

# EEL... ENERGISE, ENTHUSE, INSPIRE

EEL gives a voice to the new generation of library and information professionals. If you have any suggestions or topics for this column, please contact the column co-ordinator Lesa Maclean at [maclean.lesa@gmail.com](mailto:maclean.lesa@gmail.com)

## A tropical change

It's Saturday night in Melbourne and I am at a friend's birthday celebration drinks, being introduced to a new bunch of people. As the conversation progresses, the standard question arises, "So what do you do with yourself?" to which I answer proudly, "I am a librarian."



I then watch the all too familiar surprised looks cross the faces of these new people as they ponder to themselves, *why is this young girl wearing a short dress and heels and not a grey cardigan and glasses?* I then spend the remainder of the conversation explaining that, yes I did in fact go

to university to become a librarian, that I am not obsessed with books, nor do I enjoy telling people to be quiet. I explain with great enthusiasm about the diverse role of a librarian and reveal details of my upcoming position in Tonga.

Ever since I can remember I wanted to become a librarian, travel the world, and volunteer in developing countries. My three wishes came true all at once as I boarded a plane to the sunny tropical oasis of Tonga after accepting a position as an Australian Youth Ambassador for Development (AYAD) to work on a project developing a finance library for the Tongan government. I had decided to take a challenge and swap my job title from School Librarian in Melbourne's suburbia to Finance Librarian at the Ministry of Finance and National Planning in the South Pacific island of Tonga.

The AYAD program was first brought to my attention during a lecture at RMIT University while I was studying towards my undergraduate degree. The AYAD program is an AusAid initiative that deploys skilled volunteers under the age of thirty to live and work in developing countries on various projects to aid developing nations. The process to apply involved a written application, phone interview, mental and physical health tests, and a five-day training conference in Canberra. When I learned of my acceptance to the position I was incredibly excited, but also a tad anxious about what I had got myself into! My project description required that I practically build a library from scratch, from weeding, cataloguing, designing

a database, purchasing equipment with a very limited budget, creating policies, marketing, and training other staff.

Upon arrival to Tonga I was admittedly a little overwhelmed at the enormity of the task at hand. The existing library was spread across three separate buildings in various piles and shelves in total disrepair. It had no order, cataloguing system, policy, or records. I took deep breaths and devised an action plan. Over the past few months I've been able to cross several items off the list. To date I have weeded all the resources, created official policies, and commenced the process of cataloguing and entering all resources onto a new database. I know that I am really fortunate to have the opportunity as a new graduate to manage my own project and learn about all aspects of creating a library in the process. The puzzle of what I learned at university (late nights of assignments and endless lectures) is starting to piece together by cementing that knowledge in a practical sense.

Tonga is an extremely culturally rich country; Christianity is core to lifestyle and the royal monarchy holds a great presence. Technology is growing rapidly in Tonga and many government departments and schools are suddenly acknowledging a need for libraries. Each day to work I wear traditional Tongan attire: a Tupenu (wrap around ankle length skirt) and a kiekie (woven strips of flowers tied around the waist). Following King George Taupou's death in March of this year, Tongan people entered into a period of one hundred days of mourning, for which my colleagues and I are still wearing all black.

It is my advice to new library and information professionals to wear your title as a librarian with pride and to challenge yourself. We are part of an increasingly rare profession that is being widely sought after around the world. If you have an interest in international development, like to travel, enjoy volunteering, and want to spread your passion for libraries globally, perhaps an AYAD project could be a passport for your future too.

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*After growing up on a beef farm near Wodonga, North East Victoria, Sophie moved to the big smoke after high school and completed her Bachelor in Business Information and Knowledge Management at RMIT University in 2010. She then spent a year working as a school librarian at Gladstone Park Secondary College Community Library in Melbourne before trading in high heels, a hectic social calendar, and high speed internet for thongs, relaxed island time living, and snail mail; and she hasn't looked back.*

