



What do Santa Claus and Libraries have in common?

Maija Berndtson

Chair of the 2012 Finnish National Committee

Session:

Session 70 — Opening Session

Madame President Ingrid Parent, IFLA Governing Board, distinguished guests, delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

I am so happy to see all of you here! You, the participants of this conference have been in my mind for so many weeks, in fact for months. So it is great that you are finally here and the conference can begin.

In a more formal way I could say: On behalf of the entire Finnish National Committee I have the pleasure and honor to warmly welcome you to the 78th IFLA General Conference and Assembly which this year takes place in the homeland of Santa Claus.

Now I can see that some Swedish colleagues are shaking their heads and would like to shout out: "No, Santa Claus comes from Sweden". The Dutch could say that they have Saint Nicholas and our neighbors might point out that Father Frost (or Ded Moroz as they call him) makes Russia his home.

But this is not about where Santa Claus is from; it's about what he symbolizes. I believe that we all can agree that he is a symbol of generosity. I also believe that we, in all cultures, have that same trait of generosity, the desire to give presents and we enjoy doing it.

How is this connected to libraries? Like Santa Claus, libraries might look different in different places, but wouldn't you agree that among public institutions, libraries belong to the most generous? We listen to our customers and try to fulfill their wishes by offering them what they need. I am proud to say that Finnish libraries are especially generous; all types of libraries are open for everyone and the services are free of charge.

Giving also means receiving, receiving the simple joy of making somebody happy. We know it from our personal experience but we also recognise it from our work. A happy customer is the best reward we can get.

This brings me to another level, to international cooperation. We can say that in this kind of conference, we are sharing our experiences, but we may also say that we give and receive something. The Finnish libraries have always been part of the international library world and have benefitted from the experiences of other library systems.

Finnish librarians have in their turn been ready to share their knowledge and experiences with librarians of other countries. The Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have often supported these efforts.

I am happy to announce that a new project is starting as the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs has allocated development cooperation funds for the Finnish Library Association for the years 2012 through 2014.

The Finnish Library Association is assisting the Namibia Library and Archives Services and the Tanzania Library Services Board to extend the services of the knowledge based society to the grassroots level; to give tools for democratic participation; to promote literacy; to provide information about health issues and to support the economic empowerment of local communities by for example assisting small and medium sized entrepreneurs (SME's), especially female entrepreneurs and even farmers. The project is part of the poverty reduction goals of the partner countries in accordance with the United Nations Millennium development goals.

I believe that this kind of project is a good way to show how libraries are empowering individuals and societies!

Last but not least I want to add some words about organizing this kind of conference. We all understand that IFLA as an organization presides over this conference, and the services of the professional conference organizer, K.I.T Group, are more than needed when considering we have over 3300 participants.

Our task, the task of the local organizers, is to root the conference in the country where it takes place. I can assure you that the whole Finnish library community is enthusiastic about hosting the IFLA conference. Over 800 Finnish participants should tell you something about this eagerness. And it has not been difficult to find the near 300 volunteers who will help you with different matters during the conference. Even the National Committee has been big, consisting of 31 members plus their substitutes, as we wanted to give every library sector and organization the possibility to play an active part in the preparations.

I have the feeling that all of us Finns here would like to play the role of a generous Santa Claus. We would like to gift wrap a great conference, to sing carols about Finland, to stuff little samples of Finnish lifestyle, literature, music, film and design into your stockings, and take you on a tour of our elf workshops — our libraries. We want to give you something more than what the average tourist sees; to give you

fond memories of your time here. But remember, Santa Claus is not Mother Nature, so we can't control the weather!

Regardless of how eager we are in trying to provide you a great conference, we cannot do it alone, not without all of you. That is why I hope that together we can all generate a memorable conference, to continue the IFLA tradition in which the conferences in different continents and countries create a beautiful pearl necklace. Let us together polish a special Finnish pearl for that necklace.

Have I surprised you? Did you get inspired a little bit? And while I certainly did not empower you, the goal of this conference is to do all of these. Welcome, have a good conference, and enjoy your time in Helsinki and Finland!