

NATIONAL BOOK FESTIVAL-GOERS LEARN OF VIRGIN ISLANDS

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Last week, reading campaigns were being concurrently featured, one in St. Thomas, by Friends of the St. Thomas Public Libraries; and, The St. Croix Reading Campaign, in St. Croix by the VI Department of Education. The Virgin Islands was also answering an invitation to the National Book Festival in Washington, D.C., hosted by First Lady Laura Bush, and the Library of Congress.

Ingrid Bough-Bell, a Virgin Islander at the Library of Congress (LOC) had persuaded this host agency, to broaden the definition of "States" to include "territories," at the new Pavilion of States. She was assigned to be Territories Coordinator, and extended timely invitations to all territories.

Volunteer Community Librarian, Annette Diaz, from Puerto Rico, and me, from the US Virgin Islands, were present from among the four invited US Territories. Ms. Bough-Bell helped us meet Center for the Book Director, John Cole. In cooperation with LOC and the White House staffers, The Center for the Book's four staff members helped arrange the 70 prize-winning authors' festival appearances. They also organized the Let's Read America Pavilion I.

The Virgin Islands benefited directly from other efforts of the Center for the Book. Along with project manager Roberta Stevens and Chief Officers of State Library Agencies, Center for the Book also organized the Pavilion of the States. There, library and reading promotion tables were set up for every state, the District of Columbia, and four U.S. territories.

Arriving a day early for the Second National Book Festival, in Washington, D.C., had distinct advantages. The Center for the Book's four staffers, to include Maurvene Williams and Pat White, were very gracious in welcoming us. They have volunteered to send promotional materials to the territory, despite having just completed author and reading promotional efforts in 22 states, for the book festival.

Later, despite the frenetic eve of the book festival's opening, we met with Ms. Jo Ann Jenkins, LOC Chief of Staff, and Donald L Scott, Deputy Librarian of the Library of Congress. To get the US Congressional Building in the background of our group photograph, Mr. Scott afforded us his private back porch. We also received generous attention and support from their professional staffs, to include Fern L. Underdue, Special Assistant to the Chief of Staff. Ms. Underdue later photographed LOC executives at our Territories Table.

We were recognized at an assembly of 300 LOC, Washington area and White House volunteers, receiving final orientation from Roberta Stevens, Project Manager, for the book festival's many sites on the Capitol's south lawn. Being privy to such detailed planning was a sober reminder of how carefully the festival design was planned: weather and traffic details, escape alternative routes, ground security policy, police and crowd protocols, referring inquiries through command channels, transportation discretion and celebrity authors last-minute arrangements. The LOC weekly newspaper, The Gazette, was appropriately headlined, "Staff Works Nonstop on National Book Festival." Many citations of dedicated workers were obviously included.

The St. Croix Reading Campaign, a project under the VI Department of Education's Curriculum, Assessment and Technology, with the territory's first Territorial Book Festival, benefited directly from Special Events staff person, Jane Gilchrist's mass-mailing coordination efforts of 13,000 posters, bookmarks and flyers to bookstores, libraries and schools, nation-wide.

Ms. Bough-Bell also scheduled a National Digital Library Program workshop. It was a demonstration of cultural primary source material online, with Marilyn Parr, Reference Specialist, of the American History project. Meanwhile, Ms. Diaz made her acquaintance with the Hispanic Division staff. This was late Friday, and Ms. Parr and her colleagues were ever eager to accommodate a private workshop for a visiting librarian intern from India. While staff workers were scrambling to weekend book festival schedules, Ms. Bough-Bell intercepted Office of the General Counsel administrators, and making their acquaintance. An hour later, we were still collecting Virgin Islands packages for the book festival, and hauling them through tunnels toward security check-out.

We even inspected the pavilion site that evening, driving past the D.C. Police detours, explosive detectors and "snow-fence perimeter" grounds – a few of many preliminary security phases for the nation's First Lady, Laura Bush, and festival co-host – scheduled to tour the festival grounds of the Second National Book Festival.

Guam and Samoa, dictated by considerably farther distances, had sent materials too small to be found in the docker traffic. However, hundreds of larger packages had been sent, and smaller ones got lost. "Guam," "Samoa," "Puerto Rico," and the "U.S. Virgin Islands," the festival's mandatory "Territories" listing, were faithfully displayed at our single table – as much a diplomatic vigil, as they were a formidable petition for expanded space, next year.

National Park Service estimated some 40,000-45,000 persons attended the Second National Book Festival. . I exchanged VI book and reading resource material with e very state. Only one table's attendant looked at me askance, having nothing to exchange. People asked, "Did you come all the way from the Virgin Islands?" Others asked, "Do you have your very own schools, there?" A

few confessed, "I have never heard of the US Virgin Islands!" Librarians and reading teachers asked about employment opportunities, reaching for our colorful pencils and glittering pens. They took every brochure and bookmark we displayed, asking how to pronounce our 60 VI book titles, "Quelbe Maufe and Ting;" others earnestly repeated, "What a Pistarckle!" Our festival display narrative, "Promoting Reading through Virgin Islands Culture," chronicled the history of reading in our community from 1739; the book tradition in our territory, as early as 1770. All this stimulated hundreds of questions – answers for which, we were most proud to provide.

We hinted at the Library of Congress' web address, its US Virgin Islands listing on "Portals to the World," where our newest links include Danish archives catalog lists. The Library of Congress' web-site had a billion hits last year, and I cited some of the broadest categories of links, to include genealogy, commerce, history and literature.

Enid Baa Library pencil-sharpeners were a hit with young readers. Toddlers reached for key-chains, prompting parents to ask about our schools. National Park Service fold-outs will stimulate school-rooms across America, and St. Croix Art & Artists – a list of galleries, venues and artists – will, undoubtedly, receive e-mail inquiries. Flyers and brochures from the Division of Tourism were quickly taken by readers eager to visit us. Many nurses, educational consultants asked about professional organizations in our territory.

Two casual encounters characterize many others at the Territories table: At the very onset, I asked a passerby to photograph me at our table, already buried under oversized boxes. Gerardo Fonseca, a one-time Costa Rican Consulate (1982-90), and friend of St. Thomas merchant, Luis Barrett Bolero, was glad to help me. At the end of the day, a Peruvian mother led two small children to our table. I gave her children "VI Young Readers" bookmarks, supplied by the Florence Williams Public Library. Overhearing Spanish being spoken at the Puerto Rican display, she seemed hesitant. I told her we were sharing the table, with Puerto Rico, as territorial neighbors.

Then, I showed her a 1908 photograph of a Frederiksted music youth band; standing in their taffeta uniforms, they seemed genuinely proud and pleased. Merely a few feet away, against the brickwork of a water culvert, a group of visiting merchants sat in celebration of the national Peruvian Holiday, and having just been regaled by a Danish West Indian junior band. The photograph was a study of restraint and exuberance. Her kids peered at the photograph, momentarily; then, clutching bookmarks marked by our bookmobile, they walked away, waving and seemingly pleased.

By late afternoon, and having passed out some 1200 VI bookmarkers, we, too, were exhausted. The Librarian, Dr. James H. Billington, making his rounds at the new "Pavilion of States," came to our Territories Table for a group photo

opportunity. As the press jostled to focus, we were fortunate to hear the Library of Congress chief librarian sing a few bars of an old Caribbean ballad; proving once again, cordial approaches flourish in overcrowded spaces.

The lampshade dome of the Capitol, the pencil-pointed Washington monument lent scale to story-book sized television trucks with dish antennas. An earnest Senior Citizen questioner, faced with my fading pitch, “Each Virgin Islands book, a bookmark,” asked: “Which of your authors might I have already read?”

I answered assuredly, “Alexander Hamilton: his earliest letters.”