

Interview with an information professional...

Geraldine Barkworth interviews Del Cuddihy, an archivist volunteering through Australian Volunteers International in Dili, East Timor. Del shares her fascinating perspective as an information professional working in a war-torn country. If you have ever dreamed of volunteering your professional services overseas, read on...

Please tell us what you are doing in Timor-Leste (East Timor) as a volunteer:

I work as an archivist at CAVR in Dili, Timor-Leste. CAVR is a Portuguese acronym for Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation. The Truth Commission is an amazing place for an archivist to work as one of its major aims is to create a record, a history of human rights violations over the last twenty-five years and to report on these violations, to support victims and to foster reconciliation. When I first arrived in November last year the Commission was in full operation — district and regional teams were collecting over 8000 victim and 1500 perpetrator statements from all over the country. Now, it is in its final report writing stage and the staff has dropped to around 80 and we are all situated in the Commission's headquarters — a renovated Portuguese jail called COMARCA. It was also used as an Indonesian jail and we are hoping that we can establish it as a Human Rights Memorial at the end of the Commission.

I work with three other local staff. We came together as a group in May and have set up our Documentation Centre in a room called the Santa Cruz room, named after the young people who were rounded up and placed in this room after the Santa Cruz massacre in 1991. But it is a big job to set up a library and an archives from scratch and with limited resources.

Timor-Leste was basically a colony for the last 500 years, so any record-keeping expertise was done by the colonizers, with important records sent overseas for safekeeping. So there is limited exposure to library and archives concepts, methodologies, and practices. A large part of my role is in explaining archival concepts, terms, why you do things a certain way, why you need these sort of control mechanisms and policies. In this way I hope to pass on some knowledge and experience to my team so that they have ownership and understanding of how to manage this repository, and this segment of their history, in the future.

I am lucky that my employer, Queensland Rail (QR), has given me two years leave of absence to undertake this volunteer position. Previously I was working in the Strategy Unit of QR on an electronic record-keeping project — a far different scenario from downtown Brisbane to downtown Dili where I currently work.

As an Australian Volunteers International (AVI), I get a living allowance, airfares, remuneration of accommodation and so on. AVI has more than twenty volunteers currently working in Timor-Leste and has placed 302 volunteers in Timor-Leste since 1995. There is another AVI

librarian here in Timor-Leste, plus several other self-funded librarian volunteers and several information management volunteers.

In terms of development for a war-torn country such as Timor-Leste, there is much to be done. The whole infrastructure of society has been destroyed — sort of like Ground Zero all over the country and not just on one site in upmarket New York. Unfortunately libraries, archives and others take a back seat when people are starving, have no houses, schools, electricity, medicine, poor roads and so on. But where is the fine line to ensure that people have access to information to improve their lives, to celebrate their history and culture and to ensure transparency and accountability?

What do you enjoy most about your current role?

Aside from the day-to-day excitement of seeing an archives and library being established from the ground up, and the local staff beginning to understand and use library and archival systems and terminology, what I enjoy most is the sense of helping to create and preserve some part of the history of Timor-Leste, and working with local people to find and preserve their history.

What do you enjoy least?

I have discovered that I have strong addictions to certain features of a western lifestyle that provide independence and which are not available to me here — a car to drive, constant supply of electricity, clean water, fast access to telecommunications, phone directories, movie cinemas, bookshops and so on. It is not advisable for a woman to go out on her own at night, so its almost like going back to the time before women's emancipation. But somehow, as time goes by, these addictions lessen and in fact, they seem quite superfluous. But I think the hardest one to shake off is the addiction to speed and ease of telecommunications.

What advice could you give to library and information professionals wanting to volunteer?

Take the opportunity if you can, if it is right for you. It is a great gift to be able to live in another country. And if we are living in the Information Age in the first world, then it is a great honour to be a representative of the information management profession in a third world country.

What enthuses, delights and energises you?

It is just such an honour to get to help in this new country in what I think is an important way — working to preserve history. Many people here have had all their records, their photographs and other memorabilia destroyed in the turmoil since 1975. Many do not even know their birth date,

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as there were no records kept in the mountains where they were living, on the run. To see the look on people's faces when they see a photograph of themselves or their loved ones from more than thirty years ago is priceless.

Also, to know that I am helping to introduce information concepts to people who have not had exposure to them before gives a sense of achievement. I believe that as a professional (and doubly as a volunteer), it is my duty to share whatever knowledge and expertise I have with people who have not had the opportunities that I have had to obtain knowledge or skills. I have been involved in setting up the Timor-Leste library and information association and working with the national archivist. We are both attending the International Council of Archives Congress in Vienna later in August. It is only held every four years and so it will be the first time that Timor-Leste will be represented amongst the world archival community, which will make it a unique experience.

At the end of the day, it is the people things, the easy spontaneous sense of humour of my co-workers, the ready smiles of the children as they call out to me on my walk home from work, the great acts of generosity shown to me from people who have so little, that I remember with gratitude.

What does 'making a difference' mean to you?

I think it is the personal things that I am involved with that may 'make a difference', not any grand political scheme. I first visited Timor-Leste over

thirty years ago, when it was still a Portuguese colony. We met a young man here and he could speak quite good English — he told us that he would like to travel too, just like us, and especially he would like to go to Australia. I did not realise until then that not all people lived with the same affluence and freedom that we did in Australia, and that it was impossible for him to get to Australia.

Anyway, I always thought of this young man as the political situation in Portuguese Timor deteriorated and I hoped that he was OK. Just last week I finally found him. Carlos had survived the difficult times and is doing very well in a senior position with the police force. He has now travelled to many countries including Australia.

I was so pleased that I could give him the photos (that we took) from the early 1970s visit — he had none from this time. We made a toast — 'to youth and their dreams and may they come true'. It was just a little thing, but for me, in the end, it's the little things that count, that make a difference.

- CAVR website:
<http://www.easttimor-reconciliation.org>.
- AVI website:
<http://www.australianvolunteers.com>.

Career Coach Geraldine Barkworth of BOLD WOMEN: BIG IDEAS loves talking with fascinating people in fascinating jobs. The full-length version of this interview is available from Geraldine at vision@norex.com.au or 02 6685 1917.

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