
Volume 5
Number 3
The Heart of a Librarian (Fall 1999)

July 2014

Discovering the heart of a librarian

Pam North
Sherwood Public Library

Recommended Citation

North, P. (2014). Discovering the heart of a librarian. *OLA Quarterly*, 5(3), 2-4. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1523>

© 2014 by the author(s).

OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Discovering the Heart of a Librarian

by Pam North
Reference Librarian
Sherwood Public Library

To paraphrase an obscure 1980's rock group, Holly and the Italians (who had already taken liberties with Shakespeare's famous words): "Some people achieve greatness, some have greatness thrust upon them, and then there are those who were born librarians."

I understand there are those who have always known what they wanted to be "when they grew up." I, however, was not lucky enough to be among them. The characteristics of being "born a librarian" did not expose themselves to me clearly at an early age. The signs were veiled by a wide array of unrelated talents and diverse occupational desires. I recall wanting to be a postman, a geologist, a horticulturist and a writer, among other things. The idea of becoming a librarian simply never occurred to me.

As a latecomer to the library profession, I look back and can identify different aspects of my early life as being "risk factors" that were trying to alert me to my condition all along. It was a long journey before I discovered that I possessed the heart of a librarian.

Risk Factors

The first hint that I might have the heart of a librarian surfaced as a preschooler. Back in the days when the girls at Girl's Polytechnic High School had me in their charge they would write progress reports for our parents. In them they would say the usual things like, "Pam is a cheerful little girl," but there was also the more than occasional mention that "Pam prefers to be the postman to the Mommy" and "She enjoys handing out papers." Looking back, I consider this the first indication of desiring a public service occupation and enjoying the service component of work.

The years advanced and I found I loved books and reading. I would struggle with how I should arrange my small bookshelf—by author or by title? A disorganized bookshelf was simply unacceptable to me.

I remember my mother deliberating on the value of purchasing an encyclopedia for me—and choosing to do so, much to my heart's delight. It was *World Book*, and although I was still a little young for its pages the accompanying *ChildCraft* was just right. I would spend

hours pouring over those volumes in the quest to know a little about a lot. Eager to learn, curious about new ideas and information, I was unknowingly becoming a prime candidate for librarianship.

In grade school I loved the library. Shelves and shelves of books, some so high I needed a step stool to reach the ones on the top. The books were in order, a special order designed just for libraries. If I found a book I liked on skiing, I knew it would be in the exact same place the next time I looked for it. And there was our librarian, Miss Skorpen, who occasionally let me stamp due dates in the books of my classmates. Such joy! Opening books and removing the cards, stamping the due dates and filing the cards by date (and alphabetically) in the wooden box at the librarian's desk. I found the activity and the environment of the library intoxicating—even addictive. Soon I was helping Miss Skorpen a little bit each week. Perhaps then, I should have sensed the beating of a librarian's heart.



Reading, writing and RESEARCH! Pam is never at a loss for resources as they're always a swivel away.

Every Monday during the school year I attended ballet class after school. Ballet class was joyfully followed by a visit to the Woodstock Branch of the Multnomah County Library. Clad in black leotard and pink tights I would find my favorites: *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Chicken Soup with Rice* by Sendak, Krauss' *A Hole Is To Dig* and *The Story about Ping* by Flack. As I grew older I discovered the books of Laura Ingalls Wilder, Frances Hodgson Burnett and Lucy Maud Montgomery.

The library and the wonderful volumes it contained always promised a new adventure, new “friends” and new ideas.

Denial

Eighth grade graduation ushers in many changes, and my experience was no exception. I no longer wanted to take ballet, I left my beloved grade school for high school and I fell out of love with books and libraries and in love with a whole new set of friends and activities. Drama, tennis, soccer, watching the boys’ teams practice and play, working at the local garden center and just “hangin’ out” filled my days. I believe the only book I read for pleasure during high school was *Forever* by Judy Blume. And, heck, that was just because it was a “bad” book that had caused a great deal of controversy among the teachers.

The high school library held no allure for me. It was old and dark and the librarian was a man. Imagine



Another happy patron, satisfied with the information supplied by her helpful and friendly reference librarian.

that, a man as a librarian—and he seemed to like doing audio visual tasks rather than “library” ones. I spiraled into a period of complete library denial. It wasn’t cool to read (or to let anyone know you studied, for that matter) and I certainly intended to be cool. My heart’s condition was thoroughly concealed during my peer-driven teenage years.

I did, at one point during my junior year, briefly think about attending the University of Oregon for its library school—yet another indicator of my underlying propensity for librarianship. But alas, the school had announced its pending closure before I could apply.

Diagnosis

As a senior at Oregon State University I found that I needed an extra term to fit in some required hours. This meant I needed a job to finance that extra term. Was it dumb luck or was it fate that Kerr Library was the only respondent to a broadcast letter and resume that I sent to nearly every office on campus and in town? I was hired as a Serials Assistant (and learned what the word “serials” meant) and I began to re-discover the allure of the library. At first the appeal was merely atmospheric: cool and quiet, the library was welcoming and comfortable. I had always felt at ease in this sort of environment. Soon, the process of handling the journals, peering into their pages and being a part of organizing them was an eagerly-anticipated part of my day.

The discovery and appreciation of the tiny West Linn Public Library jarred my senses once again when I moved to town in 1985. Housed in a small room off the side of a fire hall, it was cozy and pleasant and the staff was friendly and fun. I was drawn to the place and felt that somehow through this little library I might become involved in my new community. I visited often and eventually volunteered. As the library grew, so did my interest in it and I applied for an appointment to the Library Board. Although not selected the first time around, I applied again and was chosen. For a period of time, this position was enough to fill my hidden librarian’s heart.

Working as a technical writer, I was introduced to the Internet in 1992. Something about this new information tool attracted my interest. Although it was text-based and clumsy to navigate, I sensed a great potential in it. Every day I was communicating with people all around the world, acquiring information important to my work and to my life. I became a part of “virtual communities” who shared and learned together. Soon, I was training staff to use the Internet, where I saw even greater possibilities and found the reward of helping connect people with information. My “students” could do research from their desks, collaborate with colleagues through their keyboards and spend less time tracking down journal articles and talking on the telephone. It was this experience, and the reward of helping others find the resources they were searching for, that opened my heart to its true calling.

Finally, there was the outright coincidence of learning that Emporia State University was bringing its MLS program to Oregon. I was a guest at a county library conference (for serving on a successful serial levy committee) when I heard the news. My heart soared at the realization there was an opportunity to attend library school. I applied at the last minute, endured

the most nerve-racking interview of my life (all on my end, I assure you) and ultimately was accepted. The rest, as they say, is history.

Living with the Heart of a Librarian

Today I live a full, active and satisfying life with my librarian's heart. It took a long time for me to recognize and welcome it, and now I understand that perhaps I was "born a librarian" after all. Every day I am excited about what I do and feel valued for doing it. As reference librarian at Sherwood Public Library I know that no one day will be the same as any other—and that knowledge makes my heart sing.

Since discovering my heart's chosen profession I've found I am a better "me," a happier "me" and a truer vision of what I guess I was really meant to be. Being a librarian allows me to fulfill my need to be in a "helping profession," permits me to enhance the quality of life of others and is just plain enjoyable and satisfying. I have found there are four primary areas of librarianship that help me to thrive and be a better person.

Librarians value learning—learning ourselves and helping others to learn. Our environments foster education and grant the opportunity to grow intellectually every day. Each and every bit of information we come into contact with is potentially valuable to us and to our profession.

We are a collegial community, a community where information is shared, not protected. I have always been a team player, and here the sport is information. I'm proud of what we can accomplish when we work together.


As a librarian I have gained a greater sense of self-worth and professionalism. We are vested with the power and unique responsibility to enhance the quality of people's lives. By providing excellent service and accurate information we become the "gatekeepers of possibility." I am proud to be a librarian and I value the importance of the library and all it has to offer.

By providing excellent service and accurate information we become the "gatekeepers of possibility."

Finally, there is the librarian's core value of bringing people and information together. It is what we are all about and it is what brings me the greatest reward. Regardless of message or form or delivery mechanism, it is the librarian's skill in guiding, interpreting and explaining information that makes it accessible to others. Ours is a service profession where people truly matter—all people and each person. We believe that each person is guaranteed equity of access to information. In today's fertile and prolific information landscape, access for everyone is more important than ever before. I feel fortunate to bring people together with the resources they need.

Indications for the Future

Harold Billings, Director of General Libraries at the University of Texas at Austin, once wrote: "Just as the librarians of today are shaping the library of tomorrow, the librarians of tomorrow are being shaped today. Knowledgeable in library and information science, technologically informed, educated broadly in the basic precepts of art and humane concern, dedicated to public service, willing to be leaders and to take risks in shaping the future information society—in whatever other dimension and form it comes—the librarians of the future, like the best librarians of yesterday and today, should be conceived in the truest of renaissance traditions."

I believe he has captured what should be at the heart of every librarian. I know it is at the center of mine. 

Pam can be reached at pamnorth@teleport.com.

REFERENCES

Billings, H., 1995. "The Tomorrow Librarian." *Wilson Library Bulletin* 69:34-37.

DeCandido, G., May 19, 1996. *Ten Graces for New Librarians* [online]. Available: <http://www.well.com/user/ladyhawk/albany.html>



Pam North