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Volunteering at the Warm Springs Library

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I've been a volunteer at the Warm Springs Tribal Library for several months. It's become one of the most rewarding 'jobs' of my professional career. Volunteering for any small library often means making do with what you have, working quickly to take advantage of fluctuating resources, and respecting the values of library staff and community leaders. Over the course of eight weeks, with a team of one energetic volunteer librarian, the dynamic staff, and the board of the Warm Springs Tribal Library, we were able to develop and codify interim collection and gift policies, disperse a backlog of gifts, create a library Web page, and increase the library collection by more than 30 percent.

Home of the Warm Springs, Wasco, and Paiute tribes, the Warm Springs Reservation is inhabited by nearly 4,000 tribal members, most of whom live in or around the town of Warm Springs. Although they have much in common, each tribe has its own unique history and heritage. The tribal government provides a variety of services, including education, public safety, utilities, health, resource management, business development, and recreation. Many services not offered by the tribal government are provided by locally-owned private businesses. The tribal economy is based primarily on natural resources, including hydropower, forest products, and ranching. Tourism and recreation also make important contributions. Please see the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs Web page at: <http://www.warmsprings.com>.

The Warm Springs Library is located in the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs Family Resource Center, which was once the Warm Springs Hospital. The former emergency room now houses the library. As with many tribal libraries, the Warm Springs Library serves many functions:

it is a reading room, a place to access the Internet, a study hall for elementary and high-school students, a waiting room (the library is down the corridor from a number of tribal services), and an office space (at least one small business enterprise is tied to the library's phone and Internet access).

The library consists of one large room containing what is primarily a gift-based collection of about 600 paperbacks, suspense and romance novels, elderly reference books, and a very small children's and young adult collection. A few gift periodicals are present, and the library currently has one newspaper subscription. The library contains five workstations with Internet access. Library storage areas (previously the hospital morgue!) are stuffed with donated books. Book checkout is done with index cards and functions, for the most part, on the honor system. A computer spreadsheet lists most of the book titles in the library.

Consistent staffing is a challenge faced by many rural and tribal libraries. In addition to her plethora of other responsibilities, the reservation's K-12 Education Director, Julie Quaid, directs the Warm Springs Library. The library is staffed on a day-to-day basis by one classified employee. The one staff member spends the bulk of her time going through boxes of donated items, applying basic Dewey classification numbers, and shelving items. Because of its importance as a reading room, study area, and e-mail/Internet access area, the library is often open when no staff member is directly present. Warm Springs is also served by the Jefferson County Public Library (about 20 miles away), which is often out of reach for members of a community with no public transportation. The Jefferson County Library provides summer reading program story time services to the Warm Springs Library.



My volunteer relationship with the tribal library was created over a long period of time and facilitated through the assistance of mutual connections. I met Julie Quaid two years ago while searching for co-sponsors for a diversity conference hosted by Central Oregon Community College. We had a common acquaintance who introduced us and Julie eventually served as a keynote speaker for the conference. After the conference, Julie and I occasionally communicated by e-mail. When I was looking for library-related volunteer work several months later, I thought immediately of Julie and the tour she'd given me of the then-nascent Warm Springs Library. After a few months of exchanging e-mails, Julie was able to organize a volunteer role for me at the Warm Springs Library during the summer of 2006.

I'm a pretty energetic librarian, so it was important that Julie and I sit down to discuss the current status of the library and the goals of my volunteerism before I got carried away with my own ideas as to what should be done. The long term goals for this small, homegrown library are ambitious. The library has significant funding resources from its 2004 IMLS grant and hopes to hire a professional librarian late in the fall of 2006. This librarian would oversee the development of the library's online catalog, which will be integrated with that of neighboring county public library systems. The entire gift-based collection is due to be weeded and cataloged during this process.

The wonderful thing about volunteering in such a library is that every small effort has an impact. Julie and I came up with a list of priorities and a work plan for the summer months. We wanted to gain some control over the burgeoning gift book situation and re-focus the collection to better serve the needs of the community.

Based on our informal needs analysis, we desperately wanted to increase the consumer health, children's, and young adult collections. Despite the impending move to an online system, we wanted to see immediate improvements to the collection. The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs has a significant Web presence providing information about its organizational structure, tribal services, and tourist industry, so we thought that adding a library Web page sounded like a good idea.

I had not worked in a tribal library before; my experience has been limited to heading instruction and collection development departments in small academic libraries. The priority tasks required by the Warm Springs Library, however, fell well within my range of expertise. The WS Library had been the recipient of many, many generous donations of used books from agencies and individuals from around the country. Unfortunately, many of the gift items were out of date, in poor condition, or wildly unmatched to the reading interests and information needs of the Warm Springs population.

The first order of business was to create interim gift and collection development policies to guide new acquisitions while culling the existing gift-based collection. The collection development policy was based, in part, on the Menominee Tribal/County Library's Material Selection Policy available at: <http://www.nfls.lib.wi.us/kes/policies.htm#material>. We also conducted an informal needs analysis through several conversations with the library's one staff member, Althea Henry, and a number of library patrons. Ms. Henry was often in the library six to eight hours a day and, because she had first hand experience with each patron who used the library, she had a good idea of patrons' interests. Native American



literature and poetry were in high demand. Patrons wanted information on prenatal care, mental health, and general health issues. No one read romances, but suspense novels were extremely popular. Information on horse care, ranching, and arts and crafts were needed. The library also needed more books for children and young adults.

Tribal libraries are often staffed by only one person and may not have the personnel time or shelf space required to weed through, sort, and dispose of large collections of gift books. While this jaded librarian was able to weed through dozens of boxes of outdated computer manuals, *Reader's Digest* condensed versions, romance novels, and decades-old medical texts in a few hours, my selection and weeding experience and my profound willingness to throw books away is not always shared by library staff members. Distributing gift book policies ahead of time and conducting brief phone interviews with potential donors can help ensure that the gifts that do arrive are useful. Community-based collection development policies and gift book policies provide selection criteria for future volunteers and staff regardless of their library experience.

Volunteering for a very small library often means you can take action very quickly. My proposed gift and collection development policies were approved by the Warm Springs Library Board just two weeks after I'd presented them. After the informal needs analysis, funds were released for two book buying trips, one to Bend's

Barnes and Noble and one to Portland's Powell's Books. Volunteer librarians and college instructors from the community were recruited to help select books in the fields of children's and young adult literature, consumer health, prenatal care, and Native American literature. Bend's Barnes and Noble was chosen for the first purchasing trip due to its proximity and its generous institutional discount. We wanted to get these new books into patrons' hands as soon as possible. With minimal processing and cataloging requirements it was a relatively short journey from the store to the library shelves.

There is still so much to be done. The Warm Springs Library's periodical and newspaper collection needs to be expanded. Children and teen research Web pages are needed. Relationships with the Oregon State Library need to be explored. A job description for the new librarian position needs to be reviewed and an interview committee developed. A coterie of consistent volunteers working under the new leadership must be developed. Staff will eventually need to be trained in integrated library systems, copy cataloging and processing, and other library procedures. The list is endless, but the work is vital. The impact of two short months of very part-time volunteer work is immeasurably rewarding.

Visit the Warm Springs Tribal Library's Web page at: http://www.warmsprings.com/warmsprings/Tribal_Services/Education/Essential_Education_Services/FRC-WSLib/. 

