

## **Birzeit University Library Fellow—SARAH ANDEEN**

Final Report

### Abstract:

The goal of the fellowship was to assist Birzeit University in connecting the library to electronic resources, train the Palestinian librarians on information technology and library management issues, and evaluate the library's administration, policies, procedures and workflow. The fellowship goals did not change significantly from the objectives outlined in the proposal. Living in Palestine and working with the staff at Birzeit University was a stimulating experience that allowed me to experience living in very different culture and provided me with a deeper understanding of a complex political situation. The fellowship goals were achieved in several areas and changes that were implemented should have a lasting effect.

**Birzeit University:** Birzeit University has been in existence as an educational institution since 1924, when it was founded as a primary school for the local children. Since that time it has developed from a school to a college to a university. Birzeit University officially came into being in 1975, and during the last 23 years it has managed to obtain the reputation as being the "Harvard of the West Bank", despite closures and heavy restrictions during the intifada of the late 1980's and early 1990's. The school has programs in the Sciences, Business and Commerce, English and the Arts and is currently in the process of adding several more master degree programs.

The Main Library at Birzeit has a collection of approximately 100'000 volumes in English and Arabic. The library currently subscribes to 200 periodicals and has about 700 journal titles represented in the collection. The library catalog is automated: the card catalog was replaced by the MINISIS system in the mid 1980's. This catalog works well for the users, and Birzeit is in the process of developing an in-house circulation system. MINISIS allows users to search for records in both Arabic and English, and has been easy for the staff to maintain. Although Birzeit has explored the possibility of changing systems, the cost, inconvenience, and lack of a suitable replacement keep them using the current system. The library is staffed by 23 full time employees, four with Masters degrees in Library Science.

There are five main branch libraries at Birzeit University, which operate independently of the Main Library. There is a mandate from the president that all branch libraries coordinate technically with the Main library, but this has not yet been fully implemented.

### Fellowship Goals:

**Library Restructure:** One of my primary tasks was to evaluate the staff and the administrative structure of the library to determine if there were ways in which the library workflow could be improved. This involved assessing the collection, assessing the library workload and staff resources, and evaluating the overall effectiveness of the administrative structure. Over a period of time I watched the staff and interacted with them in a variety of settings in order to determine if the library staff were working in the positions that best suited their capabilities. This was a rather touchy area as there were major problems with some of the staff and with the overall administrative structure.

When I arrived, there were a multitude of mini departments, some with only one person in them. These departments had seats on the Library Council and the overall structure of the library was unwieldy and complex. There were too many people involved in making decisions and nothing was being decided. In addition, many of the support staff were confused as to who exactly was in charge of what in the library. This created issues when conflicts arose and led to unnecessary tension in the library.

In order to streamline the top heavy administrative structure, I proposed an alternative structure in which the library would be divided into four main departments. Each department would be run by one person who would report directly to the Library Director. Combining some of the departments also helped to streamline the workflow and improve productivity. In addition, certain staff members were not as effective in their jobs as they might have been. To counteract this, I made recommendations for some of the staff to be moved around the library into new positions. These recommendations were submitted to Dr. Baker along with the plan to restructure the library .

The biggest impediment to the new plan was the Library Director, Afaf Harb. From my observations of the library , and from reports I received from faculty and staff, her lack of leadership was one of the major reasons the library was floundering. I recommended replacing Mrs. Harb as library director, but finding another suitable position for her was difficult, and the University was unwilling to fire her. Fortunately she decided to resign at the beginning of December, and this cleared the way for the restructure to take place. This also gave us the opportunity to select a new library director.

While working with the Law Center Library got to know Diana Sayej-Nassar, the Director of the Library. When the Main Library needed a new Director, she immediately came to mind. Although it took some negotiations with the Director of the Law Center, we were able to hire Diana as the new Director for the Main Library .She took over in the middle of February and has made great strides in improving the morale and the level of service in the library .

Training: A major component of this fellowship has been training, for both the library staff at Birzeit and for the local library community .During the course of the fellowship I had the opportunity to hold numerous training sessions on topics ranging from the Internet and electronic resources to grant writing and improving user services. For the most part these classes were well received and attendance was good.

In house training: Although Birzeit University's computer resources are better than most of the other West Bank Universities, when I first arrived, the library only had a limited number of PC's and most of the staff were not using the machines.

This was due in part to a lack of knowledge and in part to an unwillingness by the library administration to allow staff to learn how to use the machines properly. One of my first tasks was to familiarize the staff with the basics of computer use. Once the staff got a bit more comfortable with the machines we did some e- mail and Internet training. However, staff were hampered in their efforts to really learn how to use the new technology since there were still very few machines available for their use, and no time was provided for practice.

Soon after I arrived, the University administration approved a proposal I submitted requesting 8 additional PC's for the library .Although the library still needs several more computers for staff and public use, these new machines have allowed the staff greater access to the computers. Computer training for the staff also included Windows 95, how to use the University network, and many one on one sessions. I also worked with smaller groups on specific needs, such as how to use the Internet for cataloging and how to develop and maintain the library's web page.

Outside Training: Through the Palestinian Library Association I have been able to hold a series of workshops for the librarians in the West Bank. Most of these sessions were held at Birzeit University with librarians traveling from around the area to attend. These workshops were very well attended with staff from Hebron, Nablus, Bethlehem and other areas attending. Topics included how to use the Internet, how to develop and write a grant proposal, how to evaluate library performance, how to improve user services and how to do basic budgeting.

Teaching these classes was one of the most enjoyable parts of my fellowship as it allowed me to interact

with librarians from all over Palestine. These librarians came from all types of institutions including the Universities, public libraries and NGO's.

In addition, at the request of the Palestinian Library Association, I spent a week in Gaza, training the librarians there on Internet use and on various other topics in library science. This was a difficult training session as they only had one computer and no LCD projector, but I worked around these obstacles and we had a useful week. The librarians in Gaza are hard pressed to get any kind of training as most of the time they are unable to get permission from the Israelis to attend classes in the West Bank, and many trainers do not have the time or the inclination to visit Gaza to do onsite training.

Working with the librarians in Gaza was a most enjoyable experience, since it provided me with the opportunity to get to know the other librarians and hear about some of the problems and issues they deal with on a regular basis. It is interesting to note that for the most part they are struggling with the same types of problems librarians here are such as lack of funds, insufficient training and lack of staff. In addition, they often faced problems obtaining materials due to censorship by various governments in the region. One librarian I met in Gaza was actually jailed twice during the early 1990's for having "forbidden" materials. Gaza is very poor in comparison to the rest of the West Bank, with many of the people still living in refugee camps. It was illuminating to see how the majority of the Palestinians lived. Life in Ramallah, difficult as it was, was nothing in comparison to life in Gaza or Hebron.

Electronic Resources: One major component of my fellowship here was to evaluate how Birzeit could incorporate electronic resources into its collection. This was a lengthy process that culminated in a report detailing the steps the University needs to take to incorporating these resources into the library. Unfortunately, the University currently lacks the funds to completely implement the plan.

One of the interesting things about Birzeit University is that they have an excellent Internet connection. Until about a year ago Internet service to the University was very unreliable because people kept stealing the copper phone wires. Last year, Birzeit decided that they wanted to have a reliable connection and switched over to satellite based access, providing the University with a fast and reliable Internet connection.

It is critical that the library have access to the many free resources that are available on the Internet. During the fellowship, I worked with the staff to train them on how to access information via the Internet and how to evaluate the information resources they located. I also created a world wide web page for the Library. This page was designed to provide the students and the staff with starting points for Internet research in the major subject areas taught here at Birzeit. I also trained the staff on how to use Front Page to update and maintain the page themselves. The students and staff found the links invaluable as starting points and research tools. I am hopeful that use of the Internet will become a central reference tool for the library.

The University Administration also asked me to evaluate the library's journal collection in order to make some cuts and see if any of the expensive print resources could be replaced with electronic versions. The University was unable to continue funding the journal budget. I went through the periodical list and the indexes that the library received and made significant cuts. I was able to cut the library's periodical budget by 20% annually for English language periodicals, without greatly harming the effectiveness of the collection. In order to meet this goal I changed the mix of resources and added several CD-ROM indices. Unfortunately, they did not arrive before I left, so I was unable to train the staff on their implementation and use. One other way to lower costs and streamline the acquisitions process was to assist the library in selecting a subscription agent. I sent out several requests for proposals, and with the help of the new library director and the head of acquisitions, selected Swets as the new vendor.

One of the proposals I worked on during my time here was a request to the European Economic Community for funds to purchase some of these electronic resources and journals. This request was submitted as part of a larger proposal and according to the funding sources at the Ministry of Higher

Education. The request has been approved, but it will be several more months before the equipment and funds are forthcoming. However, when these funds are received, the library will obtain 10 new computers and the money to implement part of the electronic resources plan I have drafted for the library .

Policies and Procedures: During the course of my evaluation of the library , one of the things that became immediately obvious was the lack of formal written policies and procedures for the library .One of my tasks was then to assist the library staff in developing these policies. I have written a collection development and weeding plan for the library to follow. I have also written a Reference policy, an Internet use policy, and a computer use policy. I also helped the Director in developing and rewriting job descriptions.

Law Center: In addition, I was fortunate to have the additional experience of being able to work in the Law Center library. When I first arrived I was asked to be on the committee that was redesigning the Law Center's web page. It was through this committee that I was able to work with Diana Sayej-Nassar and to see her potential as a Director for the Main Library .

After Diana left the Law Center library in February to take over as Director of the Main Library I I worked in the Law Center library a few times a week, training the staff and overseeing their work. The Law Center was moving to a new building and I advised the librarian on the layout of the new library .I was on the search committee to locate a new director for the center library I and I worked with the staff to help them learn more about the Internet and how it can be used to locate legal information. Since I am a law librarian back in the United States I enjoyed the opportunity to work in the Law Center Library.

Living Abroad: The first question everyone asked me when they found out where I was going was "Is it safe?". The short answer to this question is "yes". In many ways, living in Palestine was much safer on a daily basis than living in Phoenix. Although there is constant military presence, one could walk on the streets and never feel at risk, even at night. I landed the day after a second bombing in Jerusalem. These bombings caused the Israelis to impose a "closure" on the West Bank. This meant that it was difficult for me to even get to Ramallah and for about four weeks, and movement throughout the area was restricted. Instead of taking one service taxi to get from Ramallah, where I lived, to the University in Birzeit, we had to take side roads and change taxis because the roads were blocked. This was a hard introduction to life in the West Bank, but although these restrictions made life more difficult, I never felt unsafe. Once the closure was lifted, travel throughout the West Bank and into Israel was easy. The county is criss-crossed by a network of service taxis.

A service is a shared taxi that runs along set routes. They hold seven people and usually only leave when they are filled, which means you can sit there for quite awhile before you go anywhere. However, they are a cheap, effective form of transportation and I rarely missed having a car. I did miss having a car during the "weekends" though as Birzeit had a rather unusual schedule. The University was closed on Friday and Sunday, but open on Saturdays, to accommodate both the Christians and the Muslims holy days. This divided weekend made short trips almost impossible as I only had the one day to travel. Distances are short, and I was able to make several day trips, but having a car would have meant I could have ventured even further.

With the assistance of the Library Director, I was able to visit all of the other Universities in the West Bank. I talked to the librarians at each of the institutions and discussed the possibility of improving coordination between the various institutions. Unfortunately, due to the political situation, the difficulty in traveling, and lack of reliable communication methods, coordination is difficult. The Ministry of Higher Education is working with the British Counsel on a project to develop a Palestinian Union catalog. I worked briefly on this project, but work was just beginning when I left. Visiting the other Universities allowed me to meet some interesting people and to see more of the county.

When I was in Nablus visiting Al-Najah University I met Hani Jabar, who was an ALA/USIS international fellow to the U.S. a few years before. He was very excited to meet me and could not stop talking about what a wonderful experience his fellowship had been. He was able to take what he had learned in Florida

and help Al-Najah develop a strong CD-ROM collection.

I was in the West Bank during the time of the U.S. -Iraq crisis. It was fascinating to see how the Western news media reported on events that were taking place in my backyard. In many ways, the media was responsible for much of the hysteria and concern that occurred, not because they reported events inaccurately, but rather because they did not give the full story. For example, during the height of the crisis, there were many reports of anti-American demonstrations. This belief that there was hostilities directed towards United States citizens lead to USIS offering to evacuate myself and the Fullbright Scholars due to concerns over the anti-American sentiments. However, during this time, even though there were demonstrations against U.S. policies, I never felt unsafe or had anyone on the street harass me. The entire time I was in the West Bank and Gaza I never felt unwelcome or endangered. One reason for this is that although there may be hostility directed at U.S. policy, they realize that the average person is not the government.

One of the most interesting aspects of my time abroad was being able to experience all of the local festivals and religious holidays. I was there for the Ramadan, the Muslim's month of fasting. During this time, people did not eat or drink during the day, which meant that many restaurants and shops were closed. At sundown, the fast could be broken and people consumed different types of foods only served during this period, such as little pancakes. In the late afternoon, the shops would open and street vendors would begin selling small pancakes that were filled with a cinnamon-nut mixture. The various pastry shops also did a booming business during this time. The Arabs have wonderful sweets such as baklava and knaffi. There were many small pastry shops in Ramallah, but if you ask a local which shop was best, they would all tell you that the best sweets come from Nablus, a city 50 Km to the north.

Ramallah is the current home to many of the Palestinian National Authority's offices and Ministries and before the 1967 war it was the summer resort for many wealthy Jordanians. As such, there are many nice old houses in the area and more restaurants and shops than is typical in the West Bank. This allowed me to experience many different kinds of Arabic food such as humus and ful. There was a pita bread bakery located on my way home from work where I could get freshly baked pita bread right off of the conveyer oven. This was real pita bread, completely different from the cardboard store bought versions available in the U.S.

Shopping is an experience in the Middle East. Each vendor specializes, so you go to the hesbah (or market) for your fruit and vegetables, the butcher if you want meat, a fishmonger for seafood, a drugstore for pharmaceuticals, and the bakery for bread. There are separate shops for candy, for pastry, and for housewares. Basic groceries are obtained in small food stores, but the choices are very limited, and just because you found something once, did not mean you would be able to find it again. I spent the first three months looking for brown sugar, and when I finally found a store that carried it, it only got a few bags sporadically. This made menu planning a bit difficult, but as I was only cooking for myself (on a very small gas stove, lit with matches), this was not a major issue.

Over the Christmas break, my husband and my family were able to come for a visit. During this time I was able to introduce them to the staff at the library, show them around Jerusalem, Ramallah, and parts of the West Bank. After we had toured Palestine we headed south and saw southern Israel before heading into Jordan to visit the ancient stone city of Petra. Petra was amazingly beautiful. The geological formations were quite interesting -with multi-colored sandstone that had been made into buildings. It was interesting to see the mix of the ancient Nabatian culture with the Roman culture that came later.

Returning from Jordan presented some problems. United States citizens are supposed to get three month visas to Israel, but when the border guard discovered that I was assisting Birzeit University, they only gave me a one week visa. It took me over six weeks with the help of the University to get the situation resolved. This is not an uncommon occurrence, almost every American who works with Birzeit has experienced a similar problem. However, this incident allowed me to experience what many Palestinians go through on a much larger scale.

Living and working in the Middle East gave me a new appreciation of time and helped me to develop patience as getting anything accomplished takes much longer than it would in the United States. However, when something finally did get finished, it gives a much greater sense of accomplishment, since it required greater effort to achieve the desired results. The eight months I spent in Palestine on this fellowship allowed me to grow professionally and personally. The contacts and friendships I made will continue to enrich my life, and I look forward to having the opportunity to return to the area.