

Global Libraries Access to Learning Award Announcement Q&A August 2010

What is the Access to Learning Award?

The annual Access to Learning Award (ATLA), now in its eleventh year, recognizes the innovative efforts of libraries and similar organizations outside the United States in providing free public access to computers and the Internet. The award is presented by the foundation's Global Libraries initiative, part of the Global Development Program, which works to open the world of knowledge, information, and opportunity to help improve the lives of millions of people. The award includes a monetary gift of US \$1 million to promote the development of new models that increase access to information for people who need it most.

Who won this year's award and why?

This year, the ATLA is presented to the Veria Central Public Library for providing innovative technology and training programs to meet the economic, educational, and cultural needs of hundreds of thousands of people in the region. The library has emerged as a leader in Greece by offering a range of services and programs for children and adults, and helping other libraries replicate its success.

Located in the county of Imathia, the Veria Library realized the power of technology early on. In 1992, the library's catalogue was already fully automated. In 1996, the Veria Library became the first in Greece to offer free access to computers and the Internet. One year later, it was the first to have its own website. It also developed the first social network to connect librarians across the country.

In addition to offering advanced information and technology services, the library has become a vibrant community center that promotes learning and creativity. It places a particular focus on young people, including highly popular programs like Magic Boxes, which provides children with computers, music stations, indoor and outdoor play areas, and a full schedule of activities—from storytelling to arts and crafts.

What has been the impact of the Veria Library's efforts in the region?

The Veria Library has made a significant impact on the community, surrounding areas, and libraries outside the region. It has the highest percentage of member subscriptions in Greece—41 percent of the city's population—and the best record regarding materials on loan.

To reach people in distant rural villages, the library sends out mobile libraries equipped with books and laptop computers. The library staff is also working with two neighboring towns to build branches modeled after the Veria Library.

To date, the library has provided IT training to nearly 3,500 adults in the county of Imathia. In 2009 alone, the library held 60 seminars on creativity, reading, and digital skills. The mobile libraries reach 30,000 people. In addition, the Veria Library helped more than 60 Greek public libraries develop their own websites and to be included in the public libraries portal that it created. The library serves a total population of 180,000 through a central library, two mobile libraries, and a network of branches.

How will the Veria Library Use the ATLA?

The Veria Library will use its award to expand its network of libraries, upgrade its IT infrastructure, replicate the Magic Boxes concept throughout the main building of the library and all new branches, and extend its impact beyond the region through websites and social networking. Microsoft, a partner of the foundation in its efforts to help public libraries connect people to the Internet, will provide the Veria Library with donations of software and technology training curriculum.

Has the foundation given the award to other organizations in Greece? Who are past ATLA recipients?

The Veria Central Public Library is the first organization in Greece to receive the ATLA.

Last year's award was granted to the EPM Foundation of Medellin, Colombia for its innovative use of technology in public libraries to promote community development. Other past recipients include Vasconcelos Project in Veracruz, Mexico (2008), Northern Territory Library in Australia, READ Nepal (2006), Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha in Bangladesh (2005), China Evergreen Rural Library Service Center in China and Aarhus Public Libraries in Denmark (both in 2004), Smart Cape Access Project in Cape Town, South Africa (2003), BiblioRed library network of Bogotá in Colombia (2002), Proyecto Bibliotecas (Probigua) in Guatemala and Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación in Argentina (both in 2001), and Helsinki City Library in Finland (2000).

Why does the foundation present this annual award?

The foundation is working to open a world of knowledge, information, and communication by helping public libraries to provide free computers connected to the Internet, and training on how to make full use of these tools. The ATLA honors and encourages new, innovative ways to provide these services to people most in need. We learn a great deal from the work of ATLA recipients and recognize their innovations as models that can ensure more people gain access to information that can help them live healthy, productive lives.

Who selects the award recipients? What are the selection criteria?

An international advisory committee made up of librarians, information technology experts, and foundation staff evaluates applications based on candidates' innovative efforts to:

- make computer and Internet access free to the public;
- train the public in using technology and accessing information;
- educate staff on technology use; and
- reach out to underserved communities.

The committee selects a list of final candidates for consideration by the foundation. Following an independent financial and organizational review of those finalists, the foundation selects the award recipient.

How does the foundation determine whether a potential ATLA recipient is making a strong impact through its work?

We consider programs that provide free access to information technology, which enables opportunities for people to increase their social and economic well-being. Examples of this can include helping farmers to use technology to learn about crop prices and improved practices, teaching job seekers how to increase their technology skills and find employment online, and showing students how to use Web-based resources in their coursework.

Who is eligible to receive this award and how can an organization apply?

Any public library or similar organization outside the United States can apply for the ATLA, as long as they provide free public access to information through the use of computers and the Internet. The foundation particularly encourages applications from institutions in developing countries or those working with disadvantaged communities. We will give preference to organizations that reach out to socially excluded groups, such as poor or disabled patrons, or those from minority communities. Applications for the 2011 award are available at: www.gatesfoundation.org/ATLA.

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