



A devastating fire at the University of Cape Town caused extensive damage to buildings, including burning down the Jagger Reading Room.

WHEN A LIBRARY BURNS



Siphiso Mahala

Suffocating fumes, charred remains of concrete and wood, ashes blanketing the floor and grotesque-looking buildings with naked red bricks tell a story of the devastating fire that started on the slope of the nearby Devil's Peak and encroached onto the University of Cape Town (UCT) campus. The proverbial saying of the loss of a treasure trove being likened to the "the burning of a library" manifested in a literal sense on Sunday 18 April, when the UCT library was engulfed with fire, destroying

rare archival material stored in the Jagger Reading Room, which housed more than 85 000 items on African Studies alone.

I am here to meet with Nikki Crowster, the UCT's Director for Information Systems and Resources who is also President of the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) and Chairperson of the South African Book Development (SABDC) Board. I learned recently that her office was located in the now burnt library building.

The purpose was to interview her about her career in the library and information sector, which spans nearly four decades, but first we do a site inspection, and we cannot help talking about the damage caused by the recent fire. She can't estimate the damage in monetary terms, but shares her devastation at the loss of the irreplaceable archival material and the massive damage caused to the building, which has been in existence for nearly a century.

We finally sit down and she is still trying to catch her breath after scaling several flights of stairs, but she can't suppress her enthusiasm when sharing the story of her first encounter with a library. "When I was about nine years old, my father took me to join the local library. It was a children-only service with the adult library being about 3km further away." This visit to Steenberg Children's Library, located in Steenberg township in the southern suburbs of Cape Town, remains etched in her memory as if it was only yesterday.

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There is a twinkle in her eye as she shares with fondness her passion for books, which led to her career choice as a librarian. "Perhaps that experience shaped my strong belief in appropriate service delivery in library and information services," she says with a smile. "Subsequently, before I was old enough to join the adult library, I had read just about every fiction title in the children's library (and a few non-fiction books too) and I loaned books from the adult library using my parents' library cards."

After completing high school with very impressive marks in English, her family could not afford to take her to university. She got a job at municipal libraries and it was while working there that she was awarded a bursary to study "librarianship". Consequently, she graduated from the UCT with a Bachelor of Library

and Information Science degree in 1988.

Throughout the four years of her studies, she returned to work at the municipal libraries during school holidays and, by the time she graduated, she had amassed an enormous experience from working in various public libraries, including mobile library services. Immediately after university, she worked in the processing department of the library administration centre.

She believes that books and libraries are key in the development of a society. "Libraries are integrated in the very fabric of society taking services to the points of need in communities; recognising the need for support for marginalised groups; providing leisure, communal and learning spaces; using technology to advance access; claiming a key support role in the global and local transformation agendas," she talks animatedly, as she often does when she speaks about the importance of books and libraries.

In all her years of working as a librarian, she has strived to promote access to books and inculcate a culture of reading. The poor culture of reading in our society remains a serious concern to her, particularly when she is wearing her hat as the Chairperson of the SABDC Board. "Longitudinal research undertaken by the SABDC reveals that over a decade the South African reading culture expanded marginally but still, just about 15% of South Africans read. Inculcating the practice of reading in our society is tied into the South African schooling system, poverty and the varied perceptions of the value of books. Libraries are under-funded and, in present day Covid-19-shrinking budget allocations, they are not considered in the same basket as other social services."

Photo: Je'nine May



Nikki Crowster is the University of Cape Town's Director for Information Systems and Resources and President of LIASA.



She believes that community libraries have a very important role to play in promoting a culture of reading through storytelling, reading recommendations and events linked to reading. At this point I wonder about the positive impact community libraries could have if there was an established and systematic interface with communities, where each community library adopts a book club, opens space for a local poetry group, or hosts authors to run regular workshops. I am imagining a situation where each of the more than 2 000 community libraries were to buy at least two copies of every published local book in South Africa (of course, following strict criteria), meaning authors would instantly sell at least 4 000 copies before they enter the retail market.

When I ask her what can be done to support more local content, Crowster lists a number of actions that ought to be taken. These include:

- More funding to libraries for ongoing replenishing of library material
- Monitoring that departmental allocations are spent as intended. Holding accountable financial mismanagement and underspending on library material. Examine the negative impact of procurement policies.
- Engagement with communities, schools and other stakeholders on language and content. Create a “Friends of the Library” support group
- Support for local authors.
- Support for indigenous language publishing.

When I ask about the future of libraries, Crowster invokes her role as the President of LIASA, the professional body representing the library and information sector. She says it is part of the vision of the association to ensure that the sector “adjusts to the changing needs of society”. LIASA continues unabatedly to meet the mandate “to protect the public and to protect the profession” that accompanied the status of Professional Body conferred by the South African Qualifications Authority.

As we wrap up our interview, we find ourselves going back to the matter of the UCT fire. She tells me that she took up the position of Director: Information Systems & Resources in January 2018. Barely three years into her job, the greatest disaster to occur in the library sector since the dawn of democracy in South Africa strikes during her tenure. She shares with me the extent of the damage.

“A large part of the 60-year-old African Studies collection was lost to the fire alongside the African Film collection and, in part, rare and antiquarian books, journals, manuscripts, maps and ephemera. Twelve thousand crates of material, including the audio-visual archive, were salvaged from the two levels below the Reading Room. These are in various stages of recovery and remedial conservation from fire and water damage.” She seems to go off on a tangent as she recounts these factors. Sombrey, she concludes: “The impact of the Jagger fire is far-reaching beyond the loss of collections.”

However, instead of wallowing in the misfortune that has befallen her institution, Crowster says she has learned invaluable lessons. The gesture of the volunteers who assisted after the fire incident affirmed her belief in universal goodwill. “Volunteers from all walks of life willingly and generously gave of their time, effort and expertise to the Jagger fire salvage and recovery,” she is emotional as she expresses her gratitude. Somewhat unconvincingly she consoles herself: “All the plans in the world, no matter how detailed, will be put to the test and be revised in an actual disaster.”

As a reader and a scholar whose life was changed by exposure to books through a library visit, I cannot help but empathise with her. I think of future students who may never get to read what was contained in the archive, scholars whose research questions cannot be answered because there are no verification sources, and authors whose dissertations, monographs and books may never be retrieved again. When the library caught ablaze, it was not just the building that was destroyed, it took away irreplaceable knowledge and information.

Crowster has not been as enthused by her involvement as a project leader in the UCT Jagger fire salvage. She believes this initiative affords them an opportunity for renewal, to rebuild out of the ashes, like a Phoenix in the Egyptian mythology, a transformed and modernised library network. “The Jagger fire has accelerated the contemplation of being an academic library in a leading African research university in a country with notable poverty and deep inequality. The rebuilding of the Jagger Reading Room is inextricably tied to the conversations about transformation of library and information services; of the contributions to social equality; of the upkeep of human rights, especially access to information; of the role in the representation of social and historic narratives from all perspectives; of efforts in preservation of culture; and relevance to being African. The new Jagger will be the outcome of broad consultation and debate.”



Rare archival material was destroyed in the fire at the University of Cape Town.

Hearing Crowster's passion when she speaks and seeing the glitter in her eyes as she talks passionately about the meaning of books in her life and the importance of libraries in society, one cannot help but think of many South Africans who still do not have access to books. If we believe that reading is an essential tool for self-empowerment, then many of our communities, especially in rural areas, are still deprived of this fundamental right. The irony of it, however, is that in this day and age there are still instances of arson, where mobs wilfully burn libraries to express their anger over perceived lack service delivery.

I have previously written about the courage of young Egyptians, who were prepared to lay down their lives in defence of the Alexandria Library in the midst of uprisings in their country. As the so called "Arab Spring" swept across the northern parts of the continent, culminating with the removal of the erstwhile Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak, an inspirational story was unfolding in the background. The youth of Egypt formed a human chain to defend the destruction of their library by an angry mob. Eventually intellectual sanity prevailed over popular rage, and the historic building was left untouched. Not a pane of glass was broken, nor a leaf torn from a book. Today, the Library of Alexandria stands tall as a beacon of Egyptian learning, knowledge, memory

and resistance as their archival material has been preserved for generations to come.

The preservation of the archive is crucial in our relentless pursuit to reclaim our history and build a nation of readers.

The archive is about the past in custody of the present but belonging to the future. Since digitisation is integral to the preservation of information for future generations this task forms part of Crowster's ambitions. "My plan includes advanced research on the role of Educational Technology as an agent of change in libraries," she says.

The preservation of the archive is crucial in our relentless pursuit to reclaim our history and build a nation of readers. When a library burns, part of our collective memory gets lost.

