



If They Could Solve the (Library) Problems in Champaign-Urbana, They'd Have the Solutions to the World's Problems: A Field Report

by Linda Crowe, Mattye Nelson, and
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Editor's Introduction: It was about one year ago that the authors of this article first reported to us that trouble was brewing in a relatively small urban library community of the Midwest. The area was one in which WLB, then gathering material for its series "Library Life in Middle America," was especially interested; and it was the kind of trouble that was engendering wildly divergent accounts by word of mouth. An investigative field report, one that would document the sequence of events—and dig beneath events to feelings and attitudes—was in order. The three authors, who were able to visit the troubled library in person, took on the assignment with the understanding that all sides of the issue must be represented, and that the authors' interpretations, though invited, must be clearly separate from the reportage of varying points of view. Librarians and not journalists by profession, they used tape recorders and forthright questioning to compile, in the opinion of WLB's editors, a valuable journalistic account.

The trouble concerns conflicting concepts of community library service in a black neighborhood. It is a national problem to be sure; but the way that it develops in Middle America seems to have a special twist. Here is their report.

The towns of Champaign and Urbana share the same site in middle Illinois. Between them they contain approximately 90,000 people. Disc jockeys refer to the area as Chambana, and students attending the University of Illinois there are rarely aware of leaving one town and

entering the other. Municipal consolidation would cut costs, improve services, and generally un-complicate life for citizens; but chauvinistic town fathers would never consider such a merger.

The north ends of the towns join together to make the black neighborhood. Residents of this section do not particularly care which town they live in; they know that they receive the poorest municipal services of all kinds regardless of where they legally reside.

The Politics and the Power

One of the few municipal services with intercity cooperation is that of the libraries. Champaign and Urbana have reciprocal borrowing, and there is close contact between the two libraries due to common system affiliations and a mutual-ity of interest between the directors. But, neither library provided much service to the black North End before 1970. Champaign Public Library had a bookmobile stop in the area. Despite the disposition of the directors to "do something," they had not settled on a concrete plan.

In February 1970, a class of University of Illinois Library School students sought out community leaders of the North End. The students were enrolled in a course initiated by Herbert Goldhor which gave them \$3,000 and a chance to do something about library service to the "dis-advantaged" in their own community. They presented the community leaders with an idea for a paperback library to be opened in the North End's Douglass Center. The Center, operated by

the Champaign Park Board, is centrally located in the area and readily accessible to people in both towns. However, Douglass Center had been the scene of gang conflict a few years before, and many community residents still considered it dangerous.

In spite of this objection, grass-roots leaders—rather than the already identified and often over-extended leaders—enthusiastically picked up the idea. The class approached the Champaign and Urbana Libraries and received favorable responses. The interested community leaders appointed a Community Advisory Committee, which, with the assistance of Alex Boyd, Afro-American bibliographer at the University of Illinois Library, drew up a proposal to submit to the Champaign Library Board.

Through casual conversations with Al Trezza, State Library director, one of the students learned that LSCA funding was available for such a project. The availability of funds was reflected

in the final Douglass Center Library Proposal: "A Black Library for a Black Community," prepared by the Advisory Board and submitted for approval to both the Champaign and Urbana Library Boards on April 8, 1970.

The proposal clearly indicates that the Douglass Center Library was to be innovative and flexible with a very strong black orientation in terms of materials and atmosphere—and with an emphasis on services to youth and self-awareness. The Advisory Board stated as its first priority the hiring of a director who would implement the spirit of the proposal. The administrative responsibilities or limits of the Advisory Board were not mentioned in the original proposal. They were outlined in the transmittal letter which accompanied the proposal when it was submitted to the Illinois State Library by Anthony Baldarotta, director of the Lincoln Trail Library System, on behalf of the Champaign and Urbana Libraries. The project was to be admin-



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istered by a joint board made up of five members: two each from the Champaign and Urbana Library Boards, and Baldarotta representing the Lincoln Trail System Board. This joint board was to have "the benefit of advice from the Douglass Center Advisory Committee."

On June 15, 1970, a contract between the State and the two libraries was signed. Champaign and Urbana were to make available their services as outlined under the provisions of the proposal. The project was to be administered by the joint board described in the transmittal letter and "conducted with the advice of a committee of residents" of the North End. The project was funded with LSCA Title IV at \$44,300 for Phase I, with \$18,560 reserved for Phase II. Champaign and Urbana were to absorb the cost for continuance beyond Phase II, and fiscal responsibility for the project was assumed by Champaign Public Library.

It should be noted here that during most of the proposal writing and negotiations, Champaign, the library with the larger responsibility for the project, was without a director. Early in the fall of 1971, Peter Niemi, from a small town in Michigan, took over as library director.

Various problems in addition to the ordinary delays experienced with any remodeling or building program held up the scheduled opening of the library from September 1970 to March 1971. Most of these problems stemmed from conflict over the authority of the Advisory Committee and the definition of a black library for a black community. The Advisory Committee wanted the renovation of the room in Douglass Center done by a black contractor whose bid was higher than one submitted by a white contractor. The State Library's policy is that contracts go to the lowest bidder; no exceptions made. The black contractor finally got the job when he lowered his initial bid. The first librarian was removed by the Advisory Committee after a disagreement on book selection which centered on the breadth of the black collection, and her book order was cancelled. The Advisory Committee wanted a strong black collection including materials "too difficult" for the community. They also wanted this collection purchased from a black bookstore rather than through the

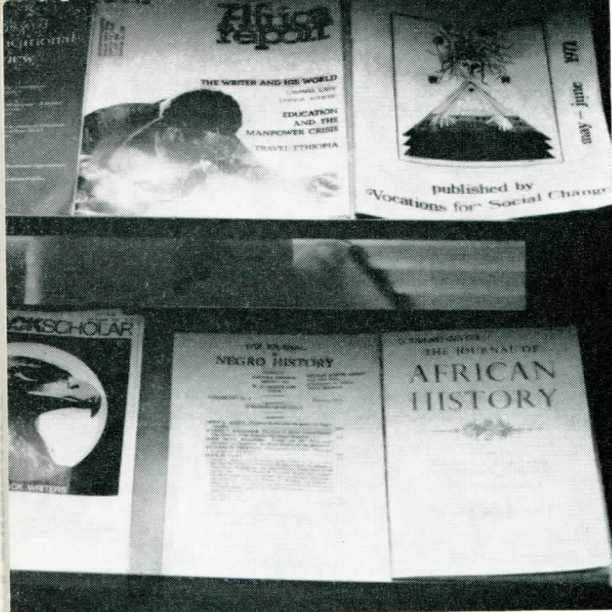
library system. The books were finally purchased through the system.

In June 1971, after the second librarian resigned because she was moving, Marion Butler, a vocal member of the Advisory Committee, was appointed project director. Conflict continued over the collection, which already contained more diversification than conceived by the Advisory Committee's definition of objectives, methods, and means of evaluation. Mrs. Butler felt the library should respond to the needs of the community, and, if those needs included food and shelter, the library should respond not merely with books. The question of gang activity around Douglass Center was again raised. The Champaign Library's heavy reliance upon statistics, such as circulation, for evaluation was also a source of conflict.

In October 1971, a set of regulations governing the project was drawn up by the Joint Board. These regulations stated that the Douglass Center librarian was an employee of the Joint Board and directly responsible to the Champaign Public Library; she would function as a librarian to select materials with "the direct assistance and guidance of the Champaign Public Library and Urbana Library staff, assist readers in the use of these materials, plan programs to publicize and encourage use of the library's resources." The activities "not directly connected with generally accepted duties of librarians or principles of librarianship" were not permitted on library time. Materials were to be ordered through the Champaign Public Library and were to "provide all points of view, opinions, and philosophies" with "a special effort made to include a large number of black-oriented materials selected with the average community reader in mind." The Advisory Committee was to advise the Joint Board and action on recommendations was to be taken only after Joint Board approval.

The Advisory Committee and the Douglass Center librarian vigorously opposed these re-

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strictions, and several heated community meetings came about and resolved nothing.

In early December, the Illinois Advisory Subcommittee for Titles I and II of the LSCA Council met and decided that funding for Phase II would be suspended unless the following changes in structure were met by December 31: the Douglass Center Library was to be placed under the direct administration and control of the Champaign Public Library, functioning as a branch. The Advisory Committee was to be abolished and the Champaign Library was to explore means for receiving advice from a "broader" spectrum of the community. The Joint Board was to continue as the legal authority for the project, and was to work with and advise the director of the Champaign Public Library.

The Advisory Committee and the Douglass Center librarian considered several alternatives, but finally agreed to the State's stipulations, reasoning that "something is better than nothing, and we can wait and see." They were encouraged in this decision by Alphonse Johnson, a young black appointed by the mayor of Champaign to act as liaison between the black community and the white establishment. Johnson is a doctoral student at the University and is not native to the area. Earlier in the year he had replaced a North End community resident who was not considered "competent" by the City Council.

Our Pride and Prejudices

The word of what was happening at Douglass

Center began to spread in libraryland. Just as the Advisory Committee was being dissolved and the Douglass Center attained branch status, we were encouraged to start shaping the sequence of events into a meaningful firsthand report for the profession at large, for we had been watching the project for some time and believed we knew what was happening. We were convinced, perhaps simplistically, that the "problem" lay in unresponsive, oppressive, institutional attitudes held by the library agencies administering the project. Our sympathies were with the Advisory Committee and the Douglass Center librarian.

Knowing our prejudices, we decided that the most objective approach would be to interview the principal people involved on both sides. At that time emotions were running very high. The Advisory Committee and the Douglass Center librarian, although discouraged, agreed to meet with us and cooperate. They had a story to tell, and wanted librarians to know what had happened in their community. The city librarians, however, were much more reluctant, particularly when they were informed that we intended to tape these conversations.

During the American Library Association Midwinter Meeting in Chicago we met with State Library Director Trezza. As the funding agency, the State Library had been involved in many Douglass project decisions and had laid down the rules for refunding. Mr. Trezza himself had attended several rather stormy meetings and had had direct dealings with the Advisory Committee over such issues as the use of the black contractor for the renovation of the center. The Douglass Library Center was also the first project funded by the State to involve a community advisory board.

Mr. Trezza was quite anxious that we understand the position of the State Library and the role it had played in the project. He felt many of the conflicts existed because none of the Douglass Center librarians had been professionals and consequently did not appreciate library procedures. To him the Advisory Committee's insistence on a strong black collection to the exclusion of standard public library materials represented an infringement of intellectual freedom—an issue about which he feels very

strongly. He also felt much of the trouble could have been avoided if the Joint Board and the library administrators had been more forceful and responsible to their administrative duties; certainly he would not have had to involve himself to the extent he had.

Mr. Trezza raised questions from an administrative point of view—such as that of a questionably authorized car rented by Mrs. Butler, the Center librarian, and kept for three months. That the bill was considerable and came as quite a surprise made us pause and consider our response to such a situation. Certainly Mr. Trezza and the State Library are generally committed to the idea of service to the “disadvantaged” and in particular to the success of the Douglass Center Library. Mr. Trezza has the money and the authority and he has been quite willing to use them to help establish successful library service as he views it in the North End. However, the concept of service behind this commitment was frequently in opposition to that of the Advisory Committee.

Man in the Middle

During Midwinter we also spoke to Peter Niemi, director of the Champaign Public Library—sans tape recorder at his request. Mr. Niemi was certainly the man in the middle: caught between Marion Butler and the Advisory Committee and Al Trezza and the State Library, both formidable individuals and groups. He was not director of the Library when the project was initiated and when so much of the conflict arose. He had been called a racist, which hurt him, and he had been accused of giving in to the pressures of the Advisory Committee. He was most reluctant to talk to us, although he did clarify the car issue: when Mrs. Butler called him to authorize rental of a car so she could get out into the community, he advised her to get permission from the Joint Board. She could not reach any of the members of the Board, so he gave verbal permission. No mention of a time limit for the rental was made. Mr. Niemi felt that the timing was poor for an article. Wounds were still open, and feelings at the moment were extremely bitter over the demise of the Advisory Committee. He asked us to wait a few months, when, hopefully, some of the

problems between the people involved would be worked out and the library could begin to function as a branch.

If the project had a chance to succeed, as Mr. Niemi felt it did, then we felt we should wait, since it would be better to write a Horatio Alger story than a woeful tale of another library flop.

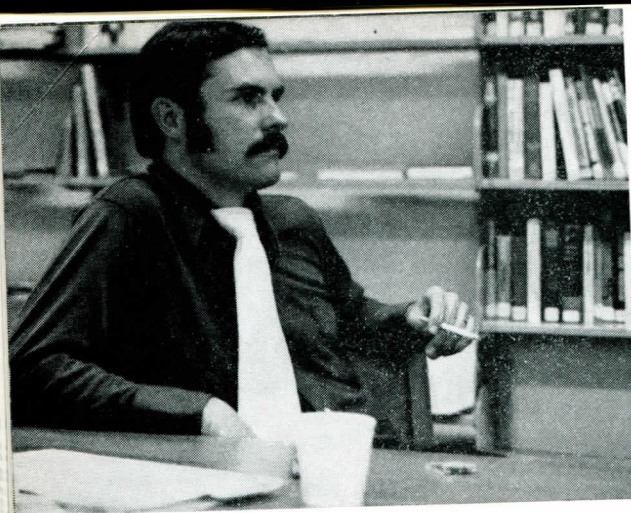
As of August . . .

Peter Niemi appears to have been correct. Certainly the situation has improved on the surface. The tensions have diminished as has the atmosphere of head-on conflict. Niemi and Marion Butler have developed a working relationship built on a kind of respect mixed with wariness and bitterness. The library is functioning as a branch. However, there is still a bad taste in everyone’s mouth, and bitterness is particularly strong in the members of the dissolved Advisory Committee.

There is a considerable difference in concepts of library service between Mrs. Butler and the Champaign Public Library. Mrs. Butler believes

. . . rather than through the library system.”





that, as important as books and education are for black people, some things take precedence over them. These things are best described as necessities of life; food when you are hungry and shelter when you are cold. If the community comes to her with these problems, she will do her best to help them—regardless of the view that this is social work not library work. Peter Niemi believes that, while the boundaries of library service may be wider than in the past, when the library acts as an advocate for the poor it is overstepping its bounds. He also believes that the public library should serve the whole community, and finds it difficult to accept the concept of favoring one element over another. Marion Butler, on the other hand, has a narrower philosophy when she defines her clientele. She is at Douglass Center to serve the “hoods” and “young toughs”; the youth with whom no one else will deal. She feels that if other people in the community are afraid to come or send their children to Douglass Center because of its reputation or the youths she works with, then they are mobile enough to go downtown and use the main branch of the Champaign Public Library.*

The Center's programs include storytelling, film showings, school visits, and other acceptable library activities. They also consist of responses to the needs of the North End as Mrs. Butler sees them. The walls of the adjoining room and one wall of the actual library were painted by youth using the library to depict the history of

* While we find it quite easy to accept the premise that libraries serve only one or two elements of a community—after all, they've been doing it for years with the white middle class and the emphasis on children—we find it a bit more difficult to accept the premise that those members of the North End Community who are fearful of Douglass Center are mobile enough or any more comfortable using the Champaign Public Library.

the black people. The outstanding black and white wall of black heroes in the library is unfinished; the “young brothers” who designed and painted it are now in jail. When the children from the school across the street come to the library after class, Mrs. Butler serves them juice and cookies because she knows they are hungry. During April she was very active in planning a celebration of Malcolm X's birthday which drew 300 people to the Center (if not to the library) and caused a bit of controversy when the American flag was flown below the black, red, and green flag of black liberation.

Mrs. Butler and the members of the former Advisory Committee with whom we spoke feel that the library is an excellent and meaningful institution for service to, and the development of, the black community. Books, knowledge, and information are essential to the development of self-image for the individual and the community. They feel also that their non-book and non-visual concerns for individual and community self-image and wellbeing can best be carried out through the library institution. Unfortunately, because of the heated conflict

Caught in the middle—the patron.



"To an observer, they are speaking different languages; they do not mean the same thing; and, no one has been able to interpret." The two sides—left, Peter Niemi, director of the Champaign PL; right, Marion Butler, Alphonse Johnson, and Netie Claiborn (member of the Advisory Committee).



power struggle, the Douglass Center Library has had very little opportunity to develop its potential in libraryland, or, more important, in the North End.

The True Villain

We were prepared to name a villain when we undertook this article. However, we've come up with no individual culprit and no pat solution to the situation. The problem is the same as that which has plagued the world forever: the communication barrier. This barrier, the fact that neither side will or can attempt to understand where the other is coming from, is the true villain.

For hundreds of years black people have been trying to comprehend the "white mind"—with philosophies ranging from the NAACP views to those of the Nation of Islam (Black Muslims). With the emergence of black pride, yet another aspect of black-white relationships has developed; many black people believe it is the white man's turn to understand the black experience and to accept it as a valid culture and heritage.

Marion Butler and the Advisory Committee of Douglass Center are articulate, vocal, and intelligent exponents of this view. The white librarians administering the libraries and the funds involved in the Douglass project have not yet been able to comprehend this view and all its implications. They lack the black frame of reference to deal with the philosophy of a black culture. Certainly their philosophies of library service differ.

The white librarians can see that they do not speak the same language as the Advisory Committee, but seem to feel as does Joel Rosenfield, Urbana Public Library director, that they mean the same thing. But to an observer, they are

speaking different languages; they do not mean the same thing; and, no one has been able to interpret.

As It Stands . . .

Neither side is satisfied with the situation, but ideologies and personal feelings have been deeply injured and the scars remain. No one wants to reopen the hornets' nest. Concern has shifted from the difficulties of the past to the possibilities of the future. Mrs. Butler and the Advisory Committee are still informally seeking ways to free themselves; Alphonse Johnson is exploring possibilities of a larger library in another location to be administered in cooperation with the University (which will probably not serve the North End any better). The question of more black representation on both the Champaign and Champaign-Urbana Library Boards has been raised and may be pursued. In the meantime, Mrs. Butler has been actively working to involve the community in the library through such programs as her summer outreach, in which Neighborhood Youth Corps Workers carrying backpacks of library materials go out into the community and ring doorbells.

The chances are slim for solving the breakdown in communication between the librarians and the community as represented by the Advisory Committee. As Marion Butler pointed out at the end of our meeting with her, if they could solve the problems in Champaign-Urbana, they'd have the solution to the world's problems. Some very dedicated, intelligent people on both sides of the Douglass Center conflict have tried to grapple with a problem larger than themselves. The fact that it was a library project is really incidental to the issues, but of major importance to every librarian. □

