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Chapter Two

Librarianship as a Second Career

By Tracey Simon

The gold watch, our cultural symbol for decades of service to one company, has become a piece of nostalgia. We may know someone who has one or may have seen one (or used one), but it's doubtful that anyone will get one again, ever. We currently live in an economy that has created detours in many career paths, such as layoffs, outsourcing, relocation, or job obsolescence. Some of these detours we make ourselves; as a mobile society with more loyalty to ourselves and our families than to a corporation, we are more willing to pull up stakes than our parents were in order to pursue better and different job opportunities.

We are also living longer. Whereas a person would expect to retire (or be retired!) at age 50 and maybe live another 10 to 15 years in the earlier part of the last century, nowadays many of us can expect to live, and even work, 25 years or more beyond that "traditional" retirement age. While some see that as a time to pursue leisure (if they can afford to), others see it as time try their hand at working at something new...like becoming a librarian.

In the 2003, the Association for Library and Information Science Education's (ALISE) annual statistics report (www.ils.unc.edu/ALISE/Table%20II-8-a.htm), approximately 35 percent of those enrolled in library school in 2001 were over the age of 40, and of those students, more than two-thirds were in their 40s, and the rest were 50 years old and older.

To find out why, this writer put an informal survey out on several electronic discussion groups. I asked the following:

1. How old were you when you received your MLS?
2. What was your first career?
3. Who or what inspired you to become a librarian?
4. What skills from your previous career do you find most useful in your current one?
5. Did you have any preconceived notions about being a librarian? Is there anything you didn't expect?

The results were eye-opening. Granted, none of respondents listed money, fame, or glamour as a motivation, but I had anticipated tales of boredom or disenchantment. What I found were people who had enjoyed what they did, and chose librarianship as a second profession because of personal interests and as a way of doing something good for their community, or loftier, for society in general. Because of space limitations, I chose three of the most representative from the responses.

Edward Goldberg, who is currently working full time for a mid-sized suburban public library (population served approximately 35,000), enrolled in library school age at 50 and became a Young Adult Services Librarian at age 52. A Certified Public Accountant/Comptroller for 25 years, he found himself out of a job when the company he was working for reorganized. He thought at first that he would teach accounting as an adjunct at a local university while job hunting, but while researching potential academic employers, he was intrigued by a description of the graduate library sciences program at one of them and thought he might like it. He spoke with librarians and library directors about the profession, and was impressed that they all loved what they did. Curious, yet cautious, he enrolled for a summer semester and never turned back. He considers his decision to become a librarian, "the best thing I ever did."

Edward found that the organizational and customer service skills he gleaned in his other career to be most helpful, as is his work ethic. "At my previous job, we believed that you were responsible for something, even if it wasn't necessarily your job. You just did what it took to get it done....Good organization and 'going the extra mile' are skills and beliefs that will always provide a better service and product," he explained. In his current position, he is doing what it takes to

“get it done” – collection development, programming and public relations, serving as a liaison to school librarians, and reference work. (He initially thought his job would be mostly reference desk-oriented.) He loves working with teenagers and is trying to get a teen advisory board going. The only thing that library school didn't prepare him for, he said, was dealing with “strange patrons,” including rude and belligerent individuals. Overall, Edward maintains, “There is really nothing that qualifies as ‘the worst part of the job.’”

Another Edward, Ed Escoffier, became a librarian at age 59. His wife, a children's librarian, knowing that Ed loved books and life-long learning, encouraged him to investigate the career. “I not only liked going back to school, but enjoyed the competition for good grades,” said Ed, who is working as a reference librarian at the Franklin Square Public Library in Long Island, New York.

For 20 years prior to getting his MLS, Ed worked in the financial securities industry as a stockbroker, trainer, and consultant. He, like Mr. Goldberg, found that a number of his business and sales skills dovetailed quite nicely with library work. “I always educated my clients and had them read books that I recommended. Hence, a book, like a common stock, has to be ‘sold’ with enthusiasm and commitment,” Ed explained. As an Adult Services Librarian, he still enjoys selling, whether it's a new author to a patron, the library's online databases to a customer seeking fast information, or librarianship to students at high school career days.

“What I didn't expect was the need for so much local information and how some patrons are so stuck on one or two authors or a genre,” Ed said. He went on to say that one of the best parts of his job is when he can sell someone on a new or relatively unknown author. His other favorite service is helping students with their homework. The part he dislikes most is dealing with “Google-heads,” whom he defines as those people who expect answers in a split second, and with the “characters,” his polite term for difficult patrons. “I admire my fellow librarians for their patience and skills at handling them,” he said.

Former attorney Mae Connor* became a reference librarian while in her 40s. She said that she changed careers because she “didn't want to deal with the commuting and stresses of a law practice while rearing children.” She was quick to add that becoming a librarian was something that had always interested her, even as an undergraduate.

Mae's legal expertise meshed well with the library environment. “My training gave me the ability to do comprehensive research, leaving no stone unturned, and my writing skills grew from years of composing legal briefs and memos.”

Like Edward and Ed, the thorn in Mae's side is problem patrons, but fortunately she doesn't have too many of them. Mae said that she most enjoys being able to access the latest books just as they hit the shelves, interacting with patrons, and discussing her love of reading and trivia with them and her colleagues.

But if you go to talk with Mae at the reference desk, be sure to check her schedule. In the evenings, she's now testing the waters of a third career – teaching reference services to potential librarians at her graduate school alma mater.

*Asked that real name be withheld.

Note: The author previously worked in public relations and advertising. She received her MLS just a few weeks shy of her 40th birthday.

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