

## **Libraries Building Communities: Communities Building Libraries**

LIANZA 2009 conference

Jessica Dorr

Libraries change lives. More than ever before, people need access to information and communications technology for everything from basic literacy, to education, communication, life skills, health resources – basically for every facet of their lives. Physically and virtually, libraries reflect the belief that all people – regardless of age, gender, race, income, or education or skill level have the right to information and knowledge. Because librarians actively work to make information available and facilitate the information seeking process, libraries are strong drivers of economic and social progress.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation began with its work in libraries in the United States. In the late 1997, we started with the simple goal that if you walked into a library, you could use the Internet free of charge. The fact that we did not stop with U.S. libraries showed both the tremendous success of this initiative, but also the fact that the foundation does not see libraries as a luxury for the wealthy. Libraries are a critical component in community development and vital to the growth and success of individuals. The foundation funds work that supports effective, sustainable public access to information and communities technology in libraries for people in developing and transitioning countries who would not otherwise have access, and to ensure that it is useful and used in ways that improves people's lives and spreads the benefits.

Despite this success, libraries face a threat to their existence. If libraries do not radically change the perceptions people have of libraries and champion the need to support equitable access in digital forms and devices, they will not survive. For us to be effective as possible, we must be bold. We must learn to use our voice more loudly and more effectively, talking about our importance in hard core terms, with data about impact, with stories about impact. We know the power of libraries to provide users with information, with opportunity, with hope. Now is the time – it is our time – to really make sure libraries stay on the agenda. No one can do it but us.