



The World Outside

OBSERVATIONS ON NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LIBRARY EVENTS AND PROGRAMS

Assisting Sri Lanka

Sri Lankan Libraries Damaged by the Tsunami

“Laura, would you be interested in going to Sri Lanka?” To call this question unexpected—especially coming from Sonia Lewis, the CEO of Kitchener Public Library (KPL)—is a ridiculous understatement. This is not a question that children’s librarians in Ontario are asked. There was, of course, only one answer: “Um, yes.”

Following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) began relief efforts in the areas most affected. With financial assistance from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the federation set out to assist communities in rebuilding and revitalizing their municipal works. When asked about their priorities, several communities in Sri Lanka identified public library services. So, along with the experts in drainage, waste removal and finances, librarians were sent to assist.

With the support of my CEO and Kitchener City Councillor Berry Vrbanovic, I sent in my resume to FCM and waited. After much nail-biting, an interview and agonizing anticipation, I was offered the position. By doing so I was given a chance to become involved, to make a difference and to see a part of the world I had long been fascinated with.

Unfortunately, in the spring of 2006, the security situation in Sri Lanka began to unravel, and plans for the library mission kept changing. It was deemed unsafe to travel, particularly to Batticaloa and Trincomalee the two communities I would be working with. By mid-summer, with the conditions continuing to deteriorate, an alternate plan was put into effect. It was decided that as a first step, library staff from Sri Lanka would come to Canada.

A group of school children who attended a special storytelling program during Reed’s visit to Batticaloa.



By Laura Reed

On Labour Day seven exhausted but excited Sri Lankans arrived in Kitchener. Rob Roy, a retired academic librarian from Vancouver, and I organized two weeks of training for the group. The focus was on children's and youth services, strategic planning and library/library board relations.

Over the two weeks that we got to know each other, Rob and I learned about the challenges facing libraries in Sri Lanka and we showed them what public libraries do in Canada. The Sri Lankans were eager to learn and experience everything they could and they approached the venture with enthusiasm and

good humour. We laughed a lot and realized that some things, such as a great, comic sneeze or *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, do not need to be translated.

KPL made a big impression on the group. As Mr. Selvajothy, the Reading Room Supervisor from Trincomalee, said on their last day, "I always thought libraries were about books, now I know they are about people."

The group left Canada with a new perspective, a strategic plan and a new vision of what they could accomplish. Capacity building is a key component of FCM projects. The goal is not to simply provide materials such as books and DVDs, but to provide the tools communities need to develop new services and programs and to encourage a culture of growth.

Throughout the fall Rob and I continued to talk to FCM about next steps for the project. In December I finally received the news I had been waiting for, that it was safe to travel and that I was going for a three-week mission in January. Needless to say my Christmas was a blur, trying to make sure I had everything ready for the trip – not just the right shoes, but also all of the information I needed to continue the training.

After three long flights (approximately 22 hours in the air), I arrived in Colombo, Sri Lanka. It was a long weekend, so I had a few days to explore the city in my jetlagged fog; it was hot, humid, frenetic, fragrant and wonderful.

The best part of the trip was meeting my Sri Lankan colleagues again. They traveled to Colombo for three days of workshops. It was great to see them and hear about what they had done since returning from Canada. In only three months they made a huge amount of progress. They had started to offer children's programs, had recruited youth volunteers and had visited local schools to promote their collections. Most importantly they were motivated and had ideas of how to take what they had seen and learned in Kitchener and make it work for them.

A Hindu temple in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka which collapsed during the tsunami.





Rob Roy and Laura Reed with the staff of the Batticaloa and Trincomalee Public Libraries.

The second part of the mission took place in Batticaloa, a long trip from Colombo over bumpy roads and through many military checkpoints. It was all worth it to finally see the library and meet my colleagues in their own environment. We got to work meeting with the Library Board and talking about children's programs, volunteers, marketing and automation. We tried to find solutions to the weeding backlog, the dated reference books and the lack of computer skills.

The staff of the Batticaloa Library showed Rob and me a great time. They opened their hearts and homes, shared their memories of the tsunami, and trusted us to help them rebuild their library into something better than it ever had been. It was so clear that while the natural disaster was what brought us there, they had needed help long before. Years of unrest and fighting had stifled the library, the tsunami simply exposed it.

I was sad to leave Sri Lanka, a heartbreaking tropical paradise, and my friends there, but I will be going back. We still have lots of work to do and together we will continue to make progress. Our work will include automation planning, a huge

step for these public libraries. We can give them computers, but the more important thing we give them is the confidence and vision that they have gained through this project. With that the library will grow and thrive long after the Canadian computers are defunct.

For more pictures and information please visit:
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For more information about FCM and volunteer opportunities visit:
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