² Because public libraries are committed to serving all people, we are challenged to respond by ensuring that our collections, programs, and services are meeting the needs of the changing population. How can libraries begin to respond to the changes in demographics when, in most cases, library staff and budgets are stretched to the limit? This article discusses the issues, strategies, and resources necessary to address the

information needs of immigrants and refugees. It includes examples of libraries across the state that have taken a proactive approach and that are providing exemplary service.

As with any new library venture, a good place to start is by surveying the community and identifying the unique needs of the particular group to be served. Before this can be accomplished with most ethnic or national groups, the library must establish trust, often by identifying and meeting with leaders or advocates from religious or educational institutions, cultural associations, or neighborhood groups. Several North Carolina public library systems have conducted interviews with community leaders, held focus group meetings, formed advisory committees, and visited faith communities that serve new North Carolinians. Jon Sundell, the Hispanic Services Coordinator for Forsyth County Public Library, has had a very positive response from both Catholic and Protestant Hispanic churches and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at the county's community college, where he gives short presentations about library services and registers new users. Reaching out in this way reaps reciprocal benefits.

Frequently the idea of an American public library is foreign to new-

comers. There is often a lack of awareness about the role of public libraries as community centers, because in India, for example, public libraries are mainly places for young adults to study and for people to read newspapers in almost complete silence. In Taiwan, libraries have a strict policy that patrons may only borrow three books per month, regardless of whether or not they return them early. In Vietnam, libraries are associated with the universities, so one must be a student to use them. Frequently, newcomers have a fear of any official institution that has ties to the government, so without a personal invitation or prior orientation, they may never consider entering the front door.

Developing a relationship between the public library and an ethnic community provides librarians with an entree to inform new residents about the benefits of using library services. On the other hand, librarians have an opportunity to participate in cross-cultural interactions, to learn about different cultures, to make contact with leaders and advocates for that community, and to learn firsthand about their in-

... over 60 languages are spoken in the homes of our school children in some North Carolina counties.

formational needs. Cultivating a network with the target community will glean mutual benefits.

Here is an example of how this might work. The Greensboro Public Library publishes the *Global Greensboro Directory*, a directory of ethnic associations, human relations organizations, and faith communities that offer services to immigrants and refugees.³ Knowing that many of the Southeast Asians who live in Guilford County frequent the Greensboro Buddhist Center, I interviewed the monk in order to learn more about the Center's activities, to write the entry for the directory, and to brainstorm ideas for promoting the library to Buddhist families. I left not only with the information I needed, but also with a sense that the library and the Buddhist Center would have a lasting collaborative relationship. Since that initial meeting, the Cambodian Temple Dancers have performed for several library functions. Library staff visits the Center's after-school and summer programs to do storytimes and library card sign-ups. Librarians have assisted with the youth leadership development program at the Center; and as an outgrowth, one young person became an Americorps member working at the Glenwood Branch Library, and is organizing classes to instruct young Cambodians to read and write in their native language, Khmer. The use of the library has increased greatly due to our cooperation, and Southeast Asian families

Frequently newcomers have a fear of any official institution that has ties to the government, so without a personal invitation or prior orientation, they may never consider entering the front door.

have gained more access to library services. The rewards of this partnership will continue to manifest themselves for many years.

According to Sundell, "There are certain groups that provide the most effective channels for promoting library services, and librarians must leave the building to find them."⁴ For instance, during his last visit to the adult ESL Program at Forsyth Technical Community College, he registered 80 new users. Going out into the community is also an "opportunity to observe the local leadership structure," which is often informal and not obvious to an outsider. Sundell works closely with a Catholic sister who visits Hispanic families living in apartment complexes; he is also developing an in-home program with a home extension agency to provide a six-week mini-workshop in Spanish on nutrition. Through his outreach work, he has recruited volunteer bilingual "assistants" who are willing to lead the programs and who also serve as volunteers within the library, giving orientations and tours at the library on Saturdays.

The opportunities to reach new North Carolinians are numerous, but frequently one must step outside of the library and the traditional route to increase access.

Unlike many other institutions that specialize in only one type of service, the public library has the unique capacity to respond to all of the major needs of immigrants and refugees — finding jobs and affordable housing, learning English, communicating with the public schools, and starting or continuing university studies. The library may not offer services to meet these needs directly, but it can provide information and materials and make re-

errals to other agencies. The *Global Greensboro Directory* is one example of how librarians can facilitate this process. By using library resources and networking, librarians can compile the contact information for the main cultural organizations and agencies that provide specialized services to international newcomers (for example, a local Hispanic church or community service organization, a refugee resettlement office, or a cultural performance group). This unique contribution can promote cross-cultural understanding and facilitate the process of resettlement. Coupled with the local United Way's directory of services, such a compilation of data will give any library or human service organization in the county the ability to make referrals or direct a patron to the needed information.

The biggest challenge of the resettlement process is often language and communication. Libraries face this challenge as well when trying to serve new North Carolinians. An ideal solution would be to have bilingual staff, and some North Carolina library systems have made it a priority to create such positions or to hire staff with foreign language skills. Over the last eight years, Mecklenburg County has experienced a 400+% increase in their Hispanic population,⁵ and the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (PLCMC) has responded by hiring Irania Macias Patterson, a bilingual children's specialist. This measure has allowed PLCMC to engage Spanish-speaking families in library programs for children. In 1995, anticipating increasing growth in the Hispanic population in the North Wilkesboro area, Beth Mueller, library director of Appalachian Regional Public Library, incorporated a workshop on improving library service to Hispanics into the staff development training.

In addition to training, many library systems have considered language abilities as an additional customer service and programming skill when hiring for new positions. Though not all libraries have the resources to pay for extra staff development or to create new positions, by partnering with local orga-

Build an ESL collection with these essentials:

Betty Schramper Azar. *Basic English Grammar*. Paramus, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995. English grammar series also includes *Fundamentals of English and Understanding and Using English Grammar*.

Alice Becker and Laurie Edwards. *Citizenship Now! A Guide for Naturalization*. Raleigh, NC: Contemporary Books, 1995.

Learn to Speak English (CD Rom). The Learning Company, 1997.

Steven J. Molinsky. *Side by Side*. Paramus, NJ: Prentice Hall-Regents, 1982. Presents English structure through conversation (includes four levels from 1A to 2B).

Yvonne Wong Nishio. *Longman ESL Literacy Student Book*. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers, 1991. For English language learners who are reading and writing for the first time.

E.C. Parnwell. *Oxford Picture Dictionary*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. Available in bilingual editions.



Libraries link lives — the world over!

familiar to you, then you will not want to go back."⁶ She reports, however, that her hometown library in Hickory is now collecting many materials about the Hmong and that young people from her community visit daily to use the Internet. In addition to collection development, it is crucial to have some obvious visual sign that non-majority cultures are welcome. Signs and library promotional materials can be translated into other languages, artifacts and crafts can be put on display, special programs can be offered for holidays such as the Chinese New Year, Cinco de Mayo, or the Vietnamese Moon Festival. Local cultural organizations as well as individual volunteers often are willing to help in the planning and delivery of such programs.

According to Guillermo Cifuentes, a Venezuelan immigrant to Greensboro, "the public library becomes a second home"⁷ for many new North Carolinians. In the library, immigrants and refugees have the ability to get oriented to the local community, to get infor-

mations and recruiting bilingual volunteers, all North Carolina libraries have the capacity to improve communication, and hence customer service, to its new international residents.

In terms of language instruction, the Department of Community Colleges provides free ESL classes for adults in every county, but many people can not participate due to a lack of transportation or childcare. The public library has an advantage here, because its branches, located in neighborhoods, not only allow, but encourage people of all ages to engage in literacy activities. While the library may not have the resources to provide instruction, it could partner with the community college to use the meeting room space at the library to hold ESL classes.

More and more public libraries across the country, however, are becoming literacy providers, but usually special funding must be sought. The Greensboro Public Library (GPL) has received funding over the last three years from the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund as part of its "Literacy in Libraries Across America" project. Part of the funding has been used to buy computer stations with language learning software, so that adult literacy students can study independently or with a tutor. Several years ago the Orange County Public Library started offering ESL tutoring and a conversation group. The demand was so great that recently the library was successful in getting the county government to commit funding for a full-time coordinator.

In addition to English language instruction, immigrants also need in-

structional materials. Although some libraries offer special collections of ESL materials, resources from non-fiction that are designated "juvenile" can suffice, since they are written on a lower reading level and have more pictures and diagrams. A basic collection of ESL-specific materials can be included in the library's budget for as little as \$500 (see the list of suggested materials for a basic collection).

With prior funding from the State Library of North Carolina, the Foreign Language Center at the Cumberland County Public Library is an example of a system that has made a larger investment in ESL materials, responding to local as well as statewide needs. Though their role as a statewide provider of deposit collections and interlibrary loans has changed recently, they still provide those services on a subscription basis. Thus with a small investment, any public library can begin to offer English language learning programs, services, and materials.

Finally, environmental changes can make the public library a more welcoming place for immigrants and refugees. According to La Khang, a Hmong refugee from Laos, "If you go into a library and you don't see any books about your own people or anything

Essential Resources for Librarians

David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies, Brigham Young University.
Culturegrams, Volume II: The Nations Around Us: The Americas & Europe. Chicago, IL: Fergusson, 1997.

John P. Kretzmann and John McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets.* Northwestern University, Evanston, IL: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, 1993.

Kathy Howard Latrobe and Mildred Knight Laughlin. *Multicultural Aspects of Library Media Programs.* Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1993. A comprehensive source of background information and perspective on serving a multicultural community and a guide for collection development.

Loida Nicolas Lewis and Len T. Madlansacay. *How to Get a Green Card*, 2nd edition.. Berkeley, CA: Nolo Press, 1996.

Contains the basic information about how the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) works and also contains forms. Use as a starting place but refer to the INS webpage for changes in laws and procedures.

Judith Noble and Jaime La Casa. *The Hispanic Way: Aspects of Behavior, Attitudes and Customs in the Spanish-speaking World.* Lincolnwood, IL: Passport Books, 1991.

Explains cultural practices and beliefs and identifies potential misunderstandings.

mation about community services, and to learn English. Through the Internet, they have the ability to communicate with friends and family and to stay abreast of current events in their native countries. In order for the library to become such a center, it is essential that library staff work both within and outside the physical building to ensure that new residents feel welcome, that they become aware of services and resources, and that they receive instruction on how to gain access. Though this task requires more extensive outreach than has been necessary to promote public libraries in the past, the results will be mutually beneficial and will help people realize that the public library is a proactive, inclusive institution committed to meeting the informational needs of all people.

References

¹ Faith in Action Institute is an ecumenical organization based at Greensboro College. See its Web site for a breakdown of the Hispanic population by county for North Carolina: <<http://www6.nr.infi.net/~faithact/>>.

² Inquiry of NC ethnic populations conducted by the Greensboro Public Library, October 1998.

³ The most updated version of the *Global Greensboro Directory* is available on the Web page for the Multicultural

For More Information: Web sites and contacts

Bablefish translates English to Spanish and vice versa. It's about 75% correct. Have a fluent speaker or translator review translations before printing signs or promotional materials. <<http://www.bablefish.altavista.digital.com>>

Dave's ESL Café is an extensive page for the ESL learner and teacher. It is updated frequently. <<http://www.eslcafe.com>>

Ethnomed gives thorough cultural profiles, medical topics, cross-cultural information and patient education. <<http://healthlinks.washington.edu/clinical/ethnomed>>

Faith in Action Institute maintains current demographic statistics of Hispanics by county for the state of North Carolina. <<http://www6.nr.infi.net/~faithact/>>

Governor's Office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs. Contact Dr. Nolo Martinez, Director, 116 W. Jones Street, Raleigh, NC 27603, (919)733-5361, Fax (919) 733-2120. <nolom@gov.state.nc.us>

Immigration and Naturalization Service, 6 Woodlawn Green, Suite 138, Charlotte, NC 28217. Call 1-800-870-3676 to receive INS forms by mail.

REFORMAnet. An information list for REFORMA, an ALA affiliate and national association dedicated to promoting library services to the Spanish speaking. To subscribe, send a message to <listproc@lmrnet.ucsb.edu>. Leave the subject line blank. Type the message "Subscribe REFORMAnet" and your name.

Resource Center at the Glenwood Branch of the Greensboro Public Library: <<http://www.nr.infi.net/~glenwood>>. The funding to print the directory was provided by a grant from the *News & Record*, the local newspaper.

⁴ Taken from a telephone interview with the author, February 18, 1999.

⁵ According to Faith in Action Institute, the Hispanic population of

Mecklenburg County increased from 6,692 in 1990 to 25,235 in 1998.

⁶ Comment made to the author during an Adult ESL Tutor Training at the Glenwood Branch in Greensboro, October 16, 1998.

⁷ Taken from a conversation with the author at the Glenwood Branch in Greensboro, November 5, 1998.

There's more than
ONE
 way to do most things. You can have
ONE
 serials management company, and
ONE
 document delivery service, and
ONE
 source for CD-ROM databases and yet another
ONE
 for full text, index and abstract database searching.
 But why would you want more than
ONE
 when there's
ONE
 integrated source that can do it all for you?

6800 Versar Center, Suite 131 • Springfield, VA 22151-4148 • (703) 750-2589 • Fax: (703) 750-2442
 Web site: <http://www.ebsco.com>



THE LEADER IN INTEGRATED INFORMATION MANAGEMENT