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Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

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*If I have seen further it is by
standing on the shoulders of giants.*

—Isaac Newton

My colleague Bill Kelm asked me to write a short piece describing a day in the life, demonstrating how I go above and beyond the duties assigned to me as the Interlibrary Loan and Document Delivery Specialist for Portland State University. I was honored and humbled. I spent a lot of time thinking about how I could address the assignment. Should I actually give a snapshot of one day? Should I describe in detail those things that might distinguish me from other paraprofessionals? One evening, I found myself in Jimmy Mak's, a jazz club in Portland's Pearl District with especially good Saganaki, making a list of activities that separated me from my support staff counterparts.

I wrote down that I serve as Chair of the Northwest Interlibrary Loan and Resource Sharing Conference, having been a founding member, as well as the Program Coordinator for two years. I listed the Scholarship of Teaching Resource Team grant that my team had received, an award to support a project examining student research methodologies. I listed an article written with two colleagues

about how cooperative service can resolve the challenges of grey literature requests. I listed the scholarships I was recently awarded, the Helen Benning Regnier Scholarship and the Tom and Roberta Drewes Scholarship.

I thought about my successes, and what made those successes possible. One might attribute publications and awards to good luck, and certainly there is some amount of luck inherent in meeting like-minded individuals with whom you can collaborate and especially in "winning" money, but behind these opportunities and gifts is philanthropy, the desire to help others, and a belief that individuals can make the world a better place. I am personally driven by altruism, as were my colleagues and the philanthropists who created those awards.

Beyond collaborative communication, I have been involved in task forces, initiatives, software enhancements and customizations, and movements to increase accessibility. In considering my contributions to librarianship, I recognize that I am privileged to have worked with like-minded individuals, and I realize something that I have known all along: collaboration is the only way that great discoveries are made, hence the title of this article, "Standing on the Shoulders of Giants." Isaac Newton, who gave us theories of gravity, motion and calculus, wrote in a letter to a colleague, "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." If I have been a success, it can be attributed to the support of my colleagues: Bill Kelm, Cyril Oberlander, Rose Jackson, Jennifer Dorner, Bob Schroeder, the Regnier and Drewes families, and so many others whose actions have been driven not by financial or self-centered motives, but by the conviction to serve others and see an improved world.

The basis of my interest in librarianship is philanthropy, volunteerism, an eagerness for positive change and a desire to leave this planet better than I found it. With an iron will to collaborate rather than compete, I find myself unable to refuse opportunities



to foster democratic, universal access to information. A good friend and colleague refers to the urge to volunteer (yes, of course I will copy edit your paper) as “helium hand,” but the drive to successfully work with others is stronger than the elements—it is a spirit of service. More than a sense of altruism or obligation, it is a desire to see others grow and watch the energy of open minds ripple across a luminescent ocean of change. It is an immersion into life, interconnectedness, the sense that we’re all working toward the same outcomes. It is with fervor and fuel that I approach writing topics, interactions with others and the intricacies of life. Each of us has been afforded an opportunity to embrace change or resent it. Why not volunteer? Why not engage in a good challenge? It is this attitude that distinguishes a professional from a paraprofessional, no matter what your official status.

If you are a support staff person in a library, you can make a difference too. If you have within you a desire for democratic, universal access to information, or a drive to discover meaning by recognizing the signs around us, then open your mind, and know that you can become a new person every day. Hate to be bored. Have a helium hand. Adapt early. Do not focus on the differences between you and others, but instead, grasp the hands of your colleagues and communicate to the best of your abilities to ensure that philanthropy and universal access remain the guiding principles of librarianship. You, your library, and larger systems will benefit from your good ethics and good will.

If you are an administrator overseeing support staff, consider how you might collaborate with or foster collaboration amongst your staff, and be sure to give your employees room to grow!

About the Author

Sherry Buchanan, Creative Writing M.F.A., is the Interlibrary Loan and Document Delivery Specialist at Portland State University, supervising six student staff

and managing the workflow of an Interlibrary Loan operation that fills over 21,000 requests per year. She has over seven years of experience within three academic libraries, including Portland State University, Willamette University and Oregon State University. Sherry is the Chair of the Northwest Interlibrary Loan and Resource Sharing Conference, having been a founding member of the conference, and served as the conference’s Program Coordinator for two years. Sherry is pursuing a Master of Science in Library and Information Science and a Certificate of Advanced Studies in Digital Libraries and expects to graduate in December 2006. Her research interests include cooperative service, grey literature, research methodologies, open access and universal access. Feel free to contact her at: sherrybuchanan@gmail.com 

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Northwest Interlibrary Loan and Resource Sharing Conference: www.oclcwestern.org/nwill/

