Working Conditions in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: An Interview with Julie Anderson

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By Michele Gibney

Julie Anderson, a graduate from San Jose State University’s School of Library and Information Science in 1985, worked abroad as a librarian in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan from 2001 to 2005. Her experiences abroad serve to illustrate valuable exchange opportunities between librarians worldwide. She also gives her honest opinions on the state of libraries in these two countries while she was there. Nowadays, Julie can be found working as a substitute librarian and teacher at Miramonte High School in Orinda, CA.

How did you and your husband get involved with working abroad?

It began in 1998 when we began interviewing with an agency that sent Christian professionals abroad to use their skills in partnership with various local organizations. We went to Kyrgyzstan in 2000 to check things out, and then went back in 2001 under the organization that interviewed us. I thought I would be teaching English, as that was what we had done in the past when we were overseas.

What other opportunities besides teaching were you presented with in Kyrgyzstan?

We arrived in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan a little over a week after 9/11. The country was peaceful and beautiful, but many American organizations were withdrawing their personnel over fears of what might happen (Kyrgyzstan is only one country away from Afghanistan). Fortunately ours gathered, prayed and stayed. I began to teach English at an international school, but early in October, during a coffee break at church, one of the State Department employees at the embassy heard I had been a librarian, and grabbed me, saying, you have to come see me! Yes, I was the only Western credentialed librarian in country at that time, and the current Minister of Education had approached the embassy about a possible library project. For the next two years, I taught English to librarians, met government officials, and visited a wide range of libraries.

I know that you also went to Tajikistan. What did you do there?

My two years in Tajikistan (2003-2005) were spent doing some training at the Information Center sponsored by the American Embassy and also working with the Aga Khan Humanities Project (AKHP) in Dushanbe. At the AKHP I primarily mentored one young man who went on to earn a scholarship after we worked on a conference with the National Library.

I also volunteered a lot at the Information Center in Dushanbe. One practice we tried to help with was weeding. Libraries in poor countries hold onto anything printed—even old advertising circulars. We never could just dump anything—the dreck was sent out to the provinces just to amplify collections.
Can you give further details on the state of libraries and librarianship at the time you were there?

We were in two of the poorer former USSR republics, and in the 10 years of "independence", librarians had experienced the raw end of tiny salaries, unheated and un–air conditioned buildings and no money for collection development. Most of the librarians I met were trying to supplement their income with hoeing cotton (Tajikistan), knitting garments (Kyrgyzstan), and basic farming. That they maintained professional integrity and interest in their jobs was amazing and inspiring.

There is a little or no handicapped access to library facilities. Broadband is available only in major cities and even then is not always dependable. Computer software was generally IRBIS, a bit of basic low-cost programming from the United Nations. In one institution the librarian had given up on it as no training was included in the budget and the person assigned couldn't figure it out.

The old model of centralized librarianship hindered libraries in all sorts of ways. The biggest challenge was drawing up a budget—for instance; they didn't know how to cost out an inter-library loan, as that had never been anything they worried about.

Overall, how do you view the experiences you had in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan?

So much of what I did seemed a waste—all the revitalization plans for the National Library, the training center we all wanted so much, and the networks of sister libraries were rejected by the embassy because we did not specify using American materials, and we wanted to do everything in-country. Larissa [a resource manager in Kyrgyzstan] fought like a tiger to get money out of the embassy to put local newspapers in libraries—the embassy just wanted English language ones that no one could read! Still, the rare opportunity for a school librarian to work with such skilled, visionary library personnel in Bishkek and Dushanbe remains my lifetime highlight.

You’ve mentioned that meeting other librarians was one of the highlights of your time abroad; can you further describe some of these meetings?

Fortunately Kyrgyzstan was still able to retain good personnel and receive grants for fall library conferences. I went to two of them—both held in a marvelous, slightly decaying old Soviet Hotel in the Lake Issyk-kul region. The gorgeous landscaped grounds of pine trees, (replete with birds such as hoo-poos and squirrels with tufted ears), as well as fruit trees that the librarians gleefully raided, bordered the world's second largest alpine lake: magnificent. Although a long journey to a remote village where ten librarians waited in the rain to take us to a meatless meal—all they could afford—and proudly introduced a young woman struggling to keep a ruined building's dimly lit roomful of books open as a library, was perhaps the most heart wrenching. The lovely smiles, the total welcome even to a stranger who had nothing to give but her interest, still brings me to tears. A lovely memory is of many of us librarians picnicking in the mountains near Lake Issyk-kul, and sharing homemade horse sausage, pastries and tea. The sun is golden, the river sparkles, and the laughter is the best gift of all.
Michele Gibney is a second year graduate student in the SLIS program at San Jose State University.