

LIBRARY SERVICE TO CULTURAL MINORITIES*

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Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share with you the Montgomery County Department of Public Libraries' experience in serving Cultural Minorities. As a Chinese-American, and a librarian, I have always been interested in the public library's services to cultural minorities. Beginning with my earlier work experience at the Brooklyn Public Library; my educational tours to the Hunt's Point Branch and Chatham Square Regional Library of the New York City Public Library; visits to the Mission Branch and the Chinatown Branch of the San Francisco Public Library; followed by a trip to the Huntington Park Branch of Los Angeles County Public Library; from knowing those outstanding and experienced individuals like Adriana Tandler of Queens Borough Public Library and Elena Tscherny of Washington, D.C. Public Library, I have learned a lot. These libraries and individuals providing library services to cultural minorities are pioneers in the field.

The Montgomery County Department of Public Libraries is a part of the Montgomery County Government. It has 23 branches

*This paper was presented at the American Library Association Annual Conference in Dallas, Texas, on June 26, 1989.

servicing a population of over 600,000. Montgomery County, Maryland is just north of Washington, D.C. It is an urban/suburban community which has been experiencing major population growth since 1970. There are about 52,000 Hispanics, 46,000 Asians and 50,000 African-Americans, presently living in Montgomery County. The multicultural community constitutes 25% the total population; the Hispanics and the Asians constitute about 80% of the total number of language minorities.

I have been lucky enough to witness the growth of this community. When I moved to Montgomery County in 1973, there was no other Chinese or Asian families living in my immediate neighborhood. A year later, I met my first Chinese neighbor at a local supermarket grand opening. In the Spring of 1975, a small number of Chinese families got together and organized a weekend Chinese language school for their children. I was one of the teachers. Presently, about 2,000 Chinese-American children attend these weekend schools.

Montgomery County has a strong economy. The school system is excellent. The County Government has paid attention to the growth and the change of its population. The first County-wide "Ethnic Heritage Festival" was held in 1984, to celebrate Maryland's 350th birthday.

In recognition of the increased minority population, two parallel efforts were initiated: First, the County Executive appointed a Montgomery County Committee for Ethnic Affairs. Second, he established a Task Force to develop a Multilingual Initiative Program. Mrs. Agnes Griffen, director of the Department of Public Libraries was the chairperson. The Task Force reviewed the overall county government foreign language needs and services, and also possible solutions.

In 1985, the Department of Public Libraries applied for and received a Library Service and Construction Act Planning Grant to develop Library Service to Cultural Minorities. An extensive

Needs Assessment was prepared on the target population, the four largest cultural minorities living in the county: the Hispanics, the Chinese, the Koreans, and the Vietnamese. The Needs Assessment focused on getting direct input from the four groups including: 1. face to face in-depth interviews; 2. a bilingual written survey; 3. focus groups, one for each of the four target groups.

I joined the Montgomery County Department of Public Libraries in 1977 as a part-time children's librarian. I also served as the library's Chinese Community Liaison, and was a member of the Foreign Language Committee. At the time of the LSCA Planning Project, I did 22 interviews.

The interviews and the surveys revealed five broad areas of need: 1. education and job-related information; 2. to maintain and build cultural links; 3. access to information about the community; 4. to overcome transportation barriers; and 5. support systems and communication links for the elderly.

When asked what the library could do to improve service to cultural minorities, the three most frequent responses were: 1. having materials in the native language; 2. having bilingual staff; and 3. publicizing the services and resources.

After the hard work of many staff members, especially the Project Manager, Mrs. Laurie Mielke, the County Libraries received an LSCA Grant for 1986 to 1988. Using this fund, Library Service to Cultural Minorities was formally initiated. Therefore, the first three years of Library Service to Cultural Minorities was closely tied to LSCA Grant Projects.

Hearing the good news, the cultural minority communities were both excited and rejoiced, which was reflected in the local language newspapers. As a library staff member, besides excitement, I felt very proud to work for a library system which cares for the needs of all its users and takes a positive attitude to face the growth and changes in its community. I also believed that the Cultural

Minorities Librarian's job would be challenging and rewarding.

The goals of Cultural Minorities Services are: 1. To provide library and information services to cultural minorities living in the county. 2. To recognize the cultural diversity of county residents through library services. One of the most important guiding principles is that services of cultural minorities will be incorporated into public services at all branches. Under the supervision of Mrs. Ann Friedman, Library Associate Director, the LSCA Grant Projects were carried out in several branches and grant funding was used to pay the first year's salaries of a librarian and an administrative aide, and to purchase the needed equipment which includes: 1. A Macintosh computer system for the use of the Cultural Minorities Office. Countless flyers, memo's, reports, news releases were produced by this marvelous machine; 2. 6 Kaypro microcomputers to teach business skills. Even today, the computer classes are still very popular; 3. 100 audiocassette players and English language tapes; 4. 8 video cassette players; 5. 6 Apple 2E microcomputers for the Computer Assisted Literacy Project.

As for the library materials, since 1982, the County Libraries have added Spanish and Chinese language books to its Foreign Language Collection at 8 libraries which serve a large number of cultural minorities. As a member of the Foreign Language Committee, I continued to participate in selecting the Chinese language materials. All the foreign language books are in our computer system which means all the information has been translated into the English alphabet. The foreign language books have a high circulation rate. At the present time, we have: 1. 3,800 titles in Spanish; 2. 2,600 titles in Chinese; 3. 1,600 titles in Vietnamese; and 4. 1,300 titles in Korean. Our cataloging department staff deserves a special mention for their hard work and courage. They have processed all the Asian language books without knowing the languages.

In 1986, I applied and became the County Libraries' first

Cultural Minorities Librarian. It was June and a couple of weeks away from the end of the Fiscal Year. I remember my first assignment meeting very well. Now looking back, I can associate those assignments with feelings of fun and challenge, but on that day, I was overwhelmed. Among the assignments, there were signs to make for the foreign language collections at 7 libraries with specific sizes and colors to match their interior; bilingual bookmarks to be produced in four languages; the Spanish version of the library brochure "Welcome to Your Public Libraries". Under the capable guidance and with the never-failing support of my supervisor, Mrs. Nancy Canada, Library Regional Administrator for Special Services Region; with the help and cooperation from many library staff members, and with some good luck, all of this was produced in a few weeks.

Six months later, Mrs. Marlene Ariata Weiss who is a native of Bolivia, South America, joined the Cultural Minorities Services. Together, we have completed many projects and programs, we have: 1. sent letters to the members of the four Focus groups to inform them about Cultural Minorities programs and activities; 2. revised and enlarged the Staff Multilingual Skills Directory; 3. planned and delivered 5 programs on the New Immigration Law with one in Spanish; 4. planned and delivered 3 programs entitled "All You Want to Know about Your Public Library"; 5. translated the Dewey Decimal Classification Summary into the four languages; 6. produced a video tape called "Public Library: Your Job and Information Center" with narrations in English and the four languages; 7. translated the library Registration Form into the four languages.

We also participated in individual library's special or regular programs, such as the "English Conversation Club" program at four libraries; the Year of the Young Readers program—"Storytime in Foreign Languages"; the micro-computer programs, and the "Small Business Clinic" program. These materials and services were

utilized by several thousand cultural minorities library users. This year, our Children's Services' Summer Reading Club program has added Chinese and Spanish languages children's books to the suggested reading lists.

For publicity, we send out news releases in Chinese, Korean, Spanish and Vietnamese about library services and programs because if the announcement is in the native language, it will be noticed by cultural minorities individuals. As a result, cultural minorities participation in library programs and activities has increased. Starting this year, we have a Korean-speaking staff member and a Vietnamese-speaking staff member working at Cultural Minorities' Office one morning a week providing information about library services in those languages. These few hours make a lot of difference. The foreign-born are usually shy about requesting information; but if they can call and speak in their native language they will take that first step to get to know the county libraries. It is very obvious that cultural minorities library staff attracts cultural minorities library users. The Library's Departmental Affirmative Action Committee has just completed a Staff Self-Identification Survey which shows there are 37 cultural minority individuals on the staff now versus only 9 in 1983.

Library advisory personnel, such as ethnic County Library Board members and cultural minority Library Advisory Committee members, and library volunteers are very important too. I have successfully recruited several cultural minorities community leaders serving as County Library Board and Library Advisory Committee members.

Networking and Outreach efforts have brought Mrs. Weiss and myself to participate in public school PTA meetings, teachers' training programs, and student job fairs; programs and activities coordinated by various county departments and agencies, and community groups; meetings and conferences of local and national organizations. The more we know, the better we serve.

The population in Montgomery County is still growing; the population of cultural minorities is also growing. Library Service to Cultural Minorities is one of the key components in the new Montgomery County Department of Public Libraries' five-year Public Service Plan for 1989 to 1994. As Cultural Minorities Librarian, I have very positive feelings about this. The key issue remains providing adequate services and materials with bilingual staff. I hope that the number of bilingual library staff will continue to grow and eventually match the growth rate of Montgomery County's cultural minorities population. Then, with the language barrier removed, cultural minority county residents will enjoy full access to all library services.