

Public Libraries Step Up to the Plate: Knowing and Responding to the Needs of Our Rapidly Changing Communities

by Lena Gonzalez

Attention North Carolina libraries: Are you responding to the rapid demographic changes that our state is experiencing? An average 400% increase in the Hispanic/Latino population in North Carolina within the last ten years is just one flag to indicate the need for programs and services relevant to the changing cultural context of our state.¹ Libraries across the state can take the lead to improve the quality of life for all residents by becoming more aware of changing needs and interests and by appropriately adapting programs and services.

According to a study commissioned by the State Library of North Carolina, "less than three in ten Hispanics had used a library to obtain information about the communities in which they resided." The reasons that they stated for not coming to the library were time, work, location, and the language barrier.² These facts underscore the need for librarians to go out and cultivate the many potential opportunities to introduce libraries to new users, to encourage English language acquisition, and to provide local information. Thus, new residents not only find a resource center where they can pursue their current interests and meet their immediate informational needs but also establish a lasting relationship that promotes life-long learning and a strong community. Just like any sports team, the overall group suffers if only some of the

players know the rules and strategies, because they cannot contribute to the overall success of the team. Step up to the plate, librarians. Encourage and enable newcomers and long-time residents to access the resources that you have, and invite everyone to play a vital role in building a strong community through the public library.

Learning to Use the Library

Many Hispanics who are new to North Carolina are also new to our U.S. concept of a public library. In Latin America, public libraries are almost exclusively used to pursue academic interests. People who are not students or researchers, rarely frequent *bibliotecas* or libraries. For popular reading it is much more common to patronize *librerias* or bookstores, so people are more accustomed to the concept of buying books than borrowing them. Even when public libraries are available, borrowing privileges and hours of operation are very limited. For example, in Venezuela, borrowers may check out only two items simultaneously, and libraries tend to be open only during business hours.³ Thus,

many immigrants to the U.S. are accustomed to a more restrictive and limited public library that does not cater to the community at large. In Mexico there is a high rate of illiteracy, and many Mexicans in North Carolina have less than an eighth grade education.⁴ This fact only perpetuates the long-standing perception that public libraries are only for learned people. In some Central American countries, rife with political instability, economic crises, and natural disasters, the masses tend to be focused on safety and basic necessities. People are hesitant to trust governmental sources of information, like libraries, as reliable institutions that protect individual privacy. In Puerto Rico, which is part of the U.S., public libraries are usually located in City Hall, and their collections often reflect the political current of the day.

Regardless of the prior experience of Hispanic newcomers to North Carolina, reliable information is critical to the process of acculturation and resettlement. Public libraries are challenged, therefore, to cultivate initial interest, so that there is a forum for introducing the many dynamic programs and services that our public libraries offer. It is less common for newcomers to come into the library and ask to be informed. So, it is up to library staff to step out of the building and find ways to connect with the community and initiate the dialogue.

Making connections with the community

Public library systems across the state

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have identified the growth in the Hispanic population as a demographic change that will have great impact on their collections, programs, and services. Many were clamoring for suggestions on how to reach this new population most effectively, which led to the formation of the State Library's Hispanic Services Advisory Committee,⁵ established in the fall of 1999 by Robert Burgin, Assistant State Librarian for Information Technology. Burgin has been working with leaders in North Carolina's Hispanic community and Yolanda Cuesta of Cuesta Multicultural Consulting to offer cultural awareness workshops for public library administration and staff across the state. Participants receive training on how to do effective outreach and needs assessments with Hispanic/Latino populations. Although these workshops focus on library services to a specific population, many of the lessons learned are applicable to the diverse immigrant and refugee populations of our state. In August 2000, twelve LSTA grants were given to conduct needs assessments for Hispanic communities in different counties, and although each project was unique, all of the grant projects had one key element in common. They identified local Hispanic leaders and established a dialogue with them and the groups that they represent. According to Cuesta, conducting community leader interviews is a great way to start the needs assessment process. Libraries may "incur high costs in staff time for conducting and analyzing [the data] ... but interviews provide a high quality and quantity of information."⁶ Using this approach, the library not only gains information about needs and interests of a particular population but also builds the foundation of a community relationship based on trust and the endorsement of the leaders.

Who are the leaders?

Finding leaders in immigrant communities is not dissimilar to scouting a good player for a team. Leaders are talented, charismatic, well-respected, and committed to the success of the group. Within immigrant communities it is common to find traditionally recognized leaders who are church officials, educators, directors of non-profit organizations and businesses, social activists, and even politicians. To work exclusively with these "official" leaders, however, would negate the strong in-

formal leadership structures that are often firmly in place.

So where are the non-traditional places to look for leaders? Another way of approaching this question is to ask where people congregate and where they go to get local information. Considering the Hispanic population, usually one of the best-informed leaders with the most connections is the owner of a store that sells Latin American products. In Greensboro, Martha Rey, the owner of Sabor Latino, is also a community activist and advocate. Customers from the surrounding neighborhood and all over the city go to her for advice, information, and referral. She sells tortillas, chiles, and pan dulce, and also gives away essential information to help people solve their everyday problems and get settled in their new homes. Establishing a relationship with small business owners, who play a similar role to that of a librarian, will help strengthen the flow and validity of information and raise awareness about the many places, including public libraries, where people can get information and referrals.

In addition to responding to the needs of users, libraries also offer materials and programs related to the interests of the community. One common interest that crosses all ethnic and national lines is sports, so another place one might find local leaders is out on the soccer field. Internationally, soccer is the most popular sport, so it comes as no surprise that there are many Hispanic, Asian, and African soccer teams and leagues around the state, although the English language media rarely report on their games. The sidelines or the bleachers of a soccer field can be great places to connect with unofficial leaders within the community, so put on your cleats and head for the field. Team captains and organizers are respected community leaders, and it can be enlightening to hear their perspectives on the local needs. Opening this dialogue is usually the first step to building trust

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and establishing a relationship so that the library can win the leader's endorsement, an essential part of raising awareness and getting people engaged with the library. With the leader's support, others will be encouraged to try it out.

Visiting a store or a soccer field may seem out of the realm of traditional library service. If we are trying to encourage non-traditional users of the library, however, we may have to resort to alternative methods to establish relationships, trust, and confidence before people will accept our open invitation to come to the library. The library staff and immigrants have a lot to learn and gain from making connections with each other. Although one does not typically find librarians out on the soccer field or in the local Mexican store, if librarians take the first risk to step out of the comfort of the library environment to make initial contacts, new users will be more likely to take the risk to come in to the unfamiliar surroundings of a library. Knowing that there are unidentified and unmet needs in the community, libraries should take the lead to seek out local leaders and establish dialogues.

Knowing and Responding to the Needs of the Community

In addition to working with community leaders, another way for library staff to make connections within various immigrant populations is to identify a common need and explore ways to help address it. In fact, our central mission as public libraries is to meet the needs of the users. This mission not only includes those who already frequent the library but also should include potential users who may not be aware of the library or may not have access because of barriers such as language or transportation.

One common need that often brings such potential user groups together is the need to acquire English language skills. Considering this need, library staff can connect with new immigrant groups at the local community college, where adult English classes are taught around the state. This is a perfect opportunity not only to present what the library currently has to offer but also exchange ideas with the classes and hold focus groups to update the library's assessment of the needs of the community. This also gives new residents an opportunity to have a voice in the development of programs and services, ensuring that

library services are relevant and meeting their needs effectively.

During such class visits, participants will often express the need for more opportunities to learn and practice English, and public libraries are in a unique position to respond. It has been found that library-based adult education is very effective because the instruction is often learner-directed. Libraries "are permanent institutions in local communities that have many resources to support adult learning—for instance accessible facilities, extensive collections of books, and a large group of potential tutors.... Moreover, unlike other programs and education providers, libraries do not generally receive funding that depends on how quickly they move students into employment or into more advanced programs."⁷ In fact, there are fewer barriers to participation than at traditional educational institutions. Public libraries encourage their students to become lifelong learners and users of the library.

Another component of the effectiveness of library-based adult education programs is that participants have instant access to community information. For example, immigrants are often unaware of the services that are provided by non-profit organizations and agencies. When someone needs a referral for a health care or social need, a librarian can easily provide the information on available services. Though this may seem like an ordinary reference question, for immigrants this basic library service can be the difference between getting necessary medical attention or not. For many newcomers the public library has become a second home, where they can learn and practice English and simultaneously gain access to essential information, which is a key to becoming successful and healthy members of the community.

As providers of adult education learning opportunities, libraries have another advantage over other educational institutions. Any library's collection of materials offers numerous selections written on almost any topic and at different reading levels. When working with adult new readers and language learners, it is important to teach within the context of a topic of interest or relevance to the life of the learner. Tutors and teachers could capitalize on an interest in sports and find innumerable materials to use for lessons. For example, juvenile biographies about sports heroes provide high interest reading with more photographs and more simply written

text than an "adult" book. Though the intended audience is children, there is nothing juvenile about the content of such materials. Steck Vaughn publishes biographies of sports heroes (movie, TV, and rock stars) called "The Spotlight Series," that is formatted as a magazine/workbook. Although the intended audience is adult, these materials would be appropriate for any age. For a reluctant or struggling reader of English, the newspaper may present great challenges, and yet it is a key resource for community information. Using the sports section can provide opportunities to practice reading charts and improve basic reading skills. Words aside, one could just use photographs from newspapers, magazines or books to spark interesting practice of conversational English. Although there are many specialized language learning materials, it is not necessary to develop a special collection to meet this need. Innumerable print resources are available in any public library that could assist patrons to improve their English skills within the context of their interests and their needs. It is a matter of thinking creatively about the multiple uses of materials and promoting them for both the traditional and non-traditional audiences.

The Internet is another resource with unlimited potential for libraries to offer relevant and high interest materials to encourage new users.⁸ When introducing a new user to the Internet, it is important to show Web sites that present information in a clearly organized and easy-to-read format. *CBS Sportsline* is one such example. The site has a menu across the top of the page that lists categories of sports with is a breakdown of each type.⁹ ESPN also gives a clear list of different sports on the first screen, and each sub-category offers short text articles with accompanying photographs and graphics.¹⁰ For the more adventurous, *Awezome.com* provides simply written explanations of extreme sports like mountain biking, snowboarding and "No Fear." The site not only defines each sport and describes the equipment needed, but it also presents some "awezone" photos of extremists in action.¹¹ Of course, sports is only one of many interests that can be used to present the vast resources of the Internet to new users who want to learn and practice English. By introducing the Internet, the library is helping people acquire important informational skills in English and computers that are transferable to job and academic situations. Furthermore, as our

world experiences this online explosion, it is extremely important that users of the library and members of our communities become aware of the availability of information on the Web, so that they will be better informed and a more integral part of our rapidly changing society.

In terms of a public library's collection, there is no need for special funding or a special collection to provide material support for an adult literacy program; however, many libraries do not have the staff to offer their own program. Community colleges and other literacy providers often partner with libraries to offer community-based classes, and the library could simply offer a meeting place, materials, and technology that might not otherwise be available. Once adult new users are in the library, staff members have the opportunity to invite the whole family to come, to promote children's programs, and to raise awareness about the many ways that one can use a library. If the objective of a needs assessment is to find out what the needs are, then the library may have to partner with local organizations and agencies to gather data and implement the changes that are suggested. This kind of partnering helps to raise awareness about what the library can offer and establishes long lasting relationships between the library and the community.

Conclusion

Opportunities exist for staff to establish connections, develop relationships, and raise awareness of the numerous benefits of being a user of the library. Libraries make necessary information and resources available and accessible so that people can lead more successful and informed lives. Libraries have the potential to assist newcomers with the common need to learn and practice English, and they can do it in an environment that is convenient, safe, and welcoming to the whole family. Reaching out to immigrants and refugees gives people, who are often marginalized and isolated, the opportunity to be engaged in and connected to the community. Conversely, the library will reap many rewards and benefits from becoming more involved and attempting to reach out to new users.

Libraries will build the community's trust and confidence in the institution, and the library staff will likewise become more aware and confident when serving new groups. Connecting with community leaders will enable the

library to reach more people and gain the endorsement of influential persons, who may become strong advocates and supporters of the library. Most importantly, public libraries will fulfill their missions more completely by having a comprehensive understanding of local needs and input from community members as to how to best meet those needs. Thus, the benefits are reciprocal. As the library reaches out to extend its services, it will continue to cultivate a relationship with the community that is based on trust and stewardship. This relationship will not only grow support for the library; community members also will begin to feel ownership and become advocates and contributors to their local lifelong learning institution, the public library.

References

- ¹ Census 2000.
- ² "Conclusions and Recommendations," 2, from "Survey of Library Needs for North Carolina Hispanics," Rincon and Associates, <<http://statelibrary.dcr.state.nc.us/hispanic/summary.pdf>>.
- ³ <<http://www.bnv.bib.ve>>.
- ⁴ *Hispanic Plan of Forsyth County* (1999).
- ⁵ <<http://statelibrary.dcr.state.nc.us/hispanic/index.htm>>, "The Hispanic Services Project of the State Library of North Carolina is a three-year project that will result in public librarians having the skills and resources necessary to provide appropriate services for North Carolina's rapidly increasing Hispanic and Latino communities. Primary beneficiaries of this project will be the growing number of Hispanic and Latino individuals in North Carolina. Public library staff will also benefit from this project since the skills they learn as part of this project will be useful in designing library services to any special population."
- ⁶ "Building Community Relationships," May 2000, 23.
- ⁷ "So I Made Up My Mind: Introducing a Study of Adult Learner Persistence in Library Literacy Programs," by John T. Comings and Sondra Cuban, October 2000, 2. For the past four years, the Greensboro Public Library has been participating in a national project funded by the Wallace Reader's Digest Foundation to expand and study adult literacy programs based in public libraries.
- ⁸ See Jim Meier's article, "I'm Not Surfing: This is My Job," in this publication.
- ⁹ <<http://cbs.sportsline.com/index.html>>.
- ¹⁰ <<http://www.espn.go.com>>.
- ¹¹ <<http://www.awezome.com>>.

Sideline: Sports Fiction

compiled by Suzanne Wise

Sports fiction has many faces. It ranges from the mysticism of Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* to the action adventure of the latest Dick Francis racing mystery, from Mark Harris' classic *Bang the Drum Slowly* to Dan Jenkins' outrageous *Semi-Tough*. There is something for everyone, and it is an easy sell if you know your merchandise. A friend's son was converted to the joys of reading when he discovered that there were stories about his passion, skiing. The library periodical literature offers many guides to new sports publications (*Booklist's* September 1 issue annually highlights new adult's and children's sports titles, *Library Journal* features a "Spring Baseball Lineup" each February, and Bill Ott often includes sports books in his *American Libraries* "Quick Bibs" column), but they are primarily devoted to non-fiction.

The resources below will help readers' advisors identify and promote sports fiction. The bonus is that readers enjoy a baseball novel from the 1950s just as much as one published last month, and the older fiction in the collection circulates.

- Beauregard, Sue-Ellen, and Hazel Rochman. "Playing the Game: Sports Fiction." *Booklist* 83 (March 1, 1987): 1009-1010. Annotated list of young adult and adult titles.
- Brodie, Carolyn S. "Nothing But Net: Basketball Materials." *School Library Media Activities Monthly* 12 (January 1996): 46-47. Includes a list of nine novels suitable for grades three through seven+.
- Burns, Grant. *The Sports Pages: A Critical Bibliography of Twentieth-Century American Novels and Stories Featuring Baseball, Basketball, Football and Other Athletic Pursuits*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987. Lengthy annotations of sports fiction.
- Grobani, Anton, ed. *Guide to Baseball Literature*. Detroit, MI: Gale, 1975. The entries for fiction, humor, and drama, verse, and ballads include titles suitable for both children and adults.
- _____. *Guide to Football Literature*. Detroit, MI: Gale, 1975. The football version of the work above.
- Harrah, Barbara K. *Sports Books for Children: An Annotated Bibliography*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1978. Arranged by type of sport. Many sections contain a list of fiction.
- Messenger, Christian K. *Sports and the Spirit of Play in Contemporary American Fiction*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1990. The bibliography of primary works cited is quite useful for identifying sports fiction.
- Oriard, Michael V. *Dreaming of Heroes: American Sports Fiction, 1868-1980*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982. Outstanding survey and analysis of sports fiction in the U.S. The appendix includes a lengthy checklist of the genre. Oriard is a professor of English and former professional football player.
- Perry, Phyllis J. *Exploring the World of Sports: Linking Fiction to Nonfiction*. Englewood, CO: Teacher Ideas Press, 1998. Curriculum ideas using fiction "to bring students from the world of imagination into the world of fact." Includes baseball, basketball, football, soccer, swimming, and track and field. A great starting point for collaboration between teacher and librarian.
- Rueth-Brandner, Teri. "Sports Fiction for Young Women: Not Enough of a Good Thing." *VOYA: Voice of Youth Advocates* 14 (June 1991): 89-90. Guide to sports fiction for girls.
- Wise, Suzanne. *Sports Fiction for Adults: An Annotated Bibliography of Novels, Plays, Short Stories, and Poetry with Sporting Settings*. NY: Garland, 1986. Exhaustive annotated guide arranged by sport.