

BLATANTBERRY



Still essential after all these decades **Information for Immigrants**

FEARS AND HOPES ABOUT immigrants and immigration have always been part of American society and politics. They have been manifest in many ways, some receptive and welcoming, others alarming and rejecting. On the positive side, the arrival of waves of immigrants often triggered measures to speed their assimilation into our culture and into the workings of our economy, education system, and democracy. These efforts continue today in U.S. cities as new refugees and immigrants arrive from dozens of oftentimes troubled parts of the world. While a host of obstacles, prejudices, and hostile forces are arrayed against immigrants, the public library is still one of the vital agencies making entry into our nation easier and more effective.

That enlightened measure was proposed in 1852, back when the Irish were escaping from famine and our nation was moving toward civil war. Facing upheaval and wrenching change, leaders proposed building the Boston Public Library as a way to educate and incorporate new and existing Americans into democratic self-government. The proposal coupled information and education with the dislocations and needs prompted by immigration. That case resonates even more urgently in our country today.

“Under political, social and religious institutions like ours, it is of paramount importance that the means of general information should be so diffused that the largest possible number of persons should be induced to read and understand questions going down to the very foundations of social order, which are constantly presenting themselves, and which we, as a people, are constantly required to decide, and do decide, either ignorantly or wisely,” the trustees told the city. We need a public library to make certain those decisions are made wisely, with all the information and erudition we can offer, they asserted.

It is obvious that such measures are urgently needed at present, as we face new populations of refugees, renewed racism, and new threats to informed democratic self-government. Anyone who watches TV news, reads any good newspaper, or follows the issues on social media will hear both promise and anxiety about immigration and information.

Today, fortunately, we have a mature and developed system of public libraries in place. They are staffed by dedicated professionals adding innovative programs to

inform, educate, and welcome immigrants who need schools, jobs, and access to good services to handle life in this demanding free society.

The creative response of libraries and librarians to these needs can be seen all over America. My current favorite example is this year’s LibraryAware Community Award winner, the Fairmont City Library Center of the Mississippi Valley Library District in Illinois (see p. 26). The only thing missing is a strong advocacy effort to tie our libraries to the information and education needs of the millions of new Americans. Information—and the empathy that comes from hearing one another’s life stories—can be an antidote to the bigotry, trepidation, and nationalist arrogance that dominate current political discussion.

There is little doubt that the people of our nation love their libraries. Most of us still need them in as many ways as do new immigrants. It is also true that we get most of our information elsewhere, usually from one of the thousands of sources created to disseminate it for profit and often for ideological, political, religious, and commercial advantage. The library offers a more trustworthy source. While some of those corrupting influences creep into the library’s sources, librarians are there to correct them and to teach Americans new and old how to evaluate the information to ensure its validity.

So here we are, full circle from the Boston of 1852 that envisioned the public library as a way to welcome new citizens. Democratic self-government is still working, though forces are attacking it once again.

The message, then, is: hang in there, librarians! The battles continue, and ours are still among the crucial agencies working for the powers that must win out to secure a truly diverse and strong America.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John N. Berry III". The signature is fluid and cursive.

John N. Berry III, Editor-at-Large
jberry@mediasourceinc.com

Copyright of Library Journal is the property of Media Source, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.