

Frustrations, Challenges and Opportunities in Public Library Collaboration: An Interview with George Jaramillo, Library Director, Taos Public Library, Taos, New Mexico

George Jaramillo, Library Director, Taos Public Library, Taos, New Mexico
(GJaramillo@taosgov.com)

Ivan Gaetz, General Editor, *Collaborative Librarianship* (igaetz@regis.edu)

(George Jaramillo is interviewed by Ivan Gaetz, *Collaborative Librarianship*)

As part of Collaborative Librarianship's series of interviews with members of our Advisory Board, we met up recently with George Jaramillo. George was one of the first persons engaged in conversation about beginning a journal that focuses specifically on library collaboration and which led to the founding of this journal in January, 2009.

CL: How did you arrive at your position of Library Director of the Taos Public Library?

Jaramillo: I have been in the library profession in one form or another for over 30 years, initially at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Campaign, working in the Education Library. This was followed by 20 years at the University of Northern Colorado where I was Associate Dean for Administrative Services, and then most recently, six years at Colorado State University (CSU) in Fort Collins, Colorado, as Assistant Dean for Administrative Services. I retired from CSU in the summer of 2006 and moved to Taos. As it turned out, my "retirement" lasted only one year, and in December, 2007, I became Library Director for the "Town of Taos."

My first entry into library work was in high school where I served as a library assistant in the school library. Upon graduating, I received a scholarship at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and found a natural fit in its library system. It has been mainly academic libraries ever since. So, in fact, my work here in Taos is my first experience as a librarian in a public library.

CL: How was the transition from the academic to the public library environment?

Jaramillo: In public libraries, there is a much broader sociological picture at play. You have to use a different language, so to speak, and engage different sensitivities. The transition involves adjusting to a different mode of inquiry and knowledge interest. For instance, the literature wanted and needed in a public library includes, of course, popular fiction, self-improvement books, travel, but also religious writings and material on spirituality, health-related issues, and resources for genealogical research. The collections in our public library support personal development and a wide range of general interest, and not so much academic research and scholarship. With a different purpose, public libraries deal with a very differently motivated user.

Another significant difference from the academic environment, and this was a big adjustment for me, was dealing with the young adult users with their interest in technology of all kinds, as well as children and their unique interests and needs in yet another very different realm. I had never actually dealt professionally with the younger users of the library, and it was a big surprise to see their particular tastes in literature. Graphic novels and literature on drugs, suicide, teen pregnancy, divorced parents, tattoos, and gangs are enormously popular with young adults. I was not expecting the popularity of these topical areas among our youth. Younger children have a special place in the public library, and because we have in our library a designated children's area, I was able more readily to

identify, understand and appreciate these users and their needs. Another significant difference is the level of technological know-how. University students are quite tech-savvy, whereas public library patrons often need extra help in becoming familiar with computers, using the software and accessing internet resources more effectively.

CL: Not only is Taos Public Library a new work environment for you, the Taos area itself is a rather unique area. Could your profile its demographics?

Jaramillo: Taos Public Library serves the 5,500 residents of the Town of Taos itself and an overall county population of 30,000. The library boasts 25,000 registered patrons, a good indication of the popularity of its resources and services. The region includes persons of Native American, Spanish and Anglo cultural heritages. The presence of Native Americans is very prominent, with their pueblo-style architecture, relaxed mode of living, and distinct art. But clearly, the Spanish influence is most dominant as represented in architecture, art, cuisine, language, and so forth. Within the area there also is pronounced economic disparity between the poor and the affluent. Generally, there has never been, at least in recent times, a thriving economy in this part of northern New Mexico. There is a great deal of partial employment, and young people tend to move out of the region to larger centers, like Albuquerque, to secure better, full-time jobs. Often folks will accept low-wage employment just to secure medical benefits for themselves and their families.

Primary industries include tourism, of course, because of the cultural richness in the area, and because of the terrific recreational opportunities in northern New Mexico. These include exploring desert areas and ancient ruins, hiking, camping and all sorts of related outdoor activities in the summer, and then in winter, skiing—yes, because of the high elevation, the area does get plenty of snow in winter.

CL: Of all the various types of libraries, public libraries serve the most diverse clientele. How does a library, especially one that does not have the extensive resources of a large public library system, meet the needs represented in this diversity?

Jaramillo: Our collection offers 72,000 items. We have a remarkable large number of adult patrons that gravitates to works of fiction, but there is also strong interest in non-fiction books dealing with the hot topics of the day. Since I've been here, we have developed programs related to themes adopted by the Town of Taos to promote the region. Last year, 2009, it was the "Summer of Love," reminiscent of 1969. This year the theme is "Return to Sacred Places." Related to this theme, we offered lectures at the library on cemeteries in the area, sweat lodges, and sacred art of local santeros, those artisans who create devotional objects reflecting the Spanish-colonial tradition. In addition to picking up on the Town's themes, we also try to reflect local history and culture in other ways. For example, we recently offered a series of lectures on D. H. Lawrence who lived in the Taos area and is buried not far from here. Typically, lectures draw 30 to 50 people. For adolescents, last year we organized a "poetry slam" where teens could come and perform their work. Although this first foray was poorly attended, for some reason this year it really took off.

Children, too, are an important segment of the population we serve. Besides the usual array of materials offered, we provide various types of programs, particularly related to literacy. Recently, our Children's coordinator received a national award for our "Reading Is Fundamental" program which is funded by the national program. Our program competed with 3,000 other entries nationwide. The "Big Read" program was another initiative whose focus was on a book by Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me Ultima*, that deals with the life of a "caundera"—a Spanish term for persons who create and administer herbal medicines and cures. The program was grant-based and developed in

partnership with other community groups. The launch event drew over 500 people, quite remarkable for a community our size. The whole program was a huge success. In recent years, visits to the library by children have increased considerably – I suspect due to the fact that our schools have lost funding for children’s library resources and for programming.

My point is that regardless of the size and diversity of the population served by a public library, it is vitally important for the administrators, librarians, and staff to pay attention to the interests of the patrons coming into the library, to understand the currents of interest moving through the community, to be attuned to the community building initiatives, and to seize opportunities to be in step with what is going on.

CL: Given their long history and mission, perhaps more than any other type of library, public libraries exhibit a commitment to collaboration and model the best in collaboration. What has been your observation and experience of this in northern New Mexico?

Jaramillo: On the one hand, this is accurate, at least for our medium-sized public library here in Taos. Collaboration is important and clearly evident, but the focus for us centers on other community leaders, groups and organizations. Kiwanis and the Rotary Club, for instance, are involved in library support and programming. Various community leaders and personalities donate their time and expertise in offering lectures and they participate in various other library events. They help us to improve our services and in turn we support them in realizing their objectives of giving back to the community, of helping to improve the quality of life, and to enhance the common good. There also is collaboration with the State Library in promoting and contributing to resource sharing. The State Library here in New Mexico does some consortial purchasing and in other ways supports funding for libraries.

On the other hand, we have not been able to partner as much as we could, or should, with other libraries. Because a significant percentage of libraries in our region are small public libraries, usually without professional librarians, there is not a high level of understanding of the principles and value of resource sharing that helps to create the mechanisms needed to make collaboration possible and effective. So, in short, we embrace collaboration and benefit significantly within our municipality because of it, but we also could do more and realize even greater benefits within the library community.

CL: Today public libraries seem to be under severe threat due funding cuts stemming from the widespread economic downturn in American, even though the recession has technically ended. The situation is similar in many other areas of the world. How has the Taos Public Library met these types of challenges, and from your experience in public libraries, in terms of collaboration, what type of response to such economic conditions do you see?

Jaramillo: Funding cuts certainly put the pressure on libraries in lots of ways. As Library Director, I have had to reach out to various community groups and clubs and appeal for support. Our Friends of the Taos Public Library group also engages in fund raising campaigns and events, and I participate in these as well. Used book sales play an important role in supplementing our operating budget. We bring in noted authors for readings and charge admission. Last year, during the Summer of Love campaign, local musicians joined forces to produce a CD that the library promoted and sold. This brought in much needed dollars for the library. In partnership with our Friends group, we sold book bags that were designed by a local artist. There are many opportunities to supplement revenue for the library, but it takes a lot of coordination. When we experience economic downturns and face budget cuts, as Library Director, I try to manage the cuts in ways that hurt least.

I also would like to point out that during an economic downturn, the role of the public library in a community is that much more important. We have experienced a marked increase in library use, 20% over the past year to be precise. There is much more interest by users in accessing online job postings and in submitting online applications through electronic processes. Increasingly this is the norm for employment. Often these users require the technical expertise of our library assistants in using computers and accessing the internet.

Locally, there have been economic pressures, and State-wide, similar pressures are being faced. We experience the local pressures, clearly, but I am not sure what the effect the problems of the State will have on our local library. Despite our efforts at fundraising, we have had to make some tough choices. We have not been able to purchase e-books like we hoped. Funds for adding new technology in the library are very limited, and upgrades for software and hardware increasingly are put on hold.

All this is to say that more work with community groups is needed. We need to work more effectively and more broadly. The need exists for greater resource sharing but unfortunately small public libraries in particular do not have the funds to enter into robust resource sharing programs.

CL: Given these economically difficult times, have you seen new initiatives in collaboration emerge in public libraries, and if so, what might be some examples in Taos, or elsewhere?

Jaramillo: There is much good will regarding library collaboration in New Mexico, and some good ideas are at play, but there is considerable distance yet to go. The State Library is trying to develop a shared online system, but there are difficulties to overcome in technology, funding, and so forth. State-wide, librarians do share ideas on improving services and on ways to better use existing resources, but other than the state supported interlibrary loan system, there is

no other effective system in place to support collaboration. Over recent years, I have seen emerge a focus on state-wide database purchasing, but because of funding losses, these hopes have not been realized. As well, collaborative professional development programs have been diminished because of budget issues.

So, to answer the question, interest in collaboration definitely exists and ideas to develop and expand initiatives are present, but state-wide, little has happened. But locally, as is the case in Taos, there are a number of interesting and effective collaborative programs that are making a positive difference, as noted earlier.

CL: In our conversation, it is clear that poor economic conditions present challenges to public libraries and diminish opportunities for collaboration, but are there other challenges or barriers?

Jaramillo: One big challenge is time. Everyone is so busy dealing with the practical local issues that there is little time to devote to matters beyond the walls of the local library. In order to collaborate, much time must be given to planning meetings, to developing programs, and to administering them. This requires a great deal of staff time, time often not available given shortages in personnel.

Space is another big issue. To enhance our library's collaboration with the local business community, it would be great to create a "business center" in the library that offers an array of business resources and technology. However, in our library, we simply do not have the space for such a center. We also need more public access computer stations in the library, but we have no space to expand. There is also the problem of obtaining support for library technology. Library computer technology is supported by the IT department of the Town of Taos, but that one department covers IT needs in 67 buildings, so there is little time available for library initiatives. Being at CSU for a number of years, I know what can be done through

technology, but I also know what type of support is needed for an effective and capable IT center. We have a long way to go to be able to tap into that type of support for our library.

Yet another barrier to collaboration is getting library staff in public libraries, large and small, to understand the importance, value and operations of resource sharing. The challenge is in educating the library community itself.

CL: Where do you see future opportunities for public libraries to collaborate with each other, or with other groups and organizations within their communities?

Jaramillo: Because there are lots of small local libraries in our area, there are great opportunities for creating networks for sharing resources and even services. It would be a major boon to have access to the library resources of the University of New Mexico and other large academic libraries, as well as the resources of large public libraries, but of course there would be significant costs for this. The same goes for improving the technological infrastructure across the region. Also, it would be terrific to see developed a state-wide purchasing plan for electronic resources and perhaps for other types of resources. Again, the costs for this would be substantial.

More on the local front, there could be developed a center, or centers, that utilize computer-base access to resources. Rather than the space-needy print-based centers, giving access to the amazing and burgeoning field of electronically published materials would require relatively little space and provide a great service. The community of Questa, nearby, would be an excellent site for such a center.

Everybody talks about collaboration in New Mexico, but there seems to be little done concretely to actualize it. There needs to be more openness within the library community to sharing resources. This is one big difference between New Mexico and other

places like Colorado that has a long history and strong commitment to collaboration. Here the potential is great. There is so much out there that could be shared across the state, such as historical collections, unique collections of topical and regional interest, and so forth, but there is no system in place to really make this happen. And there are technological barriers, such as little electronic access to catalogs of libraries in the area. We need to become more aware of what exists. Even in Taos, there are four distinct libraries but few people know about these unique collections. Hopefully over time these collections will become known and our citizens will be able to have greater access to these resources.