

People in the News

Stephanie (Step) Schmitt



Stephanie (Step) Schmitt, Interim Director of the Library, American University of Afghanistan Foundation (AUAF) in Kabul, shares with us what it is like to work as a librarian and live in perhaps one of the most difficult and dangerous regions of the world. Step was interviewed for *Serials* by Dan Tonkery, President and CEO, Content Strategies and a frequent contributor also to *Information Today* and *Searcher*.

I first meet Step as Systems Librarian at Yale University Library back in 1998, where she was an impressive young librarian who had mastered library technology. She was invaluable to NASIG when that organization was setting up all of their technology-related support activities. Step was a new librarian graduate out of the University of North Texas and soon became one of the leaders in electronic resources. She has a firm grounding in the issues from her background in cataloging, systems and serials.

After working at Yale University Library in systems and taking on the acquisitions, cataloging and systems issues at the Yale Law Library, Step decided to take her talents and broad experience to Zayed University, Dubai, UAE, where she was head of technical services and systems, continuing her strong technology background and talent in cataloging and managing e-resources.

So now we find Step in another library, this time as Interim Director of the Library at the American

University of Afghanistan Foundation (AUAF). The AUAF is a new school, having just been founded in 2002, and is backed by the American government. AUAF is a liberal arts university in Kabul that now has 550 students and a growing modern library. Working at a new university always comes with its own unique challenges as you are blazing new trails and building new infrastructure. Just building a new library at a new university is a challenge that most of us would find to be difficult, now add on top of that being in a country that is in an active war zone, where you travel with bodyguards, and must pass multiple check-points to come to work. You live in fear of death and disaster every day and work in an area where Americans are highly prized targets of opportunity.

With that background, you will be amazed to see how well Step has adjusted to life in Kabul and what it is like to work as a woman and librarian in this very hostile environment. I caught up with

Step and asked her a series of questions. I know that I would not even consider such an assignment, so my hat is off to Step. Here are her comments.

What is it like to work in this part of the world as a woman and a librarian?

As a woman working in the Middle East or in Central Asia, you need to have a strong, developed voice that exudes both confidence and intelligence. My voice is naturally very soft, very feminine, but I never add to it the wiles that some associate with a woman's voice. I don't act in a manner or take on behaviors that fulfill a man's notion of how a woman acts: no tears, no yelling out of frustration. That is what may be expected by the men I work with, but to be convincing, you must have more masculine affects. It is really no different from being a woman in the West. Instead of being called 'aggressive' or a 'bitch', though, in the East, they just say, she is 'just a woman'. We haven't come that far from that sentiment in the West.

I remember when I first started working in the Gulf, my peers in the computing services areas were all male. A male colleague told me that they all agreed to work with me so well because, and I quote, "we've declared you a man for these purposes". I can chuckle about it now, but I remember looking inward to my post-feminist approach to my professional life, thinking, "Is this what it has come to?" In Afghanistan, I have never minded covering my hair. From a practical standpoint, it is best anyways because no amount of conditioning will give you a hairstyle worth displaying. I don't find it representative of culture as much as a convenient way of getting ready for

the day. Covering without complaint is just a social convention to me. I place no level of 'respect' for religion or adherence to rules on the action, but instead think of it as though it is a social uniform. In the TV show Mad Men, everyone wears a hat. It was the style then. In Afghanistan, it is the style, if you will. Even most of the men wear some kind of headgear. It represents to them religious affiliation, of course, but also ethnicity or status. To me, I just fit in better. I learned that lesson quickly when visiting Yemen. You just don't see a woman uncovered. So to avoid standing out like a giant sore thumb, you toss on a scarf. Being a librarian in the Gulf or in Central Asia is a unique opportunity. There are no library schools. Most of the students who come to the library did not have a school library. They didn't learn how to 'do' research. Most of them obtained their education via rote learning. Discovery of information, teaching information literacy, is the solution. It is an amazing opportunity to practice librarianship in this region. To demonstrate norms of information organization and practice, I never valued my MLS studies as much as when I came to this region and managed staff for whom it is all 'new' and taught students how to make use of a Table of Contents and an index or how to use an encyclopedia. The most difficult part of being a librarian is to convince administrators to value and invest in their libraries. It is significant and sad that most of the administrators in the schools that I have worked for are from the West and we might expect them to 'know better'. Of course, this aspect is certainly no different than it is in the West. What library do you know that doesn't have to fight for funding?

Security escort on an outing to the Panjshir Valley



Step with head covered in black chador



Afghan children, overlooking Kabul



What type of security have you had?

In Afghanistan, my guest house has guards 24/7 and they are armed. They are Afghan men who carry AK-47s. I am accompanied to work by a security escort with us in the van along with a driver. There are rules, not always followed, that limit the number of expats in the vehicle at one time. This is the same going to work as going to the grocery store. On campus every corner has a guard station. The entrances are all the same. We don't wear body armor in the academic setting. We are not sequestered like those expats who live on the embassy compounds. I shop with Afghans, go to the bank with Afghans, go to work driving alongside other Afghans. The difference is that I am not doing the driving myself and I am not without security people all around me. Or, at least, those are the rules.

Security is basically a state of mind. You have constant visual representation of a secure environment. But your mind can explore the shortcomings, cracks and possible scenarios constantly. You just choose not to worry about it. Back in May of this year when there was the large car bomb (a van hit an ISAF convoy), our campus was close enough that it blew in the windows of our finance office. And it blew a huge gap, 40ft or so wide, in the retaining wall of the new campus. My boss at the time and several colleagues had just passed through the site some two minutes earlier going in to work. What happens after that is lockdown for a day, maybe two days. Then things are returned to normal. The car bomb that went off in January was only 300 meters or so from my guest house. What do you do? You ask your colleagues how they are doing and try to send words of encouragement while making your own plans to fulfill your promise to return. You have to decide. You have to choose. That is the only level of control you have. To accept your decision and go without fear. It is worth it. For me personally, that will, that decision to go, only lasted for one year. That was my limit. That is the end of my endurance run psychologically.

Where is the AUA in terms of conversion from print to e?

Access to internet resources is problematic due to the cost and availability of bandwidth. This is a consistent problem. In Afghanistan we were told that we have to find a solution with all options

except for increasing bandwidth. The most vital investment for research institutions in the Middle East or Central Asia would be in bandwidth. If you are an administrator who doesn't understand all that online 'stuff and nonsense', then you don't understand the information age. If you don't understand the information age, you are not going to fund purchasing electronic resources. While bandwidth is a common issue, there are amazing examples of digitization work. The Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU) is the main project for preserving Afghan print history. Documents, newspapers, books are all being digitized. They finally got the funding they need to bring their collections to a more public environment. The ACKU is lead by Nancy Dupree. She is one of my heroes.

Other than getting paid, what were the most difficult challenges you faced on a day-to-day basis?

Ah, yes. Worrying about getting paid is one of my least favorite problems working in Afghanistan. On a day-to-day basis there are problems of procedures – both a dependency on paperwork and a lack of consistency in what paperwork is required. There is an officiousness about our procedures that makes the paperwork itself irrelevant and worthless. There is so much paper required for the 'paper trail' that nothing is findable or discoverable. We keep statistics on things that can't be analyzed or force analysis on what wasn't correctly counted in the first place. And that is really no different than the ARL chase or any other counting system. Sometimes I let myself think that this is what universities do now: we count things and we use a lot of paper to preserve our paper trails. The truth is that the day to day is no different. What is different is learning that your shipment of books is with the Ministry and will require a full review before you get the books (i.e. a censoring body will approve all the content). Another example: finding out that an administrator wants to fire the person who purchased *Gray's Anatomy*, and fires them. Or finding out that a faculty member was fired for including a chapter of one of your library books in his class. Censorship is a significant issue in the Middle East and in Central Asia. You have to do your best to ensure that the collections are not 'improved' with black markers or pages glued together.



Step with an AK-47 on a visit to Massoud's tomb, Afghanistan

Were you able to travel in the region? Security at all times?

In Afghanistan, I traveled to the Panjshir Valley and visited Massoud's tomb. It was a perfect outing with another librarian colleague from the Gulf named Ann Swallow. A second vehicle accompanied us that was our security escort. Before we left they explained how many weapons they had and how many clips. I got my picture taken holding one of the AK-47s. It was an awesome, memorable day. General security in Afghanistan has continued to deteriorate throughout my year. Nearly every month had some incident that reminded you that war is still plaguing the nation. Thus, I did not travel much myself.

How does one even get a position in this region?

Jobs are posted to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and on various listservs. If you want to go, you have no excuse not to look and find jobs overseas. Getting a job is based on references and how you represent yourself on paper. I have a pretty good librarian pedigree. I worked at Yale University and the Yale Law Library before heading overseas. Once you get a job, then you are often solicited for other positions and opportunities. I came here not for career opportunity, but to live and do and see the world. My decision came mid-career, but many come just out of library school or just towards the end of their careers. I encourage everyone to go, though. It doesn't matter when.

Are there other Americans working at AUA?

There are many Americans working at the AUAF. Faculty and administrators. Also many are from Europe, Africa, the Middle East and, of course, Afghans.

Is there a regional library professional group?

In Afghanistan, there is no regional library professional group. But the Special Library Association has a Gulf chapter.

What about infrastructure support? Electricity, high speed internet, computing, etc.

Here, you get what you pay for. Bandwidth is via satellite. Our carrier is based in Singapore. It is the most costly aspect of infrastructure. The most problematic for our research needs. Electricity on campus has battery backup. If the lights go out, your computer is still 'on' because of UPS units. You can work away even though you can't see your keyboard. Touch typing is a valuable skill here. Electricity at the guest houses is often weak. I have candles lit nearly every evening and I invested in my own UPS power backup for my various technologies.

Few librarians have had an opportunity to work in such a challenging environment and I want to thank Step for sharing her stories and experience. By the time this is printed I hope that Step will have completed her year in Kabul and safely moved to another opportunity. The continued decline of security in Afghanistan is worrisome to everyone. All the good work and progress are still very much in flux. As the Americans began to pull the military out of the region, the stability of that region and the future of the American University of Afghanistan are in question. Step, get out before the area crumbles!

For more information on the American University of Afghanistan Foundation:
<http://www.auaf.edu.af/>