

Libraries in South Africa: Extending

WHERE THE PEOPLE ASK NEW GOVERNMENT LEADERS TO MOVE FORWARD FASTER, A HANDFUL OF LIBRARIANS REWRITE PRIORITIES FOR POLITICIANS' WISH LISTS

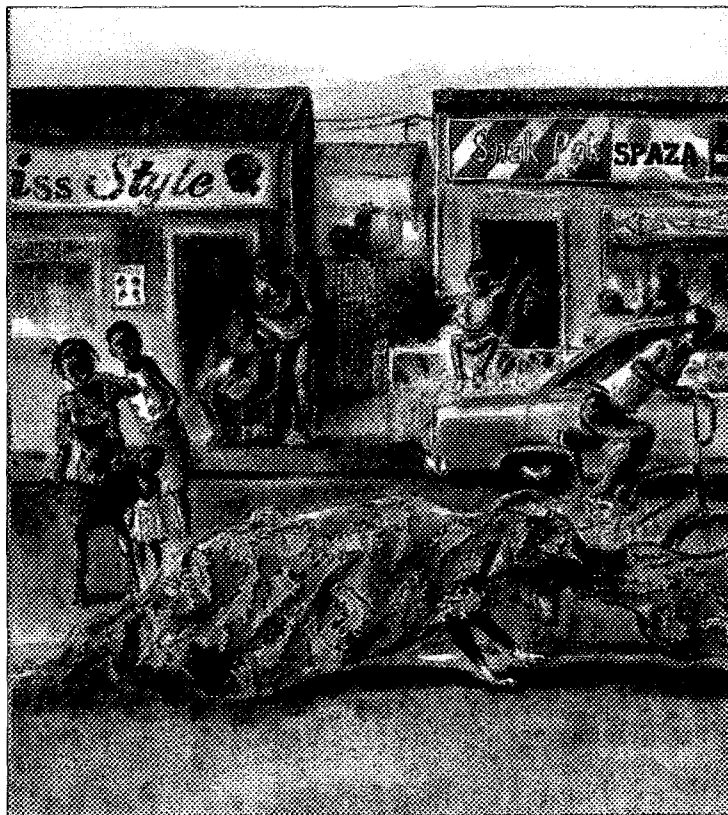
South Africa's second post-apartheid elections took place on June 2 of this year. Having given most of his 80 years to either politics or prison, President Nelson Mandela is stepping aside in favor of his successor, Thabo Mbeki, who was elected in a landslide victory and sworn in June 16. Mandela's challenge was to somehow keep the peace for the past four years in a nation where less than 15% of the population controls the vast majority of the resources, while offering political participation to the other 85%. (For a view of the state of library services in South Africa soon after the country's first democratically held election, see *AL*, October 1995, p. 878-879.)

Mandela has largely succeeded, despite reports of rising violence and economic worries. It's hard to eat political promises and even harder to turn them into the skills and resources needed to grow food. The next government has to address the need for extending those resources, ranging from land and housing to education and employment, to the entire population. Library services are not at the top of most politicians' lists, but librarians Susan Dymond and Melba Geca are rewriting some of those lists. They're getting help from Friends and volunteers, from writers and teachers, but they could always use more.

Dymond is a librarian at the Hout Bay Library in one of Cape Town's seaside suburbs. It's not quite Cape Cod or Malibu, but it could be mistaken for many upper middle-class American suburbs, with the added attraction of a gorgeous coastline. Geca is also a librarian at Hout Bay, having just graduated with honors from the University of the Western Cape. She grew up in Guguletu, one of the black townships on the Cape Flats. It's harder to find an American equivalent for the townships—they are reminiscent of urban public housing projects, but the housing is a combination of small, square, concrete block houses and shanties made of any material at hand.

In Cape Town, the townships are clustered on a treeless plain to the south and west. Their names are a glossary of resistance and survival—Guguletu (Our Pride), Langa (Sun), Nyanga (Moon), Mitchell's Plain, Crossroads, Khayelitsha (New Home). They are all the more

CHRISTINE WATKINS is a consultant to the American Library Association and other nonprofits, working with libraries, educational and cultural organizations, and their communities. She traveled to South Africa and Zimbabwe in March 1999 to meet with authors, artists, librarians, educators, and community groups.



*As the jacket of **Jamela's Dress** states: "Niki Daly celebrates youthful exuberance with vibrant artwork and a tale inspired by the distinctive local fabrics of his native South Africa."*

striking for being surrounded by the spectacular and affluent seaside suburbs that stretch down both the east and west coasts of the Cape, with a mix of colored townships and middle-class white suburbs in between. Cape Town had a reputation for being marginally more liberal than other parts of the country, and it remains somewhat less embattled. Still, the lines between township and suburb, black and white, are firmly drawn.

With a little "Imizamo Yethu"

In the early 1990s, an "informal settlement," otherwise known as a squatter camp, sprang up on the hills just outside of Hout Bay. The land, formerly held by the forestry department, became home to more than 8,000 people almost overnight. The community is called Imizamo Yethu, which means "our effort" in Xhosa, the most common tribal language among its residents.

"When Imizamo Yethu appeared, I knew we had to find a

the Reach

Story and photos by Christine Watkins



Children's book author and illustrator Niki Daly conducts a program at Imizamo Yethu library with the help of Melba Geca.

When we moved into the container, we were safer and more secure, but it was too hectic. The new building is right next to the community center. We'd never make it without support from our Friends organization and other local groups. And we were very lucky to be adopted by the Bodleian Library in Oxford in 1997."

The Imizamo Yethu library needs resources, but it also needs patrons. There's a chicken-and-egg relationship between the supply and demand for information. Living in the townships under apartheid, Geca became a librarian in part because of what libraries meant to her growing up.

"I went to the library in Mowbray, because there was no library in 'Gugs' [Guguletu], but there's one there now," Geca says. "I couldn't study at home—the library was the only place. I prayed to God, saying 'I don't care if you can't make me rich, but please God, don't let me be stupid.' The choices for someone like me growing up were to get pregnant, do politics, or do crime. Deciding to be a librarian was not just about books—they're just a format for people to get information. I wanted a library in *my* community, and deciding to be a librarian was about developing my community."

And a little help from your friends . . .

Geca doesn't especially care for the word "librarian" (too stuffy) and would like a new title. She's talking with Niki Daly, a children's book illustrator living in Mowbray who met Geca when he appeared on a panel with her at the University of the Western Cape. Daly listens to her description of her duties and suggests that perhaps "auntie" would be a better title. Geca protests that it doesn't sound professional enough, and Daly offers "auntologist" as an alternative.

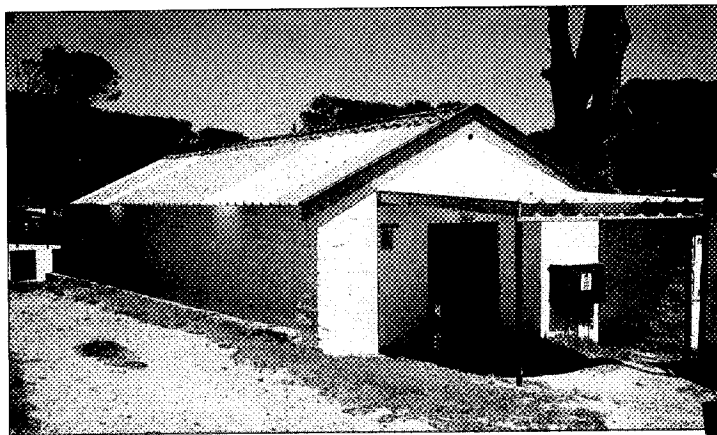
Daly's books are full of joy and possibility, two essential ingredients to living and working in South Africa. In a recent book, he talks about spaza shops, the instant businesses that spring up in the townships and squatter camps that sell everything from Coca Cola to needles and thread. American and European publishers struggle to translate "spaza" without much success. ■

way to get library services to the community," Dymond says. "When I first suggested it, people told me it was too soon. They were worried about getting roads and water in first. But I kept in touch with the social workers and others who were working with the community leaders, and finally one of them told me they thought the time was right."

The first Imizamo Yethu library opened on February 6, 1996. The library was offered the use of one of the old forestry department buildings. Volunteers cleaned, stocked, and painted the building a brilliant orange color, making it visible for miles around. Dymond organized a procession of hundreds of school children to mark the opening of the new library.

Three years later, the library has moved twice: first, to a community center built out of several shipping containers joined together and, most recently, to its own concrete-block building, built with city funds. The rest of the budget is largely donations. The library is open three days each week, with a combination of staff and volunteers.

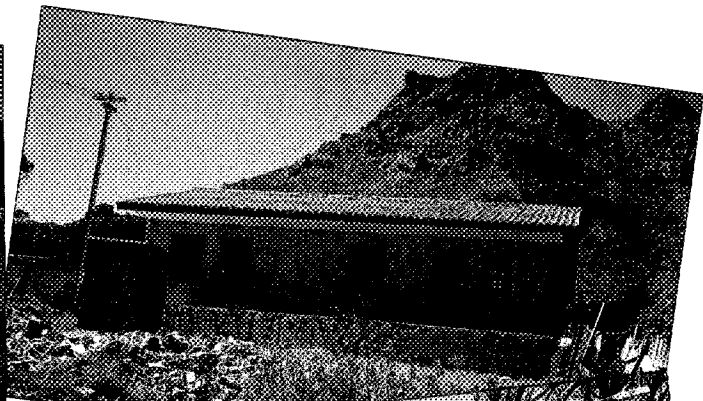
"We've had to learn as we go," Dymond says. "The first building was a great symbol, but we were too isolated.



Clockwise from above, the three faces of the Imizamo Yethu library: the current facility right next to the community center; the original, where hundreds of school children celebrated the opening; and bottom right, the building made of shipping containers.

"I must have been sleepwalking when I lived here as a kid," Daly says. "When I went overseas to study, I finally woke up. After spending about 10 years in England, we decided to come back here after we had children," he recalls.

"I came back in the early 1980s and wouldn't have missed it for the world, not that it hasn't taken some adjusting. Right after we came back, I was taking a friend back to her house in one of the townships and about halfway there, I suddenly became conscious of my whiteness. I wouldn't come to Imizamo Yethu without Melba or someone else as a guide—the local conditions change day to day, you just need to know where you should be or where you shouldn't. But when I get discouraged by the crime lately or how much still needs to change, spending a day here reading to



these kids or just hanging out makes me feel like we're getting somewhere."

Paul Faure taught school in one of Cape Town's colored areas. Now that he's retired, Faure is a full-time volunteer, working with schools, libraries, literacy projects, and child-care centers throughout the townships. He may be more at home in his own middle-class neighborhood, but as he pulls up in front of a school or shop in Crossroads or one of the other townships, he leaves the car doors unlocked. He's always moving, shaking someone's hand, slipping a coin to a young child, calling out a name.

Normalcy under abnormal conditions

The principal at Nelson Mandela High School apologizes to Faure for not having gotten back to him about the computers donated to the school library. The next stop is an elementary school. Faure and the school principal are clearly friends and they joke about having missed a chance to get together over the weekend. About three-quarters of the 1,000 students are squatters, but they are all in school uniforms, washed and pressed. One of the most striking things is the normalcy of life under abnormal conditions: People walk by with laundry, groceries, scrap, and boards that will soon become a piece of furniture or a new wall. Women string beads and sew. Besides the spaza shops, more-specialized businesses sell crafts or other products.

Faure drops in at the Crossroads Library, far more established than the new satellite library in Hout Bay, and funded by the provincial government. The librarian, who introduces herself simply as Gladys, explains that the eight-year-old library is about to become a lending library for the first time.

Left, one of the squatter camps on the hills outside of Hout Bay, where local conditions change day to day.



"It didn't make sense to be lending books in this environment where someone would take them to a home that might not be there the next day—there were fires, tear-downs, people were always moving. The community has always protected the library itself," Gladys says. "Now one of the issues is who should work here. I'm from Nyanga, one of the older townships. When this library first opened, there was no one from the community qualified to be the librarian, but that's changing."

"Our Books Are Precious"

Another township library is about to get a new librarian. Melba Geca just got a new job at the library in Mitchell's Plain. Hout Bay will be sorry to lose her, but Geca will start developing another community, this time even closer to home.

The main library in downtown Cape Town used to be off-limits to blacks and coloreds. Now it's full of students, many like Melba Geca, looking for a quiet place to study, not to mention one that has walls, a roof, electricity, tables, and chairs. One of the floors has been turned into a study area and is starting to look a lot like a student union. Posters deliver messages about the value of reading, the dangers of library theft, and the importance of condoms. A posted

set of rules for library use is headed with the phrase, "Our Books Are Precious."

It's tempting to look at South Africa with a mixture of awe and delight, despair and misgivings, judgment and opinion—hope for the future, caution for the present, and condemnation of the past. Looking on from the sidelines, even if you're observing firsthand, is to be more anthropologist than activist. To recognize how much needs to change is not to minimize how much has changed—most of these conversations and activities would have been illegal under the laws of apartheid.

For South Africans—black, white, or colored—this is not a spectator sport. Their concerns are, surprisingly or not, strikingly similar to ours.

Melba Geca is a young, black woman who wants librarianship to be relevant to her community. She's impatient with the pace of politics. Susan Dymond is committed to her profession and her community. She wants to serve all its residents and wants more resources to do it. Niki Daly wants everyone to be able to read his books in the library of their choice. Paul Faure wants to keep moving—toward the new South Africa. ♦

• "I prayed to God, saying
• 'I don't care if you can't
• make me rich, but please God,
• don't let me be stupid.'"

—Librarian Melba Geca
recalling her student days

Make a Statement with ALA Graphics.

Proclaim your library's commitment to diversity with these unique and lovely works of art, available exclusively from ALA Graphics.

THREE EASY WAYS TO ORDER:

- ▶ Call (800) 545-2433, press 7
- ▶ Fax order to (312) 836-9958
- ▶ ALA Graphics Online Store at <http://alastore.ala.org>

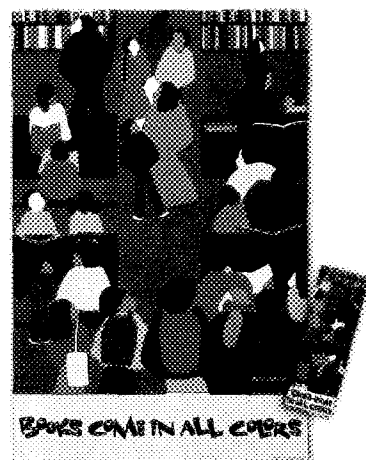
To see more of our outstanding diversity and literacy products, call and request a free catalog at (800) 545-2433, x5046.



Create a Legacy Poster

Promote family literacy through this powerful and symbolic family portrait. Titled "Ancient-Future Family Knights of Endurance," this striking image represents battles fought and ultimate survival. Created by award-winning illustrators Leo and Diane Dillon.

Poster 21" x 25"
Item #5183-0500 \$10



Rainbow Poster & Bookmark

This best-selling, eye-catching poster makes a strong statement in the library or classroom. Use colorful bookmarks as giveaways for patrons of all ages. Painted exclusively for ALA by award-winning illustrator Synthia St. James.

Poster 22" x 34" Item #5073-0500 \$10
Bookmark 2" x 6" 100/pack
Item #5073-0600 \$6