

## **Kay Raseroka, President of IFLA**

### **Bridges to Lifelong Literacy**

#### *Introduction*

The theme of the conference is 'Literacy without Boundaries'. People from 40 countries, traditions and professions have committed themselves to share knowledge and explore new meanings of literacy in a globalised environment.

We are grateful for this opportunity provided by the Croatian Reading Association to serve as hosts for the 14<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Reading. We acknowledge the hard work of the Local Organizing Committee reflected in the richness of the Conference and Program.

We wish to recognize the vibrant library community, which as long as 1954, operated in a global environment and hosted a conference of IFLA here in Zagreb.

Children's libraries in Croatia have developed high standards of service. They are engaged with literacy from early childhood. In this way they have been partners with communities – even under difficult circumstances. They recognize the right of every child to information, education and literacy. This is a concern worldwide.

In the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions IFLA, there are sections for reading, children's libraries and school libraries, in addition to 45 other sections. Most are concerned about society and what librarians can contribute to human development through the use of information, by itself is just data. Good use of information helps us as individuals to understand the context in which we live. That means reading ourselves and the world around us. This is what we mean by a literate person.

It is my view that literacy goes beyond reading, writing and numeracy. It includes other types of literacies that start with oral communication or orality, which is talking, telling and sharing. It is on this account that I chose the Presidential theme of Lifelong Literacy on which IFLA is working.

'Literacy without Boundaries' made me think of how I myself became literate and I think it is appropriate at this conference to share this with you:

I was born in Zulu Natal, South Africa, into a large and busy family. My grandfather had worked for and with an Afrikaner. Together they had trekked across the plains to settle in a part of the country that echoes the influence of Scotland; Glencoe, Dundee and Ladysmith. My grandfather died, leaving his younger wife to manage members of a family that spanned several generations. When my father and mother married, they took over some of her responsibilities of caring for the family members and ensuring that they followed their schooling and took on a profession.

Into this bustling household I was born and raised among my relatives. Dad loved to read his newspaper because he was a court recorder and, in the living room, in a prized glass case, he had his treasures: books in English and Zulu.

We all know that little children imitate. As so many of the family were in school, they did their homework in the kitchen. I would climb up beside them and take up pencil and paper. When I

was with my Dad, I would look at the cartoon, Prince Valiant, and read along with him, in the same way that he was reading the news. And when the whole house was quiet, I would sneak into the living room and open the glass case to feel and look at Dad's treasures, without, of course, ever admitting that I had done so. In this way, and with the added stimulation of Sunday School, I absorbed the sounds of stories and the smell, look and feel of print before I went to school. I began, like so many of us, the happy journey that combines orality, writing and reading and that stimulates all the senses in search of pictures, questions and answers, meaning, imagination and communication.

You may say that my story is not so different from your memory of childhood: the natural desire to imitate what older people are doing; the fascination with words, stories, alphabets, illustrations, and books. Those of us introduced to the passing on of this pleasure in the natural course of growing up are privileged; we followed the lead of others around us; we stimulated our imaginations by conversing with the authors and storytellers whose works we held. But as we know, many children grow up in homes that have no books, with people who do not read and do not have a place to study or paper on which to write.

There are many reasons for this state where homes are without books, paper or models from which to learn to read. But you know most of those reasons, so today I want to discuss the alternatives that can provide youngsters and adults with an environment that simulates the natural stimulation of a home like mine. The building of bridges to literacy is the role of the local library and its partners. And in our journey together, I wish to discuss the library not only as place with its collections and services but also the presence of models such as those I had the privilege of imitating. We are learners and teachers!

I am honoured to have been invited to give a keynote address at this 14<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Reading. I am also delighted to represent the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. IFLA, like the IRA, has many members from every corner of the world. For the most part, our members are either library associations or institutions, like national, university and public libraries, but we also have personal members and we know that a good number of them have memberships both in IFLA and IRA.

IFLA is a venerable association begun in 1927. It has grown and evolved immensely in the intervening 80 years just as libraries have. Quite recently IFLA shaped its priorities, values and programmes around three main pillars: Society, Profession and Membership. We have put society first, as we are anxious to highlight the role and impact of libraries and information services on individuals and communities, within their own cultural, social and economic contexts, and also within the larger international environment where issues of human rights such as access to information and intellectual freedom, as well as copyright, publishing policy, and global technologies and communications have a great influence. <sup>1</sup>

As librarians and educators, we know that human beings learn, communicate and take action using all their senses. We recognize that voice, image and the ability to write and read text are particularly important in supporting a literate environment. Orality, text, hieroglyphics and multi-media websites all have their place in our understanding of the world and our search for

meaning. While many of you here at this conference are teachers of these literacies to young people in formal educational settings, we also know that much work is conducted by members of the community and not-for-profit organizations working with youth who are not at school and adults to develop and support the practice of literacy. Librarians see all of these groups as partners and bridge builders. We support the teaching and understanding of literacy but also develop collections, programmes and services to stimulate the practice of literacy for all age groups and members of the community.

Perhaps some examples will illustrate the importance of work at the community level. There is a network of rural libraries in the mountainous region of northern Peru, far from Lima, the capital, and from the nearest town. Most of the residents are Amerindians whose way of life (the Incan way of life) was destroyed by the Spanish in the sixteenth century. The villagers have to walk for several hours to get to market each week to pick up necessities and to sell produce and their animals. But each of these isolated hamlets has a “librarian”, a person nominated by the citizens to keep the library books and to provide access to them. Some of the books have been bought for the whole network of libraries and are moved from one village to another by a coordinator, a few times a year. But many of the books, in multiple copies, have been researched and written by the librarians themselves, although they have little formal education. The topics they write about cover all aspects of their life, past and present: their music, animal husbandry, use of herbs and plants, clothing, traditions and so on. Each subject deserves its own volume and contains from about 30 to 200 pages. The text is typed and illustrated in black and white and the persons who have done the research and writing are named in the book. A simple cardboard cover in one-colour is added.

While there are several native Amerindian languages in the Andes, almost everyone speaks Spanish. This means that they understand each other. By tradition, groups of adults and children gather at the librarian’s home in the evening and they read together from these local volumes. Everyone who reads takes a turn. Those who do not read listen and absorb the information and join in the discussion afterwards. Clearly, this sharing has an impact on the whole community. There is opportunity for imitation, discussion, use of memory and sharing. As the women work together in the fields next day, they sing from their traditional songs or discuss some of the issues they read in their “peasant encyclopedia – enciclopedia campesina” the night before. <sup>2</sup>

The experience in Peru has been a model for the development and strengthening of community information resource centres in Illubabor, Ethiopia.

In another part of the African continent, in southwestern Africa, reading is considered so important that the Namibian Children’s Book Forum developed a national annual Readathon. It is a week long reading and book festival that culminates in the National Readathon Day on the Friday. Its purpose is first to develop a love of reading among learners in an effort to nurture a book culture and secondly to help schools develop their libraries.

At the end of September each year across Namibia, every member of the school community stops for a half hour to read: the principals, teachers, learners, and school staff. Booklets with wonderful stories are written and illustrated in English and eleven Namibian languages and are

sent off to the schools with ideas about how to celebrate; no textbooks or school readers are allowed; and over the years, many schools have demonstrated great creativity and enthusiasm. A newspaper publicity campaign is launched so that everyone can become involved, including those who can not read, parents and grandparents, community workers and members of the private and public sectors. Many partners are involved and the response to the annual Readathon has increased since its early days in the 1990s. In a number of cases, money is raised so that books for leisure, creativity and enjoyment may be bought for the school library, so that children can continue to read during the rest of the year. <sup>3</sup>

The National Library of Malaysia, like some other national libraries, has special responsibility to support reading, in collaboration with the Minister of Education. The Library is heavily involved in National Reading Month. Last year, the National Library hosted a 3-day celebration of storytelling, along with a reading summit. Many local figures illustrated how reading had influenced their lives and storytellers from Malaysia and abroad entertained the public at the conference and in bookstores throughout Kuala Lumpur. During this celebration, the link between storytelling and reading became very clear. The audience was so enchanted with the tales they have heard from the storytellers that they bought the books in which the stories are written and illustrated! So storytelling often leads to reading and writing reinforces a sense of identity and culture.

I have chosen these examples from different parts of the world, because they illustrate both the local conditions and particularities of each society but also the connections that we who promote and value reading share. It seems to me that teachers and librarians are natural allies in understanding the needs of children and young people and of also relating to the families and communities in which they live. This knowledge and respect for each context allows us to work together in the creation of collections, services and programmes that meet the needs of community members.

You may have grown up at a time when libraries and librarians seemed to make all the decisions about their collections and programmes. Increasingly, library staff and the management committee (or board) have learned to consult with community members. Together they plan the library as a centre where a number of activities can take place. In Northern Canada, for instance, the library in the school serves both the educational staff and students but also the residents of Rankin Inlet. After school, the elders and community members go to the library for books and reading but also for events and classes, including computer classes. There are many audio-visual products related directly to the life of the Inuit people and videos of the leaders are recorded and stored at the library. There is a local publisher that puts out the text in Inuktitut which uses syllabics.

In Accra, Ghana, there are a number of children's libraries, including a very successful library in Nima, a slum area of this capital. There a number of children are fed and all of them wash and dry their hands before going into read, hear stories or play games. The library has a number of extra-curricular activities including a choir and a soccer team. A study, financed by an American foundation, has been done of children who attend this library. There is concrete evidence that

their academic performance has improved through attending the library and a number of children have gained scholarships for secondary school.<sup>4</sup>

### *Conclusion*

If we were to analyse the components of success in all these examples, we would acknowledge a number of important elements. The library staff and volunteer management committee are in touch with their communities. They are well-trained and can organize programmes and procedures. They are not afraid to ask for input and suggestions from the users. They seek out partners from all sectors: public, private and not-for-profit. They understand that learning is different among different age groups and genders and they look for collections and programmes that recognize and respect those differences but also stimulate interest. Many of the examples I have cited are also involved in creative activities: the making of books, videos and radio scripts and journals; the playing of games that call on one's capacity to learn and read the world; the celebration of communication and community, however, materially impoverished the situation. As it happens, most of these examples exhibit strong public relations. Their programmes, facilities and collections are well-managed and evaluated and they are accountable to the community and donors.

You may ask how we link these sterling examples to make a greater impact. And that is where our national, regional and international associations have a great role to play. In this connection, IFLA and IRA are privileged. We have association affiliates providing conferences, training, resources and opportunities to share with members at every level.

We also have members in most countries who can speak up on behalf of students and adults who benefit or could benefit from a stronger emphasis on reading and literacy. Advocacy of these basic human rights of access to information, education and freedom of expression can not been taken for granted. Many pay lip service to them but do not deliver to the grassroots level of every country. It seems to me that we are honoured and privileged to take up action in arenas where the voice of many is not heard – at UNESCO, within the international spheres of the other UN agencies and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization etc. We should speak up in our own societies to our governments and regional councils. The clearer our message, the stronger our voice, the more likely we shall have some impact. Literacy and reading do allow individuals and communities to be more autonomous, more democratic in the sharing of responsibilities and power. They provide strength and confidence to individuals and collectivities to identify their needs and contribute to their solutions. Creating an environment for learning is itself a creative act – it opens our minds and hearts to different possibilities and different ways of seeing and knowing. It allows us to consider the importance of indigenous knowledge and cultural identity and helps build respect among peoples and institutions.

Through this address I shared a personal story – a story of watching and imitating those around me. What I now invite all of us to do, individually and collectively, is to commit ourselves to creating an environment where reading and the practice of literacy may flourish – not for our sakes, but for the members of all our communities. And because we work internationally as teachers and librarians, educators, policy developers and decision-makers, let us share our

successes, learn from our failures and take seriously our responsibility to speak for and include those whose voice and writings are normally not heard or seen.

This is the 14<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Reading. At the same time it has chosen the theme ‘without boundaries’, and therefore I have not hesitated to give examples from all over the world. And therefore I do not hesitate either to express my hope that IFLA and IRA will work formally in partnership to influence those working on the Millennium Development Goals and all those who can influence policy and decision makers, by speaking persuasively about the power of reading and literacy in providing strength, stimulation, pleasure, creativity and confidence to meet both individual and collective goals. We must demonstrate the impact of a literate society on the economic, cultural and social dimensions of development. I wish you a very interesting and rewarding conference!

#### References

1. For information on the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), please visit the website at: [www.ifla.org](http://www.ifla.org). For a discussion of role of libraries in predominately oral cultures, see the paper, *Library Service to Oral Cultures: The Reality versus the Ideal*. By Michelle Edwards at: <http://www.slis.ualberta.ca/cap05/michelle/main.htm>

2. For information on the Rural Libraries Network in Cajamarca, Peru, please see the following websites and articles:

“Thirty Years in the Saddle Bag”

[http://www.wacc.org.uk/de/publications/media\\_action/archive/236\\_jul\\_2001/30\\_years\\_in\\_the\\_saddle\\_bag](http://www.wacc.org.uk/de/publications/media_action/archive/236_jul_2001/30_years_in_the_saddle_bag)

“Literacy and Rural Libraries: Canadian Researchers in Africa Draw Ideas from Peru”. By Gwynneth Evans. *LOGOS*. v.9, no. 2, Summer 1998. p. 80-85.

« Lecture et identité dans les bibliothèques rurales péruviennes ». Par Marie-annick Bernard. *Bulletin des bibliothèques de France*. T. 43, no 5, 1998. p.32-37.

[http://bbf.enssib.fr/bbf/html/1998\\_43\\_5/1998-5-p32-bernard.xml.asp](http://bbf.enssib.fr/bbf/html/1998_43_5/1998-5-p32-bernard.xml.asp)

3. Information on the Namibian annual national Readathon was supplied by Professor Jeanne-Andrée Töttemeyer during the 3<sup>rd</sup> Pan African Conference on Reading for All. The proceedings of this conference in Kampala, Uganda, August 2003 are to be published by IRA in 2005.

4. For information on the Osu Children’s Library fund, please see:

<http://www.osuchildrenslibraryfund.ca/>