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BENE LEGERE
 NEWSLETTER OF THE
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VISIT TO THE NATIONAL LIBRARIAN TRAINING SCHOOL, HAVANA, CUBA, MAY 2000

Kay Starkweather, Manager, Employment/Employee Relations

Editor's Note: In May 2000, 21 American librarians and library workers (four from UC Berkeley) traveled to Cuba on a cultural/educational exchange, "Cuban Libraries: Creating Partnerships." Led by Beth Sibley (UC Berkeley) and Jacquelyn Marie (UC Santa Cruz), the participants visited the José Martí National Library, the University of Havana Library, the Librarian's Training School, and the Rubén Martínez Provincial Library.

The editor asked the Cal participants to record some of their impressions and observations of the tour for publication in the newsletter. The following is an article that was submitted by Kay Starkweather, Manager, Employment/Employee Relations, in the Library's Human Resources Department. The sidebar explains a program that the Cal Library has recently initiated with Cuba's National Library.



Facade of the National Librarian Training School.

Brenda Quinonez engaged me with her eyes as I walked past her studying quietly at the library table. Clearly eager to practice her near flawless English on the Americans touring the facility, she waved me down with her bright eyes and warm smile. Her ability to do this will be easily understood by anyone who has experienced firsthand the warmth and delight of the Cuban personality.

Brenda is one of 276 students currently studying at the National Librarian Training School in Havana. And I am one of a select group of 21 American library professionals lucky enough to be part of this delegation to tour Cuba's libraries.

Brenda's story is typical of the dedication to community service and educational achievement displayed by so many Cuban youth. She knows what she wants to do. She has had a private tutor in English since age 12. She applied and passed all exams to enter the School. She works in the José Martí National Library on Fridays, in the children's section, as part of the field training the program requires.

When I met Brenda, she was poring over a yellowed, obsolete



Students at the National Librarian Training School. Brenda Quinonez is on the left.

reference book. Semi-closed shutters kept out the unrelenting sun and darkened the room. The librarian's desk was adorned with little but an ancient Royal typewriter, an ashtray, a pack of Camel cigarettes, and an electric fan trying stir up a breeze to combat the intense humidity. Nothing in the School is newer than 40 years old. *The Book of the Year* ended in 1959 (the year of Fidel Castro's revolutionary overthrow of Cuba's

government). *Current Biographies* ended in 1957.

Esther Garcia, principal of the School, greeted us warmly and eagerly as we trounced into the dilapidated meeting room of the school, sweating on this stifling hot day in May. Fanning ourselves with our daily itineraries, we hoped she would finish her remarks soon so we could escape the blistering heat, but we remained fascinated and focused on her every word. She told us the whole history of the Librarian Training School, and how the program has varied from a six-to-nine month curriculum to a three-year curriculum based on the country's needs.

The Library Training School was founded in 1962, post-revolution, by the farsighted head of the José Martí National Library, who realized that training and technical programs for librarians and library assistants were needed.

Initially there was little opportunity for education in Cuba, and many of the better educated had fled the country. The revolutionary government provided education for all, but there were no books. At this time, the Library Training School accepted applicants as young as junior high school age into a three-year program.

Cuba completed its 6th and 9th grade educational campaigns in 1982, simultaneous with a demographic boom that put pressure on universities and technical school for more slots. Since 1982, high school graduation has been a prerequisite for admission to the Library Training School, and many applicants have university degrees. One permanent feature of the curriculum has always been the onsite field training along with classroom instruction.



Streetscape with posters in Havana.

As is all education in Cuba, the Library Training School is free of charge. Students like Brenda who come in from the provinces must live at the facility for the duration of the two-year program. At the conclusion, they are sent back to the provinces. Only those from nearby Havana are able to remain there to work.

Ms. Garcia, a charming and educated woman, explained the curriculum fluidly with all the appropriate buzzwords of a college recruiter. "In 1986, computer and marketing courses were introduced, while classes were maintained in catalog, reference, selection, and library management. Other classes on

cultural knowledge, Cuban culture, world culture, psychology, teacher education, and typewriting completed the program." Although "aware of the difficulties in Cuba," says the principal, we "expose students to the world of informatics and the Internet."

It all sounds good, until you look around. Equipment in the typing room is meager: old, black Royal manuals, the kind that fetch something at garage sales these days, and some old electrics and Selectrics covered with torn, yellowed plastic.

The computer room is worse, with three past-generation machines, at least one non-functional. We eagerly asked about Worldwide Web access and e-mail, as we did throughout our visit in Cuba. The answer was always the same and delivered with a big enthusiastic smile, "It's coming!"



Tour participants presenting donations to the National Medical Library in Havana.

Call it the eternal optimism of the Cubans. Call it what makes this a country of upbeat, well-educated, and forward looking people, despite extreme economic deprivation. They always see the bright side. "The mission of the school is to provide students with updated knowledge, commit ourselves to take books where needed, and work under difficult conditions."

But the reality is that when the students are released to work in municipal and small town libraries, they still catalog books in shoeboxes with little cards.

We were told that "there are few librarians in Cuba. Some students come to school thinking it is easy, clean work. The school breaks that. It's not so clean."

"Those who finished the first year love their training and have high qualifications. The school sends those students to far-reaching provinces. Books are taken into the mountains on mules. The students work with children and perform community work."

Brenda will be one of those students. Her eagerness and dedication are obvious. What does she worry about? A down payment for her first house? A new car? "Sometimes I get nervous because I can't find the information that the patrons need in the children's section," she says. "I have to go to a supervisor or someone else." She would prefer to work in Havana but will go to a province if they send her.

One has to admire these students who have so little and remain so hopeful, and who have such a contribution to make. You have to reflect on the "back to the future" aspects of a visit to Cuba. It stirs the conscience to visit a facility like the Librarian Training School, with virtually no resources, and realize the level of educational attainment in Cuba.

One of the positive outcomes of our recent visit to Cuba and the hard work of the Latin American selector at UC Berkeley, Carlos Delgado, is that a historic partnership has been formed between the José Martí National Library in Havana and Cal's Library (see above). The Cuban library will provide Cal with duplicates of materials and about 1,000 revolutionary posters, and Cal will catalog the materials and make them available via interlibrary loan.

Those interested in supporting charitable activities related to this partnership are invited to consider one of Mr. Delgado's dreams: to bring a small group of Cuban librarians to Cal to be exposed to state-of-the-art training and facilities. A second and smaller project is to underwrite the \$20 cost of digitizing a Cuban poster to make the image available on the Worldwide Web. With 1,000 posters, this will be a costly project, but even a small donation will result in a few posters being placed on-line for viewing worldwide. Donations for these projects can be designated, "Librarian Training Exchange" or "Cuba Digitization Project." Gifts can be sent to the Library Development Office, 188 Doe Library, Berkeley, California 94720-6000.

Proposed agreement between Cal and the Cuban National Library:

Library staff members are putting the final touches on a proposed agreement with the Cuba National Library. Approval of the agreement will result in making available to students and scholars materials from Cuba which have been difficult to access during the last forty years.

The agreement with Cuba, which will establish a precedent in this country, will provide to Cal duplicate copies of books, sheet music, and journals, as well as a post-revolutionary poster collection--posters being a popular vehicle in Cuba for the dissemination of social and political messages to its population of 11 million. In return, Cal will catalog and store the materials, making them available to researchers via online catalogs and interlibrary loans. In addition, if funds are secured and all relevant permissions are obtained, the poster collection will be digitized and made available for viewing on the World Wide Web to anyone who is interested.

Campus librarians and staff from the Cuba National Library celebrated the project at a reception in the Morrison Library in Doe Library on September 13. The focus of the celebration was an exhibition of the types of the materials that will become available if the project is ultimately approved. (The US Department of the Treasury has informed UC Berkeley that the proposed exchange of information and informational materials would be exempt from the existing trade embargo.)

Included in the exhibit were Cuban books on poetry, prose, and the arts; sheet music of Cuban songs; books by and about José Martí, Cuba's most influential intellectual; and handmade books and periodicals composed on scraps of paper and cardboard during periods of scarcity. In addition, Cuban posters were hung in the Morrison Room.

According to Carlos Delgado, librarian for Latin American collections at UC Berkeley, "the project, as it contributes to the building of library research collections, will have a long-term impact on Cuban studies in the UC.... At the core of librarianship is our desire to represent various viewpoints. This [collection] is not a statement for or

against Castro; this is an opportunity to broaden and enrich our collections at Berkeley and in the United States."

Charles Faulhaber, director of the Bancroft Library and professor of Spanish and Portuguese, indicated the importance of this tentative pact, "... it will be very interesting to have the ability to compare the way the Cuban Revolution is presented in these materials, as compared to the way the Mexican Revolution [a particular strength of the Bancroft Library collections] is presented. Both [collections] represent significant statements about the evolution of Latin America during the 20th century."

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