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Feedback to your Board of Directors

Board members welcome your comments and feedback. Please feel free to contact a Board member at any time.

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Last week I had an unexpected visit from my friend John Bayliss, Director of Macquarie Regional Library at Dubbo, accompanied by MRL's newly appointed Reference Librarian, Christine May. They were en route from a meeting at Bathurst and stopped off for coffee and a chat. Christine hails from Yeppoon in central Queensland, a place I know of through ALIA Vice-President Graham Black. I could sense that she was 'amazed' by my depth of knowledge on her home town! Christine knew Graham from his presentation *Is life in the fast lane always the best lane?* at the 2006 New Librarians Symposium, where he had spoken passionately about the benefits of working in regional Australia. I share his zeal.

Having worked in a provincial centre now for the best part of 20 years I smile serenely when asked the perennial question, "I guess your next move will be to the big smoke?" Inwardly I'm thinking "as if!" For me country living provides the perfect work/life balance offering endless opportunities to engage with my local and wider community and having the time to enjoy it. Lest I be called biased, I sent a 'help needed' email out to colleagues in various sectors across rural and regional Australia seeking their views. This is a summary of their responses.

Perhaps not surprisingly job variety was almost universal: "in small rural libraries you can work across a range of tasks and roles, and you have the authority to make decisions and try out new ideas at an early stage in your career". There were many examples of skills development which had been possible because of living in a smaller community, including media exposure and political awareness.

High emphasis was placed on the ability to be able to build close customer relationships and be truly responsive to their needs. "The library and the people who work there become synonymous in the minds of the customers, they have a sense of connection with, and ownership of, the library". There was a feeling that library staff have the opportunity to make a real difference and ensure "equitable access to the same resources that city folk enjoy". A colleague from a one-person library commented, "On the funny side of getting to know your patrons, I have minded a lamb, a dog, and several plants; tried on a quilted jacket; and helped with knitting".

In rural and regional areas, it is very likely that you will live in the community you serve, and you can see tangible benefits to the community from the work you do. Of course this also means that you're very accessible and highly visible. As one public librarian wrote, "while shopping for groceries after work, people ask you to renew their books!" Personally, bitter experience long ago taught me that it's never too early to pop down to Woolies without being seen and so the comb and lipstick are always employed before an outing!

Inevitably lack of access to high speed broadband communications and the ability to embrace new technologies was raised. However I thought the following comment reflected the 'can do' attitude of many of my country mates:

There's an opportunity to really put web 2.0 technologies to practice. Not just delivering content to people on level 4 of the same building but to people across the state – linking up with colleagues on projects who are very remote. We're not just doing wikis and online tutorials because they're hip and seem the in thing – we financially have to learn these mechanisms because we can't afford face to face with our remote clients or colleagues.

While e-lists and electronic PD opportunities are seen as a positive move forward, isolation is a very real issue especially when you consider that many library and information professionals are one-person bands: "even with email, phones, etc, the physical distance can stifle professional relationships and professional growth. There are limited opportunities to see other libraries in operation and to glean new ideas". However although distance is an issue there is the opportunity to travel: "I never had that chance in Sydney - it's always too far, too expensive".

Segregation between sectors is also lessened in a smaller community where staff are often shared between libraries: "I know most of the others in local 'library land' and am therefore exposed to a broader range of library issues".

It wouldn't be a country experience without the unexpected! Tales of wildlife in the form of birds, mice, and even frill neck lizards abound, but this tale remains one of my favourites:

Our rural library was visited by a small brown snake in the front foyer for a few hours. I had to close the doors and divert customers through the Art Gallery entrance until the ranger arrived. After two hours with no ranger having appeared, our slippery friend decided he had had enough and managed to get back outside under the door. It was a bit frightening for me (on my own, of course) but very entertaining for some Canadian visitors who kept asking 'does it sting badly?' Thanks to our local collection I was able to show them all about brown snakes and their venom. I also learned that day that young snakes (this one would have been only a few months old) have high levels of venom and can be more dangerous in spring than some adults. An interesting experience!

And then there's the lifestyle benefits: "you can ride to work with far less traffic and the commute is a few minutes", or as my friend Sean wrote, "I get to drive a *Ute* to head office! So, I look really rural – and manly...OK, so sorta dandy-manly". And if you're Graham Black, you get to wear a loud shirt on Fridays – but perhaps that's just the tropics!

This is the last *inCite* for 2009. To each of you I extend my warmest wishes for the festive season. Wherever you spend it, keep safe, take time out to smell the roses, and hopefully read a book (or two!)

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