

**Brendan Ryan**  
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## **Group Overview**

Much of what I was able to discover about the Liberian community in Providence is the result of speaking with Martha Moore and people at the International Institute of Rhode Island's (IIRI) Refugee Resettlement Program, notably Matt McLaren. Martha is a Liberian presently working as a law librarian with experience as a PRISM scholar at URI who has served as an intern at the Providence Public Library (PPL). Matt, presently the Minority Health Coordinator has worked in refugee resettlement in Providence for 11 years. The information he provided was invaluable. He directed me towards notable community members such as Tom Dedah and the Genesis Center in Providence, which presently works with many refugees in an educational capacity. I also worked with refugees at the IIRI briefly and learned much in that time.

Martha Moore pointed out that as a precursor to developing a collection for Liberians the PPL should "conduct a survey of its entire community and determine the ethnicities of its population because then and only then will the management realize that the changing face of Rhode Island population should be reflected in the information it provides." Without this understanding of the population it serves the PPL cannot hope to meet its needs. An assessment of its user base would allow the PPL to ensure that its funds go towards developing a collection which takes all patrons into account.

Most of the Liberians in Providence and the surrounding towns (Cranston, Pawtucket Central Falls, and Warwick) came as refugees in the 1990s and 2000s. The Liberian Community Association of Rhode Island, Inc. (LCARI) estimates that there are 12,000 Liberians living in Rhode Island (**website**). It is very difficult to get correct statistical data on the group for several reasons. The IIRI's Refugee Resettlement Program, who resettles nearly all refugees relocated

to Providence, is not really capable of culling data from the records they keep. There are only three full-time employees, charged with the task of resettling hundreds of refugees a year. They must teach them about any social support systems, employment, opportunities, healthcare, and job training. This is only a short list. They basically must help them acclimate to life in the United States after years in UN refugee camps. I could not find statistical data about Liberians through the census because respondents are unable to categorize themselves as Liberians. In addition, it is difficult to find data about Liberians because many people have not participated in census collection activities due to displacement or illiteracy.

I have found very little material regarding libraries in Liberia other than an effort to establish a national library in 2007. It is safe to say that where there have been libraries in Liberia they have not been functional entities for some time. Internal strife and civil war have been primary for the last five years, and even before that it was not an entirely stable place.

Liberians speak English along with numerous tribal languages. Typically, Liberians speak what resembles a Jamaican patois. Matt cited his knowledge of sixteen tribal groups. Various indigenous groups populated Liberia before former slaves from the United States were resettled there beginning in the 1800s. Many of the conflicts in Liberia have roots in the relationship between different groups, most particularly between resettled slaves and indigenous communities.

The education level among Liberians in Providence varies widely. Refugees who were resettled from camps are mainly from the middle to lower classes of Liberian society. Some were professionals at home while many were displaced by internal strife and never had a chance to be educated. Additionally, many Liberians in Providence are minors and are being educated in public schools for the first time.

Because of this disparity in education levels, one of the most important services a library can provide to the community is literacy instruction. The PPL can also provide a collection of materials that will garner community interest to

help facilitate literacy. This is of primary importance to the community because illiteracy and low levels of literacy trap members in a vicious cycle of poverty. Without literacy training they are eligible for few jobs. This help would be of great importance because it is really the first part of job training.

Another primary need for the Liberian community is mental health services. Matt estimated that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is very common in the community. Liberian refugees have been through warfare and refugee camps for up to twenty or more years. While I am not suggesting that the PPL is capable of providing mental health services, it would be invaluable if they were able to help direct community members to them. The PPL also can help meet Liberian needs by providing access to computers and reading materials. Because of the poverty endemic in the community shared or free resources, such as internet use, are extremely important.

### **National Resource List**

There are not any functioning bookstores, publishers, specialized libraries, or museums presently in Liberia. I conducted extensive searches yet was not able to discover any. This is most likely due to the extreme turmoil that is present in Liberia. Additionally, the University of Liberia (<http://www.tlcafrica.com/lu/lu.htm>) does not appear to be functioning. There are no class schedules posted and many of the links are not working. In light of this and the expatriate nature of the community, links to Rhode Island College (<http://www.ric.edu/>) and CCRI (<http://www.ccri.edu/>) should prove useful. Anecdotal evidence from my wife (a student at RIC) suggests many Liberians are enrolled.

There are periodical resources for Liberians. They are produced either in country or by expatriates. Many are available free online only, so providing users with the proper computer equipment for the following resources should guarantee

access. PPL staff members must ensure that computer terminals accommodate the appropriate fonts and picture formats.

- Liberia sea breeze: <http://www.liberiaseabreeze.com/>
- Foot steps: <http://www.footstepsmagazine.com/Liberia.asp>
- The Perspective: <http://www.theperspective.org/>
- TLC Africa: <http://www.tlcafrica.com/>
- The Bush Chicken: <http://bushchicken.com/magazine.php>
- The Liberian Journal: <http://www.theliberianjournal.com/>

## **Cataloging**

Materials for the Liberian community will exist in a variety of places. The PPL will attempt to set-up “literacy areas” in the branches where literacy instruction occurs. In these areas materials that will assist learners will be placed. Materials will consist of low-vocabulary, high-interest books and other materials deemed helpful by library staff in conjunction with literacy instructors. In addition, computers with literacy instruction software will be made available at literacy class sites. Other materials of interest to the Liberian population will be shelved with the rest of the collection. By doing this, it is hoped that Liberians will use the library and become familiar with the other resources it offers and the cataloging system. In addition, a pathfinder will be created which catalogs all material of interest to Liberians. This pathfinder will be constructed in as basic a level as possible. Directions on navigating the library will be included. It is hoped that the pathfinder will be usable for patrons with low-level literacy. Pathfinders will also be created for Liberians in areas of interest such as job-training, mental health, Liberian history, and others. Through involvement with the community Liberians can develop new pathfinders of interest.

Several times a year a display will be set up with Liberian materials. This will help Liberians see what is available while also drawing attention from the larger community to the material. An icon will be placed on internet computers at the library containing the links to news organizations and other sites of interest.

This will assist them in using the library computers to find information they need.

### **Collection Development Statement**

The Providence Public Library (PPL) will attempt to develop a collection that meets the needs of the Liberian population through their input. Providence, RI has a large population of Liberian immigrants. Most of them have come here through refugee resettlement programs. Those that did not come here as refugees came under similar duress because of the instability and violence that have plagued Liberia. The Liberian population of Providence is probably the largest community of Liberians anywhere in the United States. Only Queens, NY has comparable numbers of Liberians. Because of the extremely impoverished nature of the community, the PPL will seek to provide them with the connections they need to better their situation. A cursory search of the Internet did not reveal any functioning publishers or book distributors in Liberia or Liberian materials. There is no functioning book trade in Liberia because of internal strife. Liberians speak English, although it is heavily accented and rife with particular vocabulary. It is comparable to the way Jamaicans speak English. The collection of printed materials will be in English.

Budgeting to form the collection will be difficult. The PPL is currently restructuring and limiting funding so it is doubtful that the administration would want to invest heavily in this project. Funding for this project will need to be creatively acquired. The best source of funding may be through grant writing. Perhaps through partnerships with the Genesis Center and IIRI staff can be directed to potential sources of funding. In addition the formation of partnerships with these groups may also provide funding or staffing for programs. The PPL presently possesses nine functioning libraries and one branch that is presently closed. The central library is very large and the branch locations are of an adequate size. There is no shortage of space, but rather the staffing and

initiative to develop a program for the Liberian community.

As pointed out by Martha Moore, it will be extremely important for the PPL to assess the composition of their user base. Only by adequately understanding who they serve will library administrators be properly able to develop collections and design programs. In developing a children's collection, the PPL should attempt to accurately reflect the composition of their patron base by seeking out works that represent varying ethnicities. In respect to adult patrons, two specific types of material should be sought for Liberians. Materials that will assist in literacy efforts and materials that will provide information of interest to adults. Martha suggested historical works about the American Colonization Society, biographies, and books on types of foods. She also felt that “resources in general that will encourage young adults to take pride in their culture 'etiquettes' as well as books on the struggles that the country has faced” (**interview**).

Material will be deemed suitable for the collection if it serves to assist the community. By assisting the community it is implied that the PPL will have four main goals for this collection:

- 1) Assisting Liberians in their pursuit of literacy.
- 2) Helping Liberians to navigate social services assistance available to them in order to improve their quality of life.
- 3) Providing a welcoming public space that allows Liberians to bring their families and utilize resources, be they children's material, computers, adult literacy materials, etc.

It will be important to determine community needs based on reading level and interests. Because there is little hard knowledge regarding the populations' reading level, much of this information will be gathered through interaction with community gatekeepers. The PPL will attempt to work with the Genesis Center in Providence to develop a collection that works with present adult literacy efforts. Because the Genesis Center is heavily involved in educating Liberians in Providence it would be excellent to work with them so that the benefits of the work of both organizations can be maximized.. Interviews with gatekeepers and

interaction with community members will also help the staff determine what high interest- low vocabulary books to purchase.

Interaction with the community should help us to find appropriate cultural materials. In addition, the PPL will seek to work with the International Institute of RI's Refugee Resettlement Program in order to assist the Liberian community. Working with the IIRI and meeting refugee needs will most likely also involve some connection or partnership with social services agencies such as the Department of Health Services (DHS) and FIP. Once community needs are fully assessed and appropriate materials are identified the PPL can begin to develop a collection.

## **References**

All resources listed below are available at the Providence Public Library or through OPAC.

### **Adult/ Librarian References**

Brawley, B. G. (1970). *A social history of the American Negro; Being a history of the Negro problem in the United States, including a history and study of the Republic of Liberia*. [New York]: Collier Books.

- This is of interest to academic work. It will be useful to those using the special collections resources.

Chicoine, S. (1997). *A Liberian Family (Journey Between Two Worlds)*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group.

Kismaris, C. (1989). *FORCED OUT: The Agony of the Refugee in Our Time*. New York: Random House.

Moorehead, C. (2005). *Human Cargo: Journeys among the refugees*. London:

Chatto & Windus.

Nelson, H. (1985). *Liberia : A Country Study - Area Handbook Series*.

Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Ogata, S. (2005). *The Turbulent Decade: Confronting the Refugee Crises of the 1990s*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

### **Children's Resources**

Hope, C. M. (1987). *Liberia*. [New York]: Chelsea House.

- Juvenile literature- excellent introduction for children.
- An overview of the history, topography, people, and culture of Liberia.  
Also includes information on its economy and its position in the political world.
- Some color illustrations.

Levy, P. (1998). *Liberia*. Cultures of the world. New York: M. Cavendish.

- Juvenile reference book.
- Describes the geography, history, government, economy, people, lifestyle, religion, language, arts, leisure, and festivals of Liberia.

World refugees. (2002). Peterborough, N.H.: Cobblestone Pub.

- An excellent resource for other children in the library to use to learn about many Liberian's backgrounds.
- Great to give to parents as a tool for introducing their children to Liberian culture and history.

### ***Special Collections***

The Providence Public Library has an extremely impressive collection of



historical documents that are for use on-site. Many of these documents are of historical significance because they are extremely rare, possibly unique.

Blyden, E. W. (1862). *Liberia's offering: being addresses, sermons, etc.* New York: J. A. Gray.

Crummell, A. (1862). *The future of Africa: Being addresses, sermons, etc., etc., delivered in the Republic of Liberia.* New York: Scribner.

Gurley, R. R. (1850). *Report of the Secretary of State, communicating the report of Rev. R. R. Gurley by the government to obtain information in respect to Liberia.* [Microfilm] (Reports of explorations printed in the documents of the U.S. Government; no. 188) New Haven, CT: Research Publications, Inc.

Williams, G. W. (1968). *History of the Negro race in America.* New York: Bergman.

### **Web Resources:**

*FORA.tv - Videos Covering Today's Top Social, Political, and Tech Issues.* (n.d.). Retrieved December 2, 2008, from <http://fora.tv/>.

- Thirteen results for a search on Liberia. Not the best resource but perhaps the only one for video.

*Liberian Observer.* (n.d.). Retrieved December 2, 2008, from <http://www.liberianobserver.com/>.

- Daily paper.

*STAR radio Liberia.* (n.d.). Retrieved December 2, 2008, from

<http://www.starradio.org.lr/>.

- Free, streaming radio broadcast from Liberia.
- The libraries should make headphones available in computer areas so that patrons can make use of this site.

*The Analyst Newspaper [ Online ] : Liberia* . (n.d.). Retrieved December 2, 2008, from <http://www.analystliberia.com/>.

- Daily paper.

*University of Liberia*. (n.d.). Retrieved December 2, 2008, from <http://www.tlcafrica.com/lu/lu.htm>.

- A very bare bones website.
- Not clear how much its functioning, no schedule of classes link.
- Oldest university in Liberia. Founded in 1862.

*allAfrica.com: Home*. (n.d.). Retrieved December 2, 2008, from <http://allafrica.com/>.

- Source of news for all of Africa. User can narrow search to get news about Liberia.

<http://www.allliberianchurches.org/>

- A website for Liberian churches in the US. All Christian.

### **Web resources for RI:**

<http://www.dhs.state.ri.us/>

- The site for the RI Department of Health.

<http://www.dmv.ri.gov/>

- The site for the RI DMV.

<http://iiri.org/refugeeresettlement.htm>

<http://www.refugees.org/>

- The homepage for the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants.
- The organization which sponsors refugees coming to the US.

**Print materials to acquire:**

Martha Moore suggests that she would like the PPL to acquire children's materials that adequately represent the ethnic makeup of the library patrons.

**For Children:**

Mohammad, K., & William, K. (2007). *Four Feet, Two Sandals*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Books For Young Readers.

Naidoo, B. (2). *Making It Home: Real-Life Stories From Children Forced To Flee*. New York: Dial Books For Young Readers.

Zephaniah, B. (2002). *Refugee Boy*. LA: Bloomsbury Pub Ltd.

There are numerous children's books about refugees, but I feel community input is best to develop a larger collection. Liberian children may not want to read about the refugee experience. These may be more useful to other patrons in becoming familiar with the Liberian situation.

**For librarians or the community:**

- These materials provide information on Liberia, the refugee problem, and helping refugees adapt to life in the United States.
- They may be useful in staff orientation or in public forums on discussion groups for members of the community who want to learn about Liberians. I am sure that input can be provided by the IIRI or others to further develop this list.
- This list includes fiction books that may give patrons some insight.
- The non-fiction works are intended to be of assistance in dealing with issues that arise such as those in social services.

Beah, Ishmael. A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

Bixler, Mark. The Lost Boys of Sudan.(book)(excerpt from "The Lost Boys of Sudan: An American Story of the Refugee Experience")(Excerpt): An article from: Sojourners Magazine. Chicago: Thomson Gale, 2005.

Cooper, Helene. The House at Sugar Beach: A Memoir. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2008.

Eggers, Dave. What Is the What (Vintage). New York: Vintage, 2007.

Ellis, Stephen. The Mask of Anarchy Updated Edition: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War. London: NYU Press, 2006.

Mcpherson, J.H.T.. History of Liberia. Little Books Of Wisdom: Book Jungle, 2008.

Ogata, Sadako. The Turbulent Decade: Confronting the Refugee Crises of the 1990s. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005.

Olukoju, Ayodeji. Culture and Customs of Liberia (Culture and Customs of Africa). New York: Greenwood Press, 2006.

Pipher, Mary. The Middle of Everywhere: Helping Refugees Enter the American Community. New York: Harvest Books, 2003.

Potocky-Tripodi, Miriam. Best Practices for Social Work with Refugees and Immigrants. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Refugees, The Office Of The United Nations High Commissioner For. The State of the World's Refugees: Human Displacement in the New Millennium. New York City: Oxford University Press, Usa 6/1/, 2006.

Refugee Rights: Ethics, Advocacy, and Africa. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008.

Social Work with Immigrants and Refugees: Legal Issues, Clinical Skills and Advocacy. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2008.

The Mental Health of Refugees: Ecological Approaches To Healing and Adaptation. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004.

*For Liberian Patrons:*

- The PPL intends to develop a collection that represents Liberian interests.
  - It is of paramount importance to involve Liberians in this process through regular forums.
  - It is also essential to involve the Genesis Center in this process because it is likely that they would have suggestions that meet needs of newly literate adult patrons.
  - It would also be important to involve staff from colleges and active students. In light of limited community resources, it would be very useful if the PPL could make some textbooks available.
- I can imagine there would be a demand for introductory books on driving, apply to college, computer use, and other matters.
- I realize that it seems strange to lack suggestions for resources for a group that your developing library services for, yet this is a unique situation. Rather than produce a collection that may be applicable to the community, I feel it is better to allow community input in developing the

collection.

*The Liberian Star* (This is printed right here in Rhode Island

It is a bi-monthly magazine and the address is:

Ducor Communications

P.O. Box 41654

Providence, RI 02904

(401) 359-3019

### **Community Gatekeepers:**

- 1) What needs do you see as most pressing in the community?
- 2) What materials is your community most interested in?
  - 1) Types of books
  - 2) Computer needs
    - 1) Access to particular fonts or characters
    - 2) Large text views
    - 3) Websites bookmarked
- 3) Does the community need public spaces to meet in?
- 4) What is the current literacy status of members?
  - 1) Different needs as far as classes for basic literacy, functional literacy, etc.
- 5) Where do many members of your community live
  - 1) Is there a particular branch we should focus our efforts at because of location or accessibility by public transportation?
- 6) What hours are members of the community free to use the library?

Weekends, nights, mornings, etc.

### **Librarians:**

- What do you know about Liberia?
- Did you know that the emigrant Liberian population is very large in Providence?
- Are you willing to adjust hours to better serve the population?

- Does your institution presently have partnerships with any social services agencies?
- Does your institution presently have partnerships with any literacy teaching groups or educational groups who work specifically with immigrants?
- Is there anyone in the library system that would be willing to work towards addressing the needs of the Liberian community?
- Do you have a community liaison or the like?
- Do you have anyone on staff with connections in the Liberian community?
- Do you have budgetary funds that might accommodate hiring a Liberian onto the staff?
- Does the PPL have spaces that they would be willing to allow Liberians to use for literacy classes or other purposes?

### **Community Members:**

- 1) Have you ever used the Providence Public Library (PPL)?
- 2) Do you know about any library services?
- 3) Where do you live?
- 4) Where do your friends and family live?
- 5) Is there a branch of the PPL near where you live or work?
- 6) How are things in Providence? What are your needs?
- 7) Do you read? If so what material interests you?
- 8) Do you use computers? Would you be interested in introductory computer courses?

### **Information Needs:**

The Liberian community's greatest need from the PPL is help in adapting to life in America. This need can be seen as falling into two categories: acclimation to a healthy and productive life in the U.S.A and recovering from the hardships experienced in the process of being a refugee. While these needs are

largely outside of services typically offered in public libraries, I am confident the PPL can provide assistance. Addressing the first category of needs is where I see the PPL as having the most success.

In order to help Liberians acclimate to life in the US they will need assistance in dealing with social services. Not only will they require assistance in finding support, they will also need help in acquiring it. The IIRI helps refugees perform many of these clerical functions such as filling out forms. It would be essential that some form of partnership is formed between the IIRI and the PPL. Also, the PPL would be of great assistance in meeting information needs if it could work towards developing a learning environment.

By assisting Liberians in becoming literate the PPL is making it easier for the navigation of the social services system. Additionally, literacy will enable Liberians to be marketable on the job market. The most productive way the PPL can accommodate this need is in partnering with the Genesis Center, which provides most of the literacy classes to Liberians. Not only can the PPL assist by providing classroom space, they can also work to develop a collection with help from the staff at the Genesis Center, which will facilitate literacy. I imagine adding books of interest, computer programs, and low-vocabulary, high-interest books will be very beneficial. The PPL can also assist Liberians in Providence by providing workshops about college. Representatives from RIC or CCRI may be available to assist in the application process.

Supporting Liberians in their recoveries from the tremendous traumas they have endured in their lives is certainly a way the PPL to meet community needs. This task is daunting; yet making some efforts can go a long way. Staff who service Liberian patrons will greatly benefit from some trainings. Familiarity and knowledge of the community plight can certainly enhance interaction. Additionally, attempts to direct Liberians to mental health services in a sensitive manner will also be beneficial.

### **Programming:**



The PPL can undertake several programs that will serve to meet the community's information needs. It is essential that these programs be undertaken in partnership. This will reduce burden on PPL staff and make the programs far more effective.

### **College workshops**

Workshops offered to Liberians interested in exploring their college options. Hopefully done in partnership with staff from either RIC or CCRI. Instruction on the application process for admission and student loans.

### **Literacy training**

The PPL could assist in literacy training by providing space and materials to an agency that does literacy instruction, such as the Genesis Center. Collection development at the library can be done with the input of literacy instructors.

Martha Moore suggested formatting literacy training in this way.

- Family literacy programs for Liberians
  - For adults – Offer a time where families can shared in literacy experiences that draw on family strengths and values. This will provide assistance and comfort to families that are faced with the pressures of resettlement. Also offer some form of adult education. For example, a weekly ESL class, literacy classes or even one-to-one tutoring programs.
  - For the children – After school programs including tutoring, homework help, group reading sessions (preferably, on the history/culture of Liberia), group discussions, and story time on the culture of the country, etc.
  - Compile bibliographies of Liberian authors.
    - This will be an encouraging way to get more Liberians in the library.
  - Invite entire families to share in reading activities and book-talks.

### **Social services workshops**

The PPL can seek to involve social service agencies in an educational

program. Attempts to reach out to staff at the DHS should be made.

### **Introduction to the library**

This program can be organized entirely by library staff. Liberians are not familiar with the resources provided by the PPL. Staff should offer instruction in searching the catalog, requesting materials from other libraries, using pathfinders, and providing feedback to the institution.

### **Recruiting Diverse Staff:**

The PPL will take two approaches to recruiting a diverse staff that meets the Liberian community's needs. First and foremost, all staff at the PPL will be trained to familiarize themselves with the community. This sensitivity training will involve a history lesson and a brief introduction to common problems that may arise. This program will be developed with the input of the IIRI and Genesis Center. Additionally, the PPL will seek to hire staff that accurately represents the population. It would be ideal to hire Liberians as librarians, yet it is unlikely that there are many candidates with the appropriate educational background. The best route the PPL may go down to add Liberians to its staff may be to hire students as paraprofessionals. The PPL already has a good deal of positions, and in the future priority consideration can be given to Liberians, especially youth. This can be justified because it will better help the PPL to meet the needs of its community.

Martha Moore recommends finding individuals through referrals from other community members. She points out that many Liberians in Providence work in the healthcare field as registered nurses or in the educational field as teacher's aides. Through community gatekeepers it would be ideal for the PPL to identify individuals with experience as teachers aides as potential staff members. In the same way that referral from the Liberian community will be valuable to the PPL in identifying potential staff members, assistance that the PPL could offer to Liberians in making connections with other working Liberians would be beneficial in regards to job training and employment.