

Volunteering in Libraries: An Insider's View

An E-mail Conversation with Elizabeth J. Laney

by Libby Grey

Since retiring in 1991 from the Library of the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Elizabeth Laney has continued to serve libraries through volunteer work. From June through December 2003, Laney worked as a volunteer in the Library of the International Baptist Theological Seminary, located in Prague, Czech Republic. Her work for the library focused on cataloging books for the library's new online catalog system, which integrates acquisitions, cataloging, and circulation. The Seminary Library has the largest English language theological collection in continental Europe.

Laney has also done volunteer work for a number of state and library executive boards and task forces, including chair of the Endowment Committee of the North Carolina Library Association (NCLA); member of the Board of Trustees of Braswell/Rocky Mount Public Library; member of the Executive Board of North Carolina Alliance of Baptists; and public member of North Carolina Dietetics Licensing Board. In recent years she has been recognized for her outstanding professional contributions. These awards include the NCLA's Distinguished Library Service Award for outstanding contributions to library and community service (1991); the North Carolina Dietetic Association's Circle Award (2002) in recognition of contributions to the field of dietetics; UNC-Chapel Hill School of Information and Library Science Alumni Association Honors for Distinguished Service 1984-1991; Thomas Hackney Braswell Memorial Library Appreciation for Service on the Board of Trustees 1994-2001 (presented March 1, 2002); and Friends of North Carolina Public Libraries Certificate of Appreciation, President 1996-1998.

In the fall of 2003 Laney and Elizabeth (Libby) Grey of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill engaged in the following e-mail dialogue.

EG: As budgetary and staffing resources continue to be critical concerns for libraries worldwide, positive and effective volunteer experiences are valuable resources to meet the demands of providing services and access to the library's wealth of information. Lib, you have managed all types of libraries (school, special/government, public regional, and academic), worked as a library professional in a technical processing center, and volunteered in

libraries both in North Carolina and overseas. Your experiences both as library professional and as library volunteer offer us the opportunity to glean insights that would be helpful for both library managers and persons who are considering volunteer work in libraries. What has been the nature of volunteer staff in libraries?

EL: Since libraries began, they have had volunteers working in them. Sometimes the entire staff is volunteer and the library was originally set up by volunteers. Sometimes the staff is employed, but volunteers go in to do specific tasks. It may be an hour a week, or it may be a single project. Sometimes the assignment is a professional level task; more often, it is something mundane and routine. Volunteering usually takes place in the home community.

EG: Tell us about your experiences volunteering in libraries not in your own community.

EL: Another type of volunteer service entails traveling away from home and staying for days or weeks or months. Librarian friends often ask, "How do you find volunteer work in a library far away from home in an interesting location?" Actually, for me, the work found me. People knew I was a Baptist and a librarian and recommended me for the work. Sometimes, a non-profit agencies post notices for help in their newsletters, or they ask people they know to recommend someone. I like to visit libraries, so it may be that someone would approach a prospective volunteer who is visiting. I think that if you know a library in which you would like to work as a volunteer, you can just offer your services. If you are actually interested in a library of a particular type, you will keep in touch with those libraries and their staff. Or, most likely, you are interested in a topic which has an agency with a library.

EG: Please share with *North Carolina Libraries* readers a sampling of the library volunteer projects you've been involved with.

EL: I worked for two years in the Library of Gardner Webb University in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, integrating books for the new Divinity School into the University Library. Then during another two years, I worked at Regents Park Theological Seminary in Oxford University, England. There I cataloged into the Oxford University Library System the books in a special collection which had been given to the school. Now, I am at the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, Czech Republic.

EG: How do you perceive the dynamics of volunteer staff and the library's concerns for incorporating volunteer activity into library operations?

EL: As every librarian knows, all libraries are understaffed. Sometimes there is a serious lack of people to carry on the basic functions. Sometimes, there are special projects or tasks which could be undertaken by an additional person. However, some librarians are wary of volunteer help. They are afraid the volunteer staff member will not be dependable and regular in attendance. If a person is here today and gone tomorrow, there will not be continuity in the work. They are afraid that the person will not be serious and dedicated to the work. Training the new staff member requires an extra effort. These are all valid fears; however, some volunteers are enthusiastic and dedicated workers.

I knew an energetic librarian who tried to organize a group of volunteers to go to a distant place for a few weeks in the summer. Operating as a team, they would donate their services to a series of public libraries and

perform a big task. It could be anything that needed to be done and in which the library was far behind in completing. She had several people who were interested in the work, but did not find a library who wanted the barn-storming, roof-raising kind of assistance. Much volunteer service in other fields is performed by a team of people with a leader who makes the arrangements. All of my work has been as a single individual.

EG: Please describe what a volunteer may expect or need to consider when relocating away from their home during their volunteer experience.

EL: All volunteer work away from home requires some financial commitment from the volunteer. Of course, the person is not paid anything at all, and may be responsible for some or all daily expenses. First, there is the transportation to and from the volunteer site. Then there is housing near the site, and, of course, food. Some overseas locations require special medical insurance and/or a visa. Agencies vary greatly in what and how much they provide.

Housing may be the bare minimum. I knew some librarians who shared a house with other staff and students of the agency, sharing bathrooms and kitchen. They had flown to the site, and so had no car. Their house was in a nice residential neighborhood, but not near the place of work or the grocery store or the main section of town. They used the bus to travel to all the places they needed to go. They accepted the situation with good grace. I have been fortunate to have an apartment on the grounds of the school in which I was working.

Frequently, some meals are provided, but not all. In a residential school which is providing meals for the students and staff and faculty, the volunteer is given a voucher or pass for meals. If all meals in the week are not served, the volunteer is likely responsible for the others. Sometimes one needs to be creative to provide for food if nothing is convenient and/or there are no cooking facilities.

People in the host agency may meet the volunteer at the train or airport. Sometimes they provide their address and you take a taxi. When I was driving my car to the site, I was sent maps of the town and campus, with parking areas and the library marked.

Then there is the matter of entertainment. Some hosts assume you don't want to be bothered outside of working hours. Others invite the volunteer visitor to attend local performances or to go to see some interesting sites. Some introduce you to the staff in the larger agency, while others introduce you only to the library staff. They should take you to meet their boss, but often do not. I have frequently been included in such social occasions as pot-luck suppers and parties for students and faculty. At one place I was not only invited, but urged, to attend a daily event — at nine o'clock in the morning!

You may need to buy the local paper to find out what is going on that would interest you. If it is a large town or city, there would be guide books to direct you to museums and parks. You may luck into southern hospitality or you may be left on your own.

EG: What type of work activities are expected of or appropriate for volunteer staff?

EL: The work you do depends on their needs and your skills. During the negotiations you would have provided a brief vita and an expression of the type of work you would expect to do. The library should have provided you with a description of the library and its holdings and clientele, as well as a statement of the kinds of tasks or projects they need to have accomplished. Frequently, a person with no library experience offers to help in a library; members of the general public think it

would be “so nice to work in a library.” Every person who works in a library must be trained. I don’t think it is fair to library staff to volunteer if you expect to work only a few hours. I like to work in libraries, so that is a start. I am a trained cataloger who enjoys the work; lots of librarians do not like to catalog, so that skill is usually in demand. Some people prefer to do more routine tasks; if so, you should say so. Some are good with arranging archives or vertical files—do they still have vertical files? When the cataloging is entered online, there are still labels of one kind or another to attach to the materials. These days libraries always seem to need someone to word process or manipulate data via computer.

EG: Describe aspects of the work place that both potential volunteers and library administrators should be aware of when considering the working relationship between the library volunteer and the library staff and its agency.

EL: Since you are temporary, your work space may not be very convenient or comfortable. Often it is a students’ work table. You can not select a favorite chair and put your name on it. If you are lucky, you will have your own computer, but you likely will have to share. In any work place, but especially in a library, there are lots of rules and lots of customs for the way things are done. Ask for things you need, rather than going through drawers or cabinets. Ask where something should be put. The work shelves in the cataloging area in which I am now working have one-word labels to indicate the stage of the books in each section. I noticed that the tactful head of technical services has made labels to list what tasks go with each shelf. I probably had put something in the wrong place!

By all means do not try to change policies unless asked. For instance, most technical services librarians have definite policies for handling filed cards. One time, I offered to revise the filing that a student assistant was doing in the public catalog, because no one was revising the filing. The student assistant did not want to go back to check on places I had left a red flag, and his supervisor did not make him. Their public catalog continued to have filing errors. My standards were different, and I was not in charge.

Sometimes librarians are glad to have an opportunity to talk about a problem with a colleague, in which case I think it is good to discuss the issue and even to give an opinion. Sometimes it is difficult to refrain from giving advice when it is not requested. However, the volunteer can always find items or situations or customs in the library for sincere praise.

EG: What are some of the rewards of being involved as a library volunteer following a professional library career?

EL: What do we receive for our trouble? First, the pleasure of doing a task we enjoy doing and doing it well. Second, the pleasure of doing something that is helping another person and is furthering good library service to a clientele. You meet interesting people among your co-workers and within the larger agency. You learn new ways of providing library service, and you have access to a new collection from which you can borrow reading material.

EG: Lib, thank you for your insights and continued service to the library community. Your comments will help both library managers and library volunteers to better understand the concerns and expectations of the library volunteer work relationship and to develop and coordinate library volunteer work experiences successfully.