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One State, Two Stories: Getting Here With Magic and Detours

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One State, Two Stories:

Getting Here with Magic and Detours

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Margaret:

It was magic that first drew me to working in libraries.

As I was growing up, the public library loomed large in my life. Whenever my family moved to a new place the first thing my mother did was locate the library and get us library cards. Every Saturday we went to the library, staggering under armfuls of books to return, eager to check out new ones. In some of the places where we lived the librarians were stern arbiters of what we kids were allowed to check out, even preventing us from entering the adult section alone. With Mom in tow we swarmed nonfiction: books on sewing and cooking for Carol, art for Janet, electronics and music for John, and science and history for me. Mom would add them to hers, which meant she couldn't take as many as she wanted. These same libraries had limits on the number of books you could check out at one time. We four kids would divvy up our children's fiction between us so no one exceeded the limit.

The library itself meant wonder and knowledge—it was a magical place to me. The people who staffed it were peripheral and without my mother's support would have limited my access to what seemed like an endless supply of information. How ironic, then, that I came to work in libraries!

Carolee:

At Boise's Carnegie library you had to be in junior high before you could use the adult section. Braving those stairs the first time was so scary, until I discovered the historical novels. They were the magic to take me to more intriguing times and places. During summer vacations my main exercise was walking to the library for another armload of escapes. But as a teen I would have shuddered at the thought of being a librarian. Be like that Miss M ... ? No way was I going down that road!

So it was a total shock ten years later to read, "If you teach children how to use a library, the children can teach themselves anything else they need or want to know," and to realize, "Whoeee! I want to be a school librarian!"

Boise State offered only a year of undergraduate classes for school librarians. Near the end of the year I figured the next step would be a couple of education classes beyond my existing BA. Nope. They required yet another three years to earn a teaching certificate. But I had to work, and Albertson's headquarters would hire me right then to set up a training library. Business trumped idealism.

Margaret:

I didn't dream of being a librarian. My mother's wish for me was a university education and a career and she leaned toward journalism or teaching. I wanted science or English, but those weren't considered good ways to make a living and I entered University of Oregon majoring in journalism. The professors soon discouraged me because that was a "man's" profession, so teaching it was!

Working part time at the School of Librarianship it occurred to me for the first time that one could make a career as a librarian, but graduate school wasn't practical or affordable at that time. I later transferred to the University of Portland, where I got an excellent education while working part time at the Wilson W. Clark Memorial Library, the Multnomah County Library, and the Indochinese Cultural and Service Center. I graduated in two and half years with my B.A. in Education, minor in English, and plunged headlong into teaching in inner city Portland. By the time I was teaching Bilingual-Migrant education in central California, my focus had become certification in Second Language Acquisition followed by graduate school in Special Education-Learning Handi-



capped. Librarianship was long forgotten.

Carolee:

After a few years at Albertson’s and a detour into business classes, I worked at a medical library. Helping a doctor research the solution to an elderly veteran’s illness seemed somehow more vital than trying to convince a grocery manager that the “Information Center” might provide something relevant to employee training. The medical librarian was a wonderful mentor, who inspired me to consider the Masters of Library Science program at the University of Oregon.

That’s just when the UO program shut down. And, not coincidentally, I got pregnant. I turned my main focus to becoming a published poet and a creative mom—rewarding and magical detours.

While my kids were small, I worked part-time temporary jobs at a historical library, an engineering library, two public libraries, and a preschool where I loved reading to the children and teaching crafts. One wonderful year another woman and I produced the summer reading program for a small public library. I loved helping children discover the world and develop creativity. Sadly, I learned that I have a low tolerance for the high pitched voices and energy of children. Some days I channeled Miss M ... !

When my youngest started school we moved to Eugene, and once again it was essential that I work full time. I landed in Technical Services at Eugene Public Library, and turned my focus back toward a library career. I joined OLA and at my first conference, signed the petition to start the brand



Margaret Harmon-Myers and Bonnie Carolee Hirsch, Eugene Public Library

new Support Staff Round Table (soon to grow to a full division). Those were magical days as we gathered to define ourselves as library professionals. Going away for graduate school was still out of the question.

Margaret:

After nine and a half years in the classroom I left teaching and eventually moved back to Klamath Falls where I’d gone to high school and where my dad and sister still lived. I did substitute teaching until school finished then went to work in the advertising department of the local daily newspaper. When an opening at the Klamath County Library was advertised, I jumped at it and in December 1995 went to work as a Library Assistant in the Children’s Department.

I was full time and the other person in the department part time. We were it, responsible for running services and



programs and all aspects of collection development including weeding, acquisitions, and budget, for kindergarten through high school. I joined the Oregon Library Association and became immersed in the life of the public library. From establishing a separate Teen collection and space to writing a collection development policy for my department to planning the Summer Reading Program; from learning Library of Congress subject headings to applying for Ready to Read grants to doing preschool storytimes, there was never a dull moment. I lobbied for a budget for the Young Adult collection (there was none) and was thrilled with the \$1,000 I received! The next year it grew to \$2,000.

With tenuous funding and the shadow of layoffs, our library with its eight branches was struggling. One by one the MLS librarians, including two graduates of the Emporia distance learning program, who had been such good models for us, left for better jobs. My counterpart in Adult Services and I essentially became librarians. The whole staff, from the director to circulation and the library board worked tirelessly to pass a library service district levy: staffing phone trees, walking neighborhoods, and knocking on doors. It paid off and the library now had stable funding outside the county's general fund.

Carolee:

At Eugene Public Library, one had to have an MLS to directly provide reference service. Working in Tech Services allowed some schedule flexibility for parenthood, but I missed reference work. In the early 1990's the University of Arizona proposed a distance learning MLS program, with the requirement that the State Library commit a certain amount of resources toward the project. At the OLA conference that year, the Support

Staff Division gathered about 100 signatures on a petition asking the State Library for that commitment. The State Library researched distance learning programs, and encouraged another pioneering program offered by Emporia State University. Over eighty of us gathered for the first class in 1994.

Margaret:

Moving to Springfield in 2001 brought me to employment at the Eugene Public Library, first with Acquisitions in the Technical Services Department, then moving into Adult Reference Services where I am today. It is here that I began to take a more active role in OLA's Support Staff Division and I can say that after more than thirteen years of working full-time in public libraries, my appreciation and respect for my fellow support staffers continues to grow. We are such a varied group and we bring so many gifts, such strength and dedication and hard work, to the libraries and patrons we serve. We are the backbone of the library.

Carolee:

In 1997, just 25 years after deciding to be a librarian, I graduated with an MLS. Whoee! I'm a librarian! I'm an adult services librarian, not a school librarian. The lines between support staff and librarian roles are blurring, as we strive to use everyone's knowledge and abilities. Changes make for an exciting ride. Sometimes I still ask patrons to talk more quietly. And I tell parents how vital it is for them to teach their children to use the library.

Margaret:

Thank goodness today's libraries are a far cry from those of my youth, and those of us who work in them are committed to making everything accessible for all and to keeping the magic alive. 

