



Felicitaciones, Paseo Boricua!

A Community
of Librarians,
Activists, and
Students

Ann Peterson Bishop and Alejandro Luis Molina

WHAT: Paseo Boricua Community Librarianship project

WHERE: Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Chicago, Illinois

WHO: Neighborhood youth from the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School and the Family Learning Center

WHEN: Saturdays from 9:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. during the academic year, September 2003 to June 2004

HOW: Activists, librarians, and high school teachers from the Paseo Boricua neighborhood collaborated with faculty and students from the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign to involve inner-city youth in developing library services. Youth learned librarianship, computer skills, and civic engagement in order to catalog books and offer programs at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC).



and cultural resources and connect to civic engagement activities. We wanted to address the digital divide and enrich GSLIS with the experiences and knowledge of Paseo Boricua residents.

We began conducting volunteer work days where neighborhood residents came together to catalog the PRCC's collections in their Andrés Figueroa Cordero Community Library and Information Center. To support its history of community activism, this unique and extensive collection contains 4,000 volumes of Puerto Rican literature as well as two galleries of cultural artifacts. A

general and Spanish-language newsletter collection spans three decades, centering around community development, gentrification, Puerto Rican independence, and Puerto Rican political prisoners.

In fall 2003, the directors of the Campos High School and the FLC asked

Background

Library professor Ann Peterson Bishop met Alejandro Luis Molina in June 2002, when attending the Puerto Rican People's Parade in the Paseo Boricua neighborhood of Chicago. She had heard about this close-knit neighborhood and its multigenerational social action projects from Sarai Lastra, who was researching its community information systems for her dissertation. Alejandro serves on the Board of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and manages its information technology. He has also taught a computer class at the Albizu Campos High School, an alternative school located in the PRCC. Alejandro has volunteered in Paseo Boricua for the last twenty-eight years.

The PRCC is a thirty-two-year-old institution in Chicago's Humboldt Park that is guided by a philosophy of self-actualization and critical thought, self-determination, and self-reliance. It galvanizes residents around local issues such as gang violence, cultural preservation, economic development, community health, poverty, and human rights. The PRCC has spun off a range of affiliated programs that improve the quality of life in the neighborhood: VIDA/SIDA, an AIDS/HIV education center and clinic; the Family Learning Center (FLC), where young parents work toward their high school diplomas; Consuelo Lee Corretjer Day Care; Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School; and Café Teatro Batey Urbano, a neighborhood youth space where cultural expression and community action are combined.



Students Elba Rivera and Jesinia Morales present their PowerPoint at the opening of the Community Information and Technology Center.

us to develop an independent-study "Street Academy" course so their students could learn library, computer, and written expression skills in activities that would serve the neighborhood. Alejandro and Ann agreed to act as the primary instructors, with assistance from neighborhood activists Mayra Hernández, Laura Ruth Johnson, and Robin Daverso. Then faculty and students from the University of Illinois Chicago campus, Columbia College, Northeastern Illinois University; librarians from Chicago Public Library; and other local activists pledged their involvement. And so the Paseo Boricua Community Librarianship project began!

Evolving Program Content

As the year progressed, we moved from classroom-style learning to an apprenticeship model. The students formulated their own goals for the project, beginning with their major aim to earn their high school diplomas. They also wanted to gain marketable skills to use in the workplace, such as the people skills of collaboration and presentation, technology skills, and cataloging and other library skills. They wished to create a comfortable learning place for everyone in the PRCC, and while doing so, they hoped to learn tolerance and openness to new cultural experiences.

Students worked toward opening the PRCC's Community Information and Technology Center to the public. They also planned programs, a Family Reading Night and a Books to Prisoners project, that would contribute to the community. The PRCC's activities integrate the message of one program with another, bringing participants from various programs together. So the Family Reading Night, when parents

From Planning to Execution

In January 2003, two faculty members from the library school at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Ann Bishop and Pat Lawton, met with Alejandro to map out goals for creating a collaborative community of learners who could mobilize neighborhood information

bring their children to the Center to read with others, involves parents from the Day Care, where they tend to be older, with those from the Family Learning Center, high school, and AIDS programs, where parents are younger. The Books to Prisoners project merged the expertise of local activists with the experience of GSLIS student Adam Davis to develop ways to send books to prison for the loved ones of local families. Students realized the terrible way in which too many members of the community are part of this country's burgeoning incarceration rate. Both activities will be repeated regularly during the school year.

Paseo Boricua Community Librarianship participants also created digital tools and resources, working with two community information system projects at GSLIS: the **Community Inquiry Lab** collaborative (<http://inquiry.uiuc.edu/ilabs>) and **Prairienet** (<http://www.prairienet.org>). Paseo Boricua residents helped design a simple, open-source, Dublin Core online catalog software package for their own needs, soon to become freely available to anyone who wants to organize community resources and make them accessible through the Web. A Web Gallery showcases items from the PRCC's two galleries that contain more than 300 posters, photographs, and works of art donated by visiting artists and activists.

As the Grand Opening of the Community Information and Technology Center drew closer, students prepared to become the library's volunteer staff, along with others from the neighborhood. They developed policies for the information center, including a mission statement, collection development policy, and job descriptions. In the process of seeking funding and preparing publicity, they learned a little about other library management skills as well. The students—Jesenia Morales, Elba I. Rivera, Lasette Rodriguez, Deshawn Samuels, and Jalissa Santiago—prepared a PowerPoint presentation for a continuing education workshop on libraries and civic engagement held at GSLIS in early spring 2004.



Activist Alejandro Molina speaks about the digital divide at the opening of the Center, as library professor Ann Bishop stands by.

in on different activities served as valuable mentors. In addition, Kathleen Weibel of the Chicago Public Library opened doors and minds with the respect for youth, challenging conversation, and energy that she demonstrated on our full-day visit to the Harold Washington Library. Shirley Yee of the Humboldt Park branch introduced youth to library job opportunities and shared ideas for family-oriented library programs.

meal of roast pork, chicken, rice and beans, and fried plaintains.

The Community Information and Technology Center is open during the day to serve the high school, at other times on a volunteer basis, and on weekends to continue cataloging the PRCC collections. Evening hours expand for fall classes.

Comments from Youth

Students who began the course stating that they hated libraries and reading and felt little connection with neighborhood activities, ended the year with these comments:

- "I got my son his own card, and we go to the public library regularly now."
- "I liked cataloging the best—I never even knew what those little numbers meant."
- "It was a great challenge to give a presentation at a conference; I've never done anything like that."
- "I'd call it a community leadership class more than anything else."

Our students were inspired by the wide range of Street Academy participants. Beyond the core teaching team, the university students who joined



Going Forward

This first year was an amazing experiment! We all made mistakes and have learned a lot along the way as we served as consultants to each other. Those of us with library and information science expertise were consultants to the students and volunteer community members in the development of the Center's collections and services. The students and neighborhood groups were consultants to the librarians and university folks as

they demonstrated how communities and libraries can work together to develop meaningful programs and fulfill their civic engagement mission. As we design our future program, we feel that our community librarianship course for youth can serve as a model for others to build upon.

A Grand Celebration

On March 28, 2004, more than two hundred people filled the PRCC to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Day Care and the Grand Opening of the Andrés Figueroa Cordero Community Information and Technology Center. Alejandro spoke about the necessity of bridging the digital divide and the importance of the Community Information and Technology Center. He also unveiled the PRCC's Web site at <http://www.prcc-chgo.org>. Ann spoke (in Spanish!) about her experiences and mentioned the Children's Collection of bilingual books that the students were cataloging for the Web. To introduce their project to the community, students Elba and Jalissa spoke about their classroom experiences and presented the PowerPoint production. They were warmly received by the crowd, who asked questions and browsed the PRCC's collections and Web site. The Grand Opening concluded in the cafeteria with a Puerto Rican-style

Ann Peterson Bishop has been a member of the faculty of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for more than ten years. Her research and teaching focus on community informatics, with an emphasis on social justice in the information professions and the participatory creation of community information systems. She can be reached at abishop@uiuc.edu.

Alejandro Luis Molina is a community activist who serves as Secretary on the Board of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center on Division Street in Chicago, volunteering his time as manager of its information technology. He can be reached at alejandrom@prcc-chgo.org.