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## No More Candles! Second Career Librarians Tell Their Stories

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# No More Candles!

## Second career librarians tell their stories

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by *Jane Corry*  
and *Rachel Mendez*

### AUTHORS

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### PANELISTS

*Lee Catalano*, Youth Librarian at Multnomah County Library. Graduated from Syracuse University School of Library and Information Science in 2001.

*Victoria Oglesbee*, Branch Supervisor at Multnomah County Library. Graduated from Emporia State University School of Library and Information Management in 2000.

*Steve Armitage*, Reference Librarian at Multnomah County Library. Graduated from Columbia University School of Library Service in 1988.

*Rose Jackson*, Reference Librarian and Information Consultant to the College of Urban and Public Affairs at Portland State University. Graduated from Syracuse University School of Library and Information Science in 2002.

*Susan Smallsread*, Youth Librarian at Multnomah County Library. Graduated from Emporia State University School of Library and Information Management in 2000.



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“Wherever your path leads, remember the twisting paths these people took to get where they are today. And remember that the place you end up might be a place you like very much indeed.”



On a beautiful day in July, a group of librarians gathered around Jane Corry's dining room table. They had been called there because they are all "burn-ins": burnouts from other careers who found their way to librarianship.

The assembled company chatted over iced tea and spice cake while Quincy, Rose's beautiful young daughter, played with Toobers and Zots in the living room. The conversation meandered and people laughed a lot. Out of this easy conversation three threads emerged:

- A mid-life career change to librarianship was a positive experience for all participants.
- Although none of the librarians had seriously planned a career in libraries, every one present is quite a bit happier as a librarian than in their previous careers.
- All felt that library work is socially important, fulfilling and worthwhile. Some commented that librarians who have not had a previous career are sometimes less able to recognize this fact, and will even express a fear that library work is somehow unworthy or unnecessary.

#### **In my past life...**

Our panelists came from an interesting variety of careers. As you might expect, a few came from other helping professions: two teachers (and one who tried teaching and just said, "No") and a social worker. You might not expect, however, that our librarians include a former Navy officer (still in the Reserves), a pharmaceutical salesperson, a furniture salesman, a candle maker, and one who quit her job at a power plant trade journal because she was afraid she was "becoming a Republican." (Not that there's anything wrong with that. – ed.)

Both our teachers quit after having their own children. Jane admitted that after she had her own child other children started seeming less cute and their parents pushy. Victoria quit her elementary school teaching job after having five children of her own. Rose, after leaving her full-time Naval position, briefly tried teaching high school before realizing it was a very bad idea indeed.

Susan put in a full 23 years as a social worker, working in youth services, sometimes with very disturbed kids. Steve, when he found his artwork wasn't selling, became a salesman at a furniture store, and put in 20 years. After leaving her trade writing job, Lee became a grant writer for nine years, until she couldn't stand to ask one more person for one more dollar. Done with teaching, Vicky started a candle making business. She was so successful that she had to quit because she was so sick of seeing candles. She got to the point of saying, "No more candles!"

#### **How I became a librarian**

Only a couple of our panelists had considered library work earlier in life. Jane was the only one who wanted to be a librarian as a kid, although several panelists remembered their elementary school librarians quite fondly. Lee actually applied to library school at age 22, but decided that she'd had enough school for the time being.

Others, though, had no "calling" to library work at all. Most seemed to fall into the career accidentally. Steve started considering it after meeting his future wife, a youth librarian at the time, who enjoyed her work much more than he did his. He took it more seriously after playing Trivial Pursuit with friends and impressing them so much that one told him he should be a reference librarian. One even sent Steve's name and address to various library programs so that catalogs would come to his home.

Rose, Susan, and Vicky all volunteered at the library and got hooked. When Susan



started burning out as a social worker, she underwent career counseling. Tests concluded she should be a social worker or a librarian.

In reality, not many librarians get to read on the job, and it seems naïve to us when patrons say, “I’d love to be a librarian because I just love to read.” Still, a few of our panelists did become librarians simply because of liking to read. When trying to figure out what to do next in life, they figured, “Hey, I like books!” For example, Lee said, “I liked to read, and I liked the Central Library building” in downtown Portland. Vicky decided to go to library school for an even more unusual reason. She just wanted to get good at research for her own writing projects, not work in a library.

The decision of where to go to school was just as capricious for many. Lee chose Syracuse because they didn’t require her to re-take the GRE. Vicky quickly changed her birthday plans when told she’d have to join the current cohort immediately, or wait three years for the next one. Steve chose Columbia over a school closer to his home in Connecticut because the local library director said she would hire him with a degree from Columbia, but not the closer school. He commuted to New York, worked 40 hours a week, and went to graduate school at the same time.

Rose ended up going to Syracuse while waiting for the University of Washington to start their distance program. Shortly after becoming a library clerk, Jane saw a flyer for Emporia and thought, “Why not?” Susan heard about a coworker doing a distance program, and enrolled in Emporia. Except for Steve all attended distance programs.

### **Older and wiser**

Steve was 47 when he started library school. Victoria worried briefly about the fact that she’d be 50 when she got her MLS, but then realized that if she didn’t start school, she’d be 50 and not have an MLS. Lee worried, too, about starting at 45, but

a friend told her that was stupid. Once she was in the program at Syracuse, she found that she was not the oldest student by any means. She met many mid-career students.

Jane never worried about her age, her own mother got a BS at age 40, followed by two masters. Susan is from a family of multiple degree holders, so it didn’t seem strange to her either.

### **You look like a librarian**

When she announced her impending career shift, Rose got negative feedback from friends, not because of her age, but because she was going to take such a salary cut. She hadn’t even checked the salaries before pursuing a career as a librarian, but has no regrets.

Most people received positive comments about their new career choices, although many of them were backhanded compliments. One of Vicky’s sons said, “Mom I know why you want to be a librarian, you look just like one.” (Another son was less enthusiastic, saying, “Mom you’re nuts, librarians are so mean.”) Rose’s family told her that being a librarian was perfect for her since she was such a geek. Susan’s older brother thought librarianship made sense for her, since she had always been a reader.

### **Happily ever after?**

All of our panelists reported feeling quite satisfied as librarians. Most said they are happy to go to work. Every day at work is different. All the different questions, some quite unusual, allow the librarians to learn things themselves. Steve loves the job because we help people and information is free for everyone. Libraries, he pointed out, are a true democratic institution where everyone gets treated the same.

For Susan, after so many years committed to helping children who had grown up in terrible conditions, she now relishes helping children and families develop from the start. She feels that she practices



society's commitment to children as a librarian, rather than trying to repair the damage as she did in social work.

Rose appreciates that she no longer has to have an edge. In the Navy, where she watched people tinkering with propulsion systems, everything was life and death. In sales, she needed an edge to convince people to buy her products. Now she gets to say, "How can I help you?" instead of telling them what to do, or cajoling them to buy.

As a grant writer, Lee had to always think of an angle to convince people to give money. As a librarian she can simply say, "We're a good place."

Vicky enjoys being in management at the library, and working with her branch's community. She gets to do outreach to communities we don't yet serve, and gets to help groups network with each other. She remembers fondly her library work in the 90s, when she helped seniors connect with computers. It inspired her to see people so late in life being active and vibrant learners.

### **Encourage or discourage?**

Our panelists encourage interested people to pursue a career in libraries, but warned that the job market is tough these days. Many people with MLS degrees are working as paraprofessionals, our panelists reported.

Be aware that you might have to move, they cautioned. You might have to take a pay cut from your previous career, and you might have to wait awhile before finding a job.

Interestingly, several people mentioned that libraries are the only job they've been in where workers spend time questioning the relevancy of their work. Panelists wondered if technological advances, specifically the advent of the Internet, have caused this sort of questioning. All our panelists agreed, though, that they believe strongly in the importance of libraries and library workers.

### **Burnout? Nein danke!**

All in all, the panel was unanimous in loving library work. Would a group of other workers be so positive about their careers? And, as some panelists pointed out, is it harder for people who never had a first career? Does coming to the library as a second career give one a uniquely positive perspective?

Perhaps the message to take from our panelists is that it is good to make a change when you feel burned out at your current job. That change, we also learned, doesn't have to be something you've always planned on. It can happen suddenly, by accident, or because of all the wrong reasons. Maybe, as happened with Jane, you'll apply for a job because a friend talks you into it. Maybe you'll decide one day to follow a childhood dream. Maybe you already work in the library, but will decide to try a different track—go from clerical work to reference work, or from reference to cataloging. Maybe you'll leave management, as Steve did, and feel refreshed by being able to focus on reference work once again.

Wherever your path leads, remember the twisting paths these people took to get where they are today. And remember that the place you end up might be a place you like very much indeed. 

