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From New York to Europe to Hawaii to Fiji to Hawaii to Portland:

Reflections on the past 35 years

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How have I managed to stay in the same career for almost 35 years? For me the answer is simple—it's the library profession itself that has helped me avoid burnout. I have taken advantage of the diversity this career offers—first by traveling and working in other cultures, then by taking on different aspects of librarianship.

Right after I finished college, I considered teaching or social work as a career—definitely something in the “helping professions.” I tried social work in New York City, working with drug addicts and people who had attempted suicide. But being an idealistic child of the 60s, I felt that social work was not for me. I felt that I was just counseling people to conform to society's norms.

So, I took off with all the money I had and a one-way ticket to Europe. I had never flown before, had never been on my own. For two weeks, I cried myself to sleep every night. My pride was the only thing that prevented me from going back home. After those first two difficult weeks, however, I settled into a vagabond's life and began to enjoy myself. I traveled alone all over Europe with no particular itinerary. In retrospect, it was the best thing I ever did for myself. I gained self-confidence and learned that ultimately I have to rely on myself for what I need in life.

While staying in a youth hostel in Holland, I met a woman who was taking a break from her MLS studies, and I actually asked that naïve and clichéd question: “You mean you need an MLS to shelve books?” She was very polite as she patiently explained to me what a librarian really does. And it clicked! I knew that this was what I wanted to do with my life!

I continued my travels for five months, until my money ran out. After returning to

New York, I began the process of applying to graduate school. All my traveling made me adventurous, so I decided to get away from the familiar and apply to schools in places where I would like to live for two years. One of those places was the University of Oregon, which still had a library school at that time. For reasons that probably do not require much explanation, I ended up choosing the University of Hawaii.

While there, I was very fortunate to be able to be a part of a special federally funded institute called “Cross Cultural Training in Librarianship: The Librarian in a Pluralistic Society.” And Hawaii was the perfect setting in which to pursue this type of study. The institute was made up of 10 LIS students and 20 practicing librarians. I was able to filter all my course work through the lens of multiculturalism and how libraries can adapt traditional systems to meet the needs of underserved communities.

I left library school with high hopes, ready to get started in my new career. Unfortunately, it was 1972 and the economy had hit bottom. It was a time of gas rationing and price freezes, and very few jobs for first time librarians. The lack of employment only succeeded in feeding my travel bug, and I decided to join the Peace Corps. A position opened up right away in Fiji, and I knew I could not pass up this plum assignment. While there, I worked for the public library system. One of my duties was to develop and then teach a certificate program for paraprofessionals. Through this program I realized that I enjoyed teaching adults. Once again, my travels were teaching me something about myself and my career.




After living in Fiji for two years, I decided I was not ready to go back to the “Mainland” (the continental U.S.). Instead, I got a job on the Big Island of Hawaii, at the University of Hawaii at Hilo. Next, I worked as the head of a combined public and school library. These jobs allowed me to develop many different skills, including collection development, project management, supervision, program planning, story hours, reference, teaching, and of course handling “politics.” Whenever I thought I might be getting bored or to the point of burnout, I tried to re-invent my job as much as I could.

After nine years, though, it was clear that the only way I could develop further in this environment was to go into upper-upper management. I still wanted to work directly with patrons, not become sealed off from that in the world of management.

My husband and I decided that this would be a good time to move. True Oregonians have no problem with the idea that someone would choose to move from Hawaii to Oregon, and that is exactly what we did. We set our sites on Portland. My experience in Fiji showed me that I loved teaching adults so I was thrilled to get a job at Marylhurst University right away. As an institution that focuses on adult learners, Marylhurst was a perfect fit for my interests. I stayed there for 14 years without burning out. As in my previous job, I was able to move into different areas—first in technical services, then to reference and teaching. One of the great benefits of working in a small library is that you often get to learn to do a bit of everything.

Now I am the director of Emporia State University’s MLS program in Oregon. In this position, I get to combine my many interests and years of experience. I am an education geek, and I love working with adult students. I get to shepherd the new recruits into the world of librarianship, and greatly enjoy the academic advising I do along the way.

I’ve been lucky in my life to have been able to follow my curiosity and spirit of adventure while at the same time developing in my career as a librarian. I relish the fact that after 34 years as a librarian, every workday is different. I relish feeling a sense of “home” here in Portland after 20 years, but sometimes, just between you and me, those traveling feet start to itch a bit... 

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