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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — A Bookmobile Named Desire

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The American Library Association annual conference visited New Orleans in June and things went alright. Some 17,000 attended the convention, a respectable number. Librarians lined up for taxis and buses, checked into hotels, attended their meetings, and at mealtimes and after hours reached for their wallets in restaurants and bars in and adjacent to the French Quarter, where this year t-shirts that said "Make Levees Not War" were for sale, and where it was nearly possible to imagine that there were not, a short cab ride away, block upon block of unpeopled houses still showing the coded chalk writing of rescue workers who had arrived, too often belatedly, to search for survivors of the flood.

When ALA president **Michael Gorman** announced after a period of uncertainty, in October, a month after Hurricane Katrina, that the association would come as scheduled, it had been an outright gamble that by June the city could pull off a convention the size of ALA. Some librarians refused to go, predicting they'd be making their own beds. But others wanted to help, and had an actual chance to. Going to New Orleans was a way to put something behind that desire.

Some librarians wanted to help in a different way. ALA had lined up volunteer projects for the first and last days of the conference, Friday and Tuesday. Conferencegoers could register online from a menu of library rebuilding projects like sorting through gift books, shelving, and keying titles into databases. Or, for a real example of what they didn't teach you in library school, for cleanup work in the still devastated neighborhoods. So many librarians volunteered, over 900, that some were turned away.

What might have been the most quixotic ALA project was described on the conference Website as "bookmobile outreach to FEMA trailer communities." Volunteers, said the site, would need a valid driver's license. Now that sounded interesting, and so early on Tuesday morning the dozen or so volunteers who had chosen this project found each other, amidst the mild chaos of the sign-in hour, next to a designated pillar at the far end of the long central hallway of the city's **Morial Convention Center** — site of some of the most horrific televised images of real chaos, during the flood — and after a period of merely waiting around, finally received their instructions from an ALA volunteer coordinator. They were to load up a bookmobile with boxes of donated books, then drive to a public library to pick up more donated books, then drop them off at points around New Orleans, a tent city, and several day care centers where the volunteers would read to children.

In hindsight it clearly was a naïve idea that a city so famously unprepared for Katrina and her aftermath — where the director of the li-

brary system had resigned only the week before, where eight of twelve branches had been destroyed in the storm, and where all but a small number of staff had been laid off — would have a fleet of stocked bookmobiles ready to go, as the ALA Website had implied. And in fact, none of the volunteers drove a bookmobile that day.

But, there *was* a bookmobile. It was a brand-new one, without a scratch or a dent, displaying on its shiny white body a blue book-shaped logo proclaiming the **Platte County Library System**, the Nebraska customer who had recently bought it and who had agreed that the manufacturer, **Matthews Specialty Vehicles** of High Point, North Carolina, who had driven the bookmobile to New Orleans and onto the ALA exhibit floor for the weekend, could use it in the volunteer projects before final delivery.

Things at last got rolling that morning when the driver, who was from **Matthews**, drove the bookmobile to the front of the convention center and librarian-volunteers began to load it up with boxes wheeled in from the exhibit floor on borrowed book trucks. They also put on board a case of bottled water, a 12-pack of Diet Coke, and two plastic sacks the size of garbage bags filled with box lunches. Some volunteers rode in the back of the bookmobile, sitting on the floor. But others rode in a rented minivan and still others in a third vehicle, someone's Jeep, a small caravan that pulled away from the convention center curb and headed into the city.

First stop was the **Algiers Regional Branch** of the **New Orleans Public Library**. That meant a drive of twenty to thirty minutes, enough time for everyone to contemplate the day ahead and, for those volunteers riding in the windowed van and Jeep and not in the panel-sided bookmobile, enough distance to see their first real evidence of the devastation hidden from visitors who had stuck close to the French Quarter and convention center. Algiers is a residential section of New Orleans sitting directly across the Mississippi from the French Quarter, connected to it by ferry and bridge. Algiers largely escaped flooding during Katrina and was one of the first parts of the evacuated city to which residents returned. But they found Algiers hardly unscathed. Wind and rain had taken a severe toll on the library branch, tearing through the roof and ruining everything inside the building, a low-slung structure located across from a **Winn-Dixie** grocery store.

The library, like many nearby businesses, still had not reopened. It continued to house books, though, more books, in fact, than ever before. The library's gutted interior had become a depot to store mountains of cardboard boxes

full of the books donated to New Orleans from across the country. Large boxes, small boxes, taped boxes, open boxes, boxes falling apart; boxes stacked on pallets, boxes spilling onto the floor, great sloping ridges of boxes. The entire **Algiers Regional Branch Library** was given over to cardboard, overflowed with cardboard, the nightmare of any librarian who has ever run a gifts room. Space for passageways was grudgingly carved out to give access to those who needed to get through.

Which, for the stricken **New Orleans Public Library** system, meant volunteers. The job of the bookmobile caravan was to take books away, but a larger ALA volunteer group had arrived before them, by bus, with the mission of first sorting through unopened boxes of gift books. These librarians stood in a semicircle inside the building's entrance, receiving instructions from the one New Orleans librarian onsite.

"No mass market paperbacks," she called out in a gametime voice like a coach addressing a football team. "No encyclopedias, partial or complete. No

Time-Life sets. No *Readers Digest* condensed editions. No *National Geographics*. No periodicals. No *Marquis Who's Who's*. No software." She went on for several minutes outlining this tiny collection development component of the larger New Orleans rebuilding effort that is bound, in many ways, never to end for those who choose to re-

main residents of the city. "Use your judgment," she said to the first group, as they fanned out among the boxes to look for the keepers and to relegate *Readers Digests* and the like to trash, equal to the building materials ripped from homes and all the other forms of piled waste that everywhere beyond tourist districts remained a defining aspect of the New Orleans streetscape.

The bookmobile group, directed to an area of pre-sorted books, began to load boxes onto shopping carts and hand trucks and to roll them out front to the three waiting vehicles. The volunteers formed a human chain, carrying boxes down a set of cracked concrete steps to curbside, then lifting them up to the bookmobile steps, passing them to the back of the interior, and setting them down on the floor with the boxes loaded at the convention center. Some opened the boxes to set aside good children's books to read later in the day. A few boxes were loaded into the back of the van and Jeep.

Before the caravan left Algiers a library patron drove into the parking lot and asked if the building was open.

"No, I'm afraid it isn't."

"What about the trailer?" There was a trailer

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parked in the lot with a banner identifying it as the temporary home of the library.

"We don't work here, we're only volunteers. But we'll see."

The trailer was locked. "Do you need books? We have lots of books."

"No, I want the Internet. Is somewhere else open?"

The bookmobile volunteers had made direct contact with a New Orleans resident. Eager to do any little thing to help, several had gathered by the car of the Internet-seeker. One of them, a Chicago librarian and past president of ALA, no less, completed this post-Katrina parking lot reference transaction when she went back inside the building and returned with the address of the nearest open branch with Internet, written on a piece of paper which she handed through the open car window of the driver-patron, who swung the car about and drove off.

Soon bookmobile, van, and Jeep, reloaded with books, drove away too, back across the Mississippi and toward the day's next stop, a day care center near the Garden District. But the vehicles got separated and by the time the van arrived, there was nothing to do. Books had already been unloaded from the bookmobile. Story hours had commenced in two of the classrooms of this elementary school building doing summer day care service. One was led by a Rhode Island technical services librarian and natural storyteller who was surrounded by a half-circle of youngsters who laughed and leaned forward to hear every word he read from the donated picture books. When he was done, a day care worker said thanks, that was great, give me your address, can the children send you a thank you note? It was a highlight for the day.

"Where should I park the bookmobile?" A further stop brought the caravan to a center for runaway and homeless children and teenagers, in a neighborhood where the question, most likely, had never before been asked. Hurricane damage in the area was hard to distinguish from the shuttered storefronts lining the street for years. The day was running ahead of schedule and there was a degree of confusion. We're from the library group, with a bookmobile. We're here to deliver books and read stories to kids. But it was still naptime for the children. The right staff member wasn't available yet. You should get your bookmobile off the street and park around back, said the receptionist. Just wait.

Sometimes the desire to help overmatches a need, the need of a particular moment anyway. There was again nothing to do for a dozen librarian-volunteers wearing bright yellow "Libraries Build Communities" t-shirts, each of them trying to look inconspicuous while standing about in the modest reception area of a crisis center located in one of the toughest neighborhoods in one of America's toughest cities. But somehow another good moment came next. Four teenaged boys dressed in hip-hop had been standing back almost unnoticed, keeping warily to themselves; exactly as the librarians were

doing. Someone said something to somebody. The receptionist spoke up, "They want books." Never in the history of library public services was there a more willing escort into the stacks than the one those four youths, their eyes still turned to the ground, received from that yellow cadre of librarians. "Oh, we'll show you!" one said, leading the boys out back to the parked bookmobile to pick what they liked from the rolling, boxed collection dispersed that day throughout New Orleans.

Meanwhile, a few volunteers had walked several blocks down the street to the next stop, another daycare center, this one run by a church. It's early, but maybe they'll be ready for us. But once there, only more confusion. Who can we talk to? We're with the library group. We have a bookmobile. The center had printed a little handout. "Bookmobile and Activities," that afternoon; but not for another two hours, it said. We'd better wait. We'll come back.

There was waiting the day long, and not just for volunteers. Waiting and stillness hung over the city itself. The media had well prepared everyone to see destruction, but to look at scenes of destruction unredeemed by activity was hard to apprehend. The bookmobile passed blocks of empty, damaged homes with barely a person in sight. In the neighborhoods there were some construction evident, but longer stretches where the only imprints of recolonization were standing piles of rubble and trash at streetside, banks of portable toilets in road medians, and signs staked in the grass to advertise mold removal services. Abandoned cars were common. Some had been hauled together and lined up beneath freeway overpasses, others gathered onto empty lots. A strip mall anchored by **Family Dollar** was shuttered. A banner in front of **Wendy's** offered a hiring bonus of \$125, but a **McDonald's** standing in perfect quiet and emptiness was an eerie sight.

At midday the caravan pulled into **Good News Camp**, the tent city. The camp occupied an acre or two in the vast rectangle of City Park, New Orleans's largest green space, located between the French Quarter and Lake Pontchartrain and a short drive from the city's most devastated areas. The **Good News Camp** had opened in September. Like much of the relief activity in the city, it is run by church organizations. The camp's two enormous tents were on the scale of what a circus would use. These were not living quarters. A homemade sign inside one of them said that plainly. This is a relief center for dispensing supplies, not a homeless shelter for sleeping and bathing. The only people living at **Good News Camp** were the workers, church volunteers who had traveled to New Orleans and who lived in RVs and trailers.

Much of one tent was given over to food, pallets of grocery items which supplied the "camp store," two long rows of tables forming an aisle where anyone could walk in and take what they needed from arrangements of staples like peanut butter, pasta, canned fruit, water, juice, onions, boxes of macaroni and cheese. Beyond the food tables were rows of used cloth-

ing on racks, like a **Salvation Army**. Big as it was, the tent couldn't hold all of the camp's relief supplies. A smaller tent housed a pile of new mattresses. There was a pallet of potatoes sitting, for some reason or more likely for no reason, next to a pallet of home bookshelf kits. Freight containers and truck trailers, parked near the tents, held all manner of other supplies.

For the bookmobile volunteers, there was little to do at **Good News Camp**. Only drop off some boxes. The hardest part of that was to find someone who knew where to put them. The Rhode Island storyteller found a man named **Dion** who seemed to be in charge. He said to put them inside the supply tent, near the back, and pointed to a straw-covered section of the tent floor. How about over there instead, off the ground on a pallet? No, we need that space for more food coming in. Back to the parked

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bookmobile for the books; but by then someone had found someone else who seemed to be in charge, and boxes of books were already being offloaded by another human chain down the bookmobile steps and into a trailer, one marked for medical supplies.

The volunteers ate their box lunches in the second circus tent, one set up for food preparation and meals. They occupied two of the several dozen round tables which formed the meals area. Since most tables were empty they had their pick and chose to sit close to the tent's entrance. From a stage erected against the long opposite side of the tent a youth choir was singing, wearing lime-green t-shirts which identi-

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Group Therapy

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GRIPE: Submitted by **Kelly A Smith** (Electronic Resources Librarian, Eastern Kentucky University Libraries)

Do any of you have thoughts about whether to archive eBooks? In particular, we recently subscribed to the **Gale Virtual Reference Collection**, and we're trying to figure out if it would be worth our while to archive these titles. I'd be especially interested in hearing from those of you who have archived commercial titles. Why did you decide to do so? Was it a complicated process? Did you develop a search interface for the local archive?

RESPONSE: Submitted by **William Walsh** (Head of Acquisitions, Georgia State University)

When we talk about archiving and preserving eBooks, what do we mean?

So far, we have purchased six **Gale Virtual Reference** titles. (Because of our FTE, each title cost significantly more than its print counterpart, but pricing models are another story.) For what I consider a reasonable annual fee, **Thomson Gale** hosts these titles for us on their platform.

For each title we purchased, we received an archival copy of the book in XML format. **Gale's** FAQ states that these files are "for disaster recovery purposes." I asked our rep what that meant. Could they only be used in the event of a catastrophe? The answer was no, the files are ours. If we don't want to pay **Thomson Gale's** annual hosting fee, we are welcome to host the titles ourselves or have a third party host them for us.

But why would we want to? In the short term, I'm certain we don't have the resources to improve upon (or to pay someone else to improve upon) the **Virtual Reference** platform. In the long term, hosting the titles and developing a search interface for them isn't the same as preserving them.

"*Urgent Action Needed to Preserve Scholarly Electronic Journals*," edited by **Donald Waters**, the Program Officer for the **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation**, details four key actions that academic and research libraries need to take to ensure long-term access to the scholarly record. The first is, "Libraries and associated academic institutions must recognize that preservation of electronic journals is a kind of insurance, and is not in and of itself a form of access." To this and the other three actions, participants in the archiving challenge from the **Janus Conference** have added, "Libraries should affiliate with an appropriate repository. Libraries don't need to reinvent the archiving 'wheel,' but all need to cooperate, communicate and move forward together" <http://janusconference.library.cornell.edu/?p=83/>.

eBooks are not eJournals, but I don't think the best way for most libraries to proceed is to individually archive their eBook titles. Surely this calls for a collaborative effort between libraries and publishers — something similar to the preservation efforts (like **JSTOR**, **LOCKSS** and **Portico**) currently underway for electronic journals.

RESPONSE: Submitted by **Warren Holder** (Electronic Resources Co-ordinator, University of Toronto Libraries)

To quote **Carole Moore**, the Chief Librarian at the **University of Toronto Libraries (UTL)**:

"One solution we have decided on is to invest in a pilot project in electronic books." At **UTL**, we believe that our users do not care whether the information they are looking for is in a journal article, a section of a reference work, or a chapter of a book — they want the information online 24/7/365. To that end, we intend to undertake a pilot project with a critical mass of

eBooks, from as many publishers as we can afford, with the intent of ascertaining how users discover the eBooks, how they use the eBooks and what do they do after they get the information they were looking for."

To be honest, the archiving of commercially copyrighted eBooks is not the issue that is motivating many of us. We are motivated more by assisting in the discovery of information.

To that end, the **University of Toronto Library** has been very actively pursuing the local loading of e-resources for many years. What once was only a **University of Toronto Library** initiative has grown into a province wide project, here in Canada, involving 20 universities. This project is called **Scholars Portal** and from the homepage one can read that:

"Our goal at **Scholars Portal** is to provide access to scholarly electronic resources through a set of tools which allows the networked scholar to search, save and integrate these resources with their teaching and research to foster greater learning opportunities."

It is our belief that it is by hosting the content that we can best move forward to accomplish the stated goal. Here is some statistical information to give a sense of the stage **Scholars Portal** is at.

Scholars Portal users can:

"Query over 65 million references to scholarly journal articles from over 50 major index & abstract databases through a single search interface, it's like a **Google** search of scholarly information source."

The **Scholars Portal** electronic journal collection contains more than eight million articles from over 7,300 full text scholarly journals published by major distributors and presses (titles and numbers will vary with institution).

Our service integrates & supports **RefWorks**, a Web-based citation management system and interlibrary loan & document delivery protocols through **RACER (Rapid Access to Collections by Electronic Requesting)** system which provides connections to the university libraries in Ontario and to major research libraries throughout the world to get the resources you need."

RESPONSE: Submitted by **Heather Morrison** (Project Coordinator, BC Electronic Library)

In theory, of course the ideal is meaningful archival access to electronic materials, whether books or e-journals. At **BC Electronic Library Network**, we have a collection of **netLibrary** titles, for which we have

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fied them as from the First Baptist Church of New Port Richey, Florida. For the most part, these teenagers sang to their own adults from New Port Richey, some of whom operated sound equipment directly in front of the stage. Only a couple of tables in the back of the tent were occupied by people who appeared to be from New Orleans.

Stillness imbued **Good News Camp** that hot afternoon. Camp workers were out in the city on projects. Most activity at midday was the silent coming and going of vehicles. Delivery

trucks, a car. An ambulance pulled in, then pulled out without a sound. Outside, just beyond the driveway, a handful of men sat under shade trees. A blue church van from "Transformation Ministries" drove past, leaving the quiet of the encampment. As it did, librarian-volunteers eating box lunches and half-listening to the New Port Richey youth choir singing to a mostly empty tent could read the words painted on the van's side panel, a statement of faith that had to have been much of what there was to sustain some people who had returned to New Orleans after the flood, but to others, a statement belied by the facts. "God is Good," it said, "All the Time."