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Guillotines at the Door:

Waging Peace One Pencil at a Time

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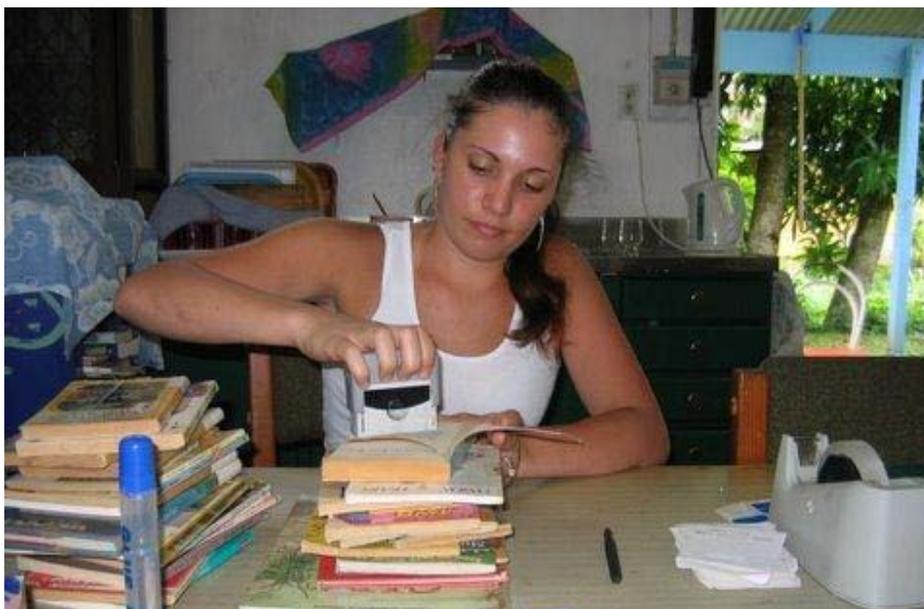
My decision to become a library volunteer in the South Seas was one of the best choices I have ever made, and I entirely blame the Oregon Library Association. I remember exactly when I got the notion to do library volunteer work in lieu of a vacation. It was at a Portland library seminar about Disaster Planning. The first speaker stood up and said (more or less), “I am supposed to talk about disaster planning, but I’m going to talk about volunteering instead,” and she stood up and gave us a rousing talk about adventure, global friendships, and working to make a better world. Thank heavens for that lady. If it hadn’t been for her, my next few months would have been all about worrying how to freeze dry books after a major flood and how to tackle the mold spores that were sure to arrive shortly thereafter.

Instead, the next few months were spent planning a trip to volunteer in a library in the South Seas.

I joined Global Volunteers, an organization that has been around since 1984. Their brochure said they needed people to help out in schools, clinics, conservation areas, libraries and museums in a place called Rarotonga. The philosophy of Global Volunteers is to “wage peace” though understanding and community service. That sounded good to me. The fact that I could wage peace in a library on a tropical island sounded even better. The final fact that it was all tax deductible made it perfect.

So I packed up my bag, rounded up my sixteen year old daughter and headed out to Rarotonga, an island steeped in the Maori culture in the Cook Islands. Where is Rarotonga? I didn’t know either. Go to Tahiti and turn right.

I joined a team of twenty other volunteers from around the world. The oldest was 90, and the youngest was my daughter. After a day of orientation, we were assigned our work projects. My daughter chose to work in the Takitumu Conservation Area and hack up stuff with a machete. If you knew my sixteen year old daughter at the time, it was probably for the best. At least she would be in the jungle.



Author’s daughter, Remy, stamping books at the Cook Island Public Library & Museum.





Cook Island Public Library back room—note the sheets covering the computers.

My project was to work at the National Museum of the Cook Islands to help organize and catalog thousands of historical photos and negatives that had recently been donated to the Museum. I am not a cataloguer, but fortunately, their system was easy to learn. It basically consisted of separating the photos from the negatives, trying to figure out what was on the negatives, and then sorting them into the appropriate album, by date and subject.

The only other staff with me in the work room consisted of two Maori ladies who were very shy at first. They made me wear white archival gloves and were very reluctant to say much. However, cataloging the historical pictures gave me a great opportunity to ask about the Maori culture. I would find a negative of a line of women wearing straw skirts and raising their hands in the air and ask, “Should this go in the Dance file or Women of the Islands file?” and they would laugh and say something like, “No these women are performing a dance in honor of their migration to the island in canoes in the 1300s. You must file it with Celebration and Holidays.” So, because of my ignorance and constantly having to ask questions, we became friends, and by the end of the first week, they were bringing me snacks, mostly in the form of raw squid. They were not joking. It turns out that the squid was a delicacy. We all ate it together.

It was extremely hot in the work room, but the ladies brought me fans, and when the rains came in the afternoons, they made me stop working to sit outside under the porch with them and watch the downpour while talking about America and what it was like to live there. I would ask them about their islands and what it was like to live there. It was then during the downpours, talking with them about their families and their culture that I truly felt that I was “waging peace.”

A few years later, I asked my daughter if she wanted to go on another vacation. She said she wanted to go back to Rarotonga: it was the best time she ever had. So, off we went.



She wanted to go back and chop more stuff up in the jungle. By now I was fine with her machete work, and as far as I could tell, it wasn't spilling over into her social life.

This time, I was put to work in the Cook Island Public Library and Museum in Avarua.

At the time, the Director of the Library was Johnny Frisbie, author of the well-known (at least in the Cook Islands) *The Frisbies of the South Seas*. In her absence, during my two weeks, the library was run by Sally Voss. She ran a tight ship, let me tell you. If we wanted to use a pencil, we had to sign out for it.

The library was great. There were always chickens running around. The first thing you saw when you walked up to the front door was this big machine labeled "Printing Press and Guillotine" which made me think twice about my volunteer duties. I didn't know how long retribution for American Imperialism would linger in the South Pacific. I soon found out that a "guillotine," is another word for paper cutter, and that the whole machine was brought over in the 1800s to publish the first bible in Maori. I breathed easier after that.

My volunteer teammate at the library was Ronit, a doctor of Internal Medicine from New York. Our job this time was to begin to catalog the collection. As I said before, I am not a cataloguer, and of course, neither was Ronit, but since their cataloging program was to enter information on an excel spreadsheet, we figured we could not mess up too badly. I tried to tell Ronit about how real MARC Record cataloging involved non-filing indicators and uniform resource identifiers, and she basically said that it sounded easier to remove a spleen.

Most of the books we "catalogued" were about the Maori culture, and like my previous volunteer time at the national museum, I got to talk to Sally about some of the items, and she lightened up a bit and invited me to actually assign Dewey numbers to a cart of items that had no COP. Fortunately, the library had Internet access and I showed Sally that she could log on to the New Zealand National Library Web site to see how they catalogued



Author outside the Cook Island Public Library.



their items. Since the Cook Islands are a protectorate of New Zealand and have a substantial amount of Maori history and language materials, she would probably find a lot of help there. It was a watershed moment in our relationship. Although she never brought me snacks, I no longer had to sign out for a pencil.

The Library itself was interesting. Instead of reading the shelves left to right, left to right, the books were arranged in an S-pattern: left to right, down a shelf then right to left. It was confusing at first, but by the end of the second week, it made sort of made sense.

The real problem was the environment. In a hot, humid climate, things tended to get full of bugs and mildew—and this meant everything. Most everything in the work room was covered with sheets until they were needed. The computers were covered, because insects would crawl inside the CPUs and wreak havoc. This gave a whole new meaning to the problem of your computer having a bug. These computers had lots of bugs, most of them alive building little bug communities.

The books also had a bug problem. If you think that Sally, who had a guillotine at the front door, was going to go down without a fight, you are mistaken. Since my visit, the Cook Island Library bought a freezer. They now put their infected books and other items in it for three weeks. After three weeks in the freezer, those bugs are no longer a problem. If they have too many books or larger items from their museum that can't fit in the freezer, they take them to the walk-in freezer at the local supermarket which has donated space to the library for bug warfare.

By the end of the second week, my daughter came down from the jungle and volunteered to work with me and Ronit in the library. I would like to think it was because she realized how fabulous her mother was, but more likely it was because her “mentor” had to leave the island for a few days and would not let a machete wielding twenty year old alone unsupervised in a jungle. Sally put her to work in the back room stamping books and helping out.

I was able to spend two weeks working in the library, and it was one of the most memorable “vacations” ever. My fellow teammates and I remain in contact to this day.



Author with Sally Voss at the Cook Island Public Library.



Last April, I once again joined up with Global Volunteers and traveled to Beja, Portugal with the hopes of working in a library. We had a team of six from all over the United States and we were all put to work teaching English in the schools. My team leader made sure that I could do something with a library, so I was granted a wonderful opportunity to spend part of the time in a public high school library where I got to meet the library staff and see how it works in Portugal.

Every day after work my fellow teammates would be at one of two places. They would either be at the outside café to drink “coffee,” which usually turned out to be wine or beer, or they would be at the José Saramago Biblioteca Municipal de Beja public library in the Internet Room. Those at the café would have been the ones who had already been to the library, because, in our team, the library was the first place you went after work.

Here’s another thing I learned: Internet rules in libraries worldwide are pretty much the same. You have to sign in, you can only get one hour, and the library staff is always helpful. Even though I spoke no Portuguese and they spoke no English, there were no problems. The universal language of library Internet usage is understood by all. So is beer drinking, I guess, because it was never a problem to get one.

Will I volunteer overseas again? You bet. I went on a normal vacation to Roatan last month, and although I visited the Public Library in French Harbor, it wasn’t the same as hanging out in the work room, and enjoying time (and maybe raw squid) with a fellow library friend from a different culture. I learned that no how different our customs are, librarians throughout the world possess a common spirit for sharing of their books and themselves. Volunteering in libraries is one of the most rewarding things I have ever done. You should try it. Wage peace. 🌿



Author outside the Jose Saramago Biblioteca Municipal de Beja in Portugal.

