20 Years and Counting

In commemoration of the Librarian of the Year Award's 20th anniversary, all 19 of the profession's indefatigable stars return for an encore

By Raya Kuzyk -- Library Journal, 1/15/2008

What more illuminative view of librarianship through the years than from atop the shoulders of two decades of the field's finest? When LJ named them Librarians of the Year, these inimitable 19 (for the 20th, Norma Blake, see p. 36) had singled themselves out as risk takers, visionaries, bulldogs, pragmatists, optimists, and dreamers. They've since set off in various directions—some continue making headway in their same (mostly public library) positions; some have moved on to other library-related ventures; some now work as consultants in the field; and still others offer us the distinct perspective of librarian-turned-patron. They've survived steep budget cuts, multiple branch closings, earthquakes, even cancer. The single common denominator: they all have strong opinions on and critical concerns about the library profession. Their insights only reinforce what we've always said about these title holders: once a Librarian of the Year, always a Librarian of the Year.

Mary Baykan

2007 "We must not think of technology for technology's sake: Does it enrich patrons' library experience, give them more resources, or does it become a frustrating and impersonal labyrinth?"

Mary Baykan, for 12 years director of the Washington County Free Library System and executive director of the Western Maryland Public Libraries, is keenly aware of the challenges awaiting her and her peers in the years ahead: meeting new immigrants' demands, catering to an aging population, staying competitive in a global economy, and mitigating what she sees as a growing disconnect between citizens and their communities. The onus is on libraries to meet these challenges; of that she is sure. "To remain relevant," Baykan says, "we must be able to demonstrate how we can make a positive contribution to our communities' sustainability."

Librarians are already becoming more proactive and politically aware in advocating for their libraries as well as savvier in finding strategic partners, Baykan notes. In other words, she says, they are coming to realize that "lobby is not a dirty word."

And though she marvels at the intelligence, enthusiasm, and technical know-how of today's library school graduates, she wishes they were better prepared to deal with boards, politicians, legislatures, budgets, the homeless, and many other realities inherent to librarianship. Because, as Baykan sees it, they'll need "the heart of Mother Teresa, the business acumen of a Fortune 500 CEO, the intellect of a nuclear physicist, and the political skills of an eight-term senator."

Rivkah Sass

2006 "How awesome would it be to see a group of librarians on the cover of Business 2.0 or Fast Company?"

"We whine a lot about succession planning and diversity," says Omaha Public Library director Rivkah Sass, "but I still think we do a better job
of hiring, nurturing, and promoting people just like us than we do of really examining what we need and being bold."

The day we spoke with Sass, she was just back from a visit to Google's Mountain View, CA, headquarters to learn about Google Scholar, Book Search, and YouTube's efforts with universities. Maybe it was the visit, or maybe it was the confidentiality agreement she was required to sign, but Sass was beside herself with things to talk about. Why aren't libraries, she asked, taking advantage of technologies like the iPod and PayPal? Having herself just bought an iPod Touch, Sass attests it's transformational. "Now if only I could download audiobooks from the library," she says. And why the difference between how easy it is to make payments with PayPal and how hard it still is in many cases to pay library fines? "I know some vendors have added e-commerce solutions," she says, "but for the most part, they are clunky and expensive for us to implement."

Like Baykan, Sass has faith in today's library school graduates, in whom she sees "a willingness to let go of the tools that need to die—MARC, traditional cataloging, OCLC." But the two also share a desire to see the curriculum expanded to include classes on community development, marketing, branding, and making a compelling case for service and public/private funding.

Susan K. Nutter

2005 "There is some real talent in the pipeline, but we're going to need more diversity in that pipeline, and I mean diversity of all sorts, in terms of interests, skills, disciplines, ages, geographical backgrounds, ways of seeing the world...."

The science and engineering library at North Carolina State University (NCSU), Raleigh, chiefly owes thanks for its decades-long standing as a library on the cutting edge to Susan Nutter, its director (for 21 years) and vice provost (for 13). The NCSU campus will be welcoming another library under her direction, currently a $114 million design and construction project headed by the Norwegian architecture firm behind Egypt's Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

Nutter expects the undertaking to inspire changed behavior in the community, making the library that much more an active and exciting learning environment. And she anticipates the years beyond will bring more of the same. "Collaboration in any and all forms will be a prevalent form of activity," Nutter envisions, "and technology will be part and fabric of the workspace, the walls, the air—no longer tied to a specific machine." Everything, as Nutter sees it, will be not just moving but movable—furniture, people, spaces—and collaboration, creativity, and discovery will rule the day. What's more, passersby, attracted by the library's palpable levels of energy and intensity as well as its reputation as "an incubator for the newest information technologies," will continually be filing in.

Sure, things are going well now, Nutter says, but "I can't wait for the next five years!"

Toni Garvey

2004 "Being a librarian today means everything it did 30 years ago, with the added element of competition; it is imperative we find our niche in today's information world."

In the four years since her Librarian of the Year win, Phoenix Public Library (PPL) city librarian Toni Garvey has hardly been resting on her laurels—in fact, she's gone and acquired more of them: the 2006 Arizona Library Association's Rosenzweig Distinguished Service Award as well as accolades for several newly opened PPL branches.

She is concerned with how libraries are responding—or failing to respond—to changing methods and manners of learning among today's youth. Just as the Public Library Association (PLA) has looked to child development experts for insight on early reading habits, Garvey believes "we need once again to work with experts to understand this issue."

For now, she is heartened by what she sees happening in the Louisville Free Public Library, KY, where the library card doubles as the school ID, discounts transit fares, and waives the $40 fee for GED testing. "We've all talked about your library card being the most valuable card in your wallet, but in Louisville," says Garvey, "it's really happening."
In Raymond Santiago's ten years as director of the Miami-Dade Public Library System, FL, he has helped grow the system's annual budget from $29 million to $108 million as well as instated an eight-year capital expansion program that will result in the opening of 18 new facilities. In 2005, PLA acknowledged these efforts with the Charlie Robinson Award.

Santiago worries about public libraries' long-term financial stability, a matter he feels is being addressed only piecemeal, with most libraries operating in one- or two-year cycles.

It will take a renewed dedication to public service, he believes, to solve the problem, a quality he sees in today's young librarians that he predicts will lead them to exceed all expectations. If anyone's not fulfilling expectations, Santiago feels, it's those, like him, in positions of leadership. "We need to micromanage less and allow for more opportunities for advancement and exposure," he says. "We keep seeing the same faces."

Just one year after city librarian and director of the Los Angeles Public Library Susan Kent won LJ's Librarian of the Year Award, the American Library Association (ALA) presented her with its Lippincott Award, and she was appointed director and chief executive of the Branch Libraries of the New York Public Library, a position she held until a much-speculated-about May departure (see News, LJ 6/1/07).

Today, she channels her 35-plus years of public library experience into an independent consulting business through which she assists libraries in strategic and capital facilities planning and financial development and management.

When we talked to her in November, Kent was on her way to the Netherlands and Denmark (with a possible stop in Malmo) to set up a November 2008 Urban Libraries Council study tour. A frequent guest speaker at international library symposia and conferences, she believes it's critical to institute programs and staff exchanges in the United States and internationally to foster future generations of library leaders.

Because to Kent, the job is truly global now. "We're no longer just imagining and hoping," she says of recent technological strides as she packs for her flight, "but racing to keep up, learn, and understand."

We set our sights in 2001 on Louise Blalock, chief librarian of the Hartford Public Library, CT, because of her commitment to urban libraries. Today, her more than 30 years of experience as a librarian have taught her that she can't improve the urban library landscape solely through directed library legislation. Instead, she says, these libraries must be stakeholders in the areas of health, jobs, literacy, housing, and
immigration, and library leaders must keep working together on policy issues.

But with changes in federal policy putting less money in the public domain, Blalock sees the need for a new structure wherein fair and equitable funding delivers essential services to libraries. Within this structure, she'd like to see highly engaged and entrepreneurial politicians "capable of understanding all the opportunities that there are to raise their libraries." But politicians aren't the only ones Blalock holds accountable. "The public does not perceive the work of the librarian as crucial to their needs and interests," Blalock says. "That is what we are required to demonstrate."

2000 See 2001. LJ changes year of the award to the year in which it is presented.

Jerry Thrasher

1999 "Individuals need to realize the hazards inherent in social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook: they're sharing detailed personal information about themselves."

In the days between the November writing of this article and its publication, Jerry Thrasher retired as director of the Cumberland County Public Library and Information Center, Fayetteville, NC, where he'd worked for the last 27 years.

While he respects today's "young, bright, and tech-savvy librarians," Thrasher notes it's largely second-career librarians who are bridging the gap in special skills and knowledge in libraries by helping old-timers adapt to new technologies and "providing relevant and exciting programming to our communities."

He's excited by the advancement of integrated library system freeware, like Evergreen, that enables local libraries to develop and evolve their own circulation and collection management system "without being held captive by private software companies." And he expects this development to continue, with some larger libraries able to handle their own software development and others relying on private companies for enhancements.

Thrasher is proud that under his direction and with the help of staff and community leaders, his library system has fostered what he sees as a greater appreciation of what a public library is and what it means for our democracy. "There will always be challenges," he says, "but with effective leadership, we will not only endure but thrive."

Susan Fuller

1998 "I want every library I visit to be: current, connected, comprehensive, challenging, careful, and comfortable."

It's been five years since Susan Fuller retired as director of the Santa Clara County Library, Los Gatos, CA, or, as she puts it, "traded my suits and nylons, numerous night meetings, the political positioning, and the careful presentation of philosophical issues for a different kind of life." Today, as a librarian-turned-patron, her standards for service are high.

Fuller wants the library to be a personal and knowledgeable place ("I don't want a store"); she wants the staff to know and care about ideas and be able to talk to her about the collection, "whatever the format vehicle"; and she wants to feel that the staff is willing to stand firmly for the public library "as a defender of my fundamental rights as an American, to use information and ideas to seek my own path, in my own way and with the help—not the hindrance—of the government."

Happily, she reports, the local library she patronizes meets all these desires. And though she may no longer be riding the library train, she's anticipating the places it's bound to take her, as she's confident that, "whatever the future holds, the public library will be a part of it."

Bobby Roberts

1997 "We must never forget that...library directors are ultimately responsible to the public paying the bills. We
The libraries constructed within Little Rock's Central Arkansas Library System (CALS) since Director Bobby Roberts was named Librarian of the Year have garnered seven design awards. CALS is currently in the middle of a $20 million construction project, a joint venture with the University of Arkansas that will combine their cumulative historical manuscripts into one facility providing cooperative services and programs on Arkansas history.

More surprising to Roberts, however, are future-oriented developments. "I did not think the industry would be able to deploy such a variety of technology so quickly," he says. Unfortunately, "the United States hasn't done it quickly enough, and we continue to fall behind other nations," he adds, noting that this is especially the case with regard to the deployment of broadband services in rural areas.

Roberts's 1982 stint as a Clinton campaign aide taught him a seminal lesson he's carried with him into librarianship: realizing the value of small successes. "If I leave our patrons with a better system," he says, "then I will have done my duty; I will leave it to someone else to solve those large issues."

And he is sure none better qualify for the job than the incoming generation of librarians, whom he deems "better trained, more flexible in their thinking, and better equipped to deal with the public" than his own.

Dorothy M. Schirtzinger

1996 "We have to convince funding sources that technology does not replace the need for service but only makes it more important."

Under Dorothy Schirtzinger's 18-year reign as director of the Lee County Library System, FL, the system grew from eight libraries with a staff of 23 and a budget of $500,000 to 11 libraries with a staff of 170 and $11 million spent annually. And the Librarian of the Year Award on her mantle keeps good company: namely, the Florida Library Association's Intellectual Freedom Award.

Ten years into retirement, Schirtzinger is now intrigued by the Lifelong Access Libraries initiative's attempts to transform library services for older adults. Of particular interest to her is the technology hurdle it's up against. "The target age group may have a computer, may use it for email, or may not feel comfortable on a computer at all," she says. "Suddenly, they need to be computer literate while also being comfortable accessing library services in a mobile-friendly way—seems to me like a big challenge." And challenges, as Schirtzinger's track record attests, have always been her strong suit.

Carla D. Hayden

1995 "Thinking about how to weave the old in with the new, make the connections—I don't see enough of that."

When we interviewed Carla Hayden in 1995, she was two years into her job as executive director of Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library. In the 13 years since, she's endured a real roller coaster of a ride, the nadir of which came with the library's announcement in 2001 that it would be closing five of its 26 branches. There was, however, an upside: "those challenging times led the community to let the government know how important the library was," she says. Indeed, incoming grants have increased by 17 percent thanks in part to two separate million-dollar donations, and, last year, the library opened two new branches—its first new branches in 35 years.
Hayden is encouraged by the initiative she sees in the newest generation of librarians. "They're really pushing and introducing new things to us," she says, "and they think things out differently than we do, are positive, and really draw from their experiences." But she regrets that many are powering ahead without regard to practices of the past. "Sure, a lot of the way we did things is no longer relevant," Hayden says, "but it's not an either or; it's an evolution."

A born leader—she was the 2003—04 ALA president and one of Ms. Magazine's 2003 Women of the Year—Hayden intends to help oversee this evolution. "I want to put the systems in place so that we can continue the momentum to keep normalizing change," she says. "Really, I want to institutionalize growth and change."

Deborah L. Jacobs
1994 "I bless the day I decided to become a librarian—it is still the most amazing and fulfilling profession I can imagine."

Jacobs, former director of the Corvallis—Benton County Public Library, OR, and the Seattle Public Library's current city librarian, says the biggest problem libraries today face is an awfully familiar one: "despite efforts by ALA in initiative after initiative, it's the same problem we faced when I first became a librarian 31 years ago"—adequate funding. She sees the solution as three-pronged: "start spending more time educating city managers, county commissioners, and governors at their conventions; have graduate programs look for strong, charismatic potential librarians; and teach advocacy skills at the information schools." In support of this last point, Jacobs teaches a class at the University of Washington Information School in Seattle on public library politics and advocacy.

Though she's impressed with how successful libraries have generally been in reaching and staying relevant to teens, she sees room for improvement in interlibrary collaboration and believes there's a lesson to be learned in the success of online social networking. "Why do we all need to create a unique web site or homepage?" Jacobs asks as an example. "Most of us don't have the time or the money to all do the same thing, so why not do something different and quite possibly even better?"

Susan C. Curzon
1993 "There is a misperception that libraries will vanish as the world of cyberspace advances; libraries fully present in virtual reality will contradict that assumption. We are taking baby steps now, but the possibilities are enormous."

The vice provost of the Information and Technology Resources Division at California State University at Northridge and dean of the university library since 1992, Susan Curzon has led her library headlong into the future: it boasts the nations' first automated storage and retrieval system. But major setbacks came by way of a natural disaster that struck in 1994: a 6.7-magnitude earthquake. Its resulting damage has dominated Curzon's experience to date with substantial time devoted to the restoration of services and the rebuilding of the 235,000 square foot library.

But if anyone knows how to navigate the lows, it's Curzon, who started her career as a special librarian for a deep-sea mining company. She has channeled the overall experience into a positive one and today speaks to other librarians on disaster restoration.

Curzon is eager to see what the incoming crop of librarians will have to offer with more experience. "My generation brought technology, outreach, diversity, customer service, and marketing," says Curzon. "The question they must now ask is, what will their generation bring to libraries?" The university's 2008 launch of a new master's degree in Library and Information Management is her good-faith investment.

John W. Ferguson
1992 "Only a small percentage of potential library users are even aware of library services; I want to be an ambassador for the library."
"My wife and I took early retirement in 1998 after I was healed of cancer," says John Ferguson, former director of the Mid-Continent Public Library in Independence, MO. In 1999, the couple established an interdenominational senior adult ministry; they became ordained ministers last year.

Ferguson's new profession has informed his thinking on his previous one. Working now with several homebound senior adults, he wants to see libraries offering programs that institute Books on Wheels in conjunction with Meals on Wheels or some other existing service.

If libraries seem central to Ferguson's thoughts, it's because he's now a devoted patron. The library he goes to, in fact, recently outsourced some clerical tasks to a local shelter's workshop, and he thinks this could be instructive to other libraries. "The workshop provides quality work at a reasonable rate," he says, "which frees up library staff for other in-house jobs as well as provides employees of the shelter's workshop an opportunity to contribute to the library's needs."

Dan Bradbury

1991 "I don't think we quite yet fully reflect our users. We are getting better, but we're not there."

Some time within the five hours that a missed flight afforded him at Chicago's O'Hare airport, Dan Bradbury, former director of the Kansas City Public Library (KCPL), MO, wrote to us on his laptop via a wireless Internet connection. He and his wife and business partner—the couple has comanaged Gossage Sager Associates, an executive search firm specializing in the library market, since Bradbury retired in 2002—had just come from an all-day meeting in Chicago at ALA headquarters (he's a trustee on the ALA endowment fund).

Bradbury predicts the retirement of baby boomers will create both "a leadership void and a great opportunity for latter-day boomers and rebounders to step up to leadership and middle-management positions." And he believes continued leadership-development programs as well as more scholarships and work-study arrangements—particularly in urban libraries—can best address the gap.

Grateful for his 19 years with KCPL, Bradbury hopes his efforts there and in his current capacity have "enriched people's lives and made our community a better place." If he can keep making that kind of difference, he says, he'd consider himself a pretty lucky guy. "And if it involves libraries or librarians, so much the better."

Amy Owen

1990 "Our largest-scale problem is reinventing the tools and techniques of librarianship in a world transformed by technology. Only ongoing experimentation and the willingness to try new techniques will lead to workable solutions."

In 2003, Amy Owen retired as director of the Utah State Library in Salt Lake City, having during her 16-year service twice been named Librarian of the Year (by LJ, in 1990, and by the Utah Library Association, in 1992). Under her leadership, the Utah State Library Division achieved numerous recognitions, among them the Governor's/Chief Information Officer's Award in 2003, for excellence in improving access to government information; for RSS development, support, and implementation; and for LiveChat support for the state web site.

Owen is excited about the growing sophistication of the library and related or allied professions in managing digital collections. "Ultimately," she predicts, "the maturation of this capacity will profoundly alter the ways librarians manage their collections and open up new avenues of service." She further sees librarians interacting with users and delivering data and services to "tomorrow's iPods and SmartPhones."

Brenda Vogel
"Many predigital librarians are wary that the deluge of infinite, socially engaged, user-centered information may defeat the storehouse of authoritative, verified, factual, scientifically concluded data...there must be room for zeitgeist reconciliation."

In the years between her 1989 Librarian of the Year win and her 2000 retirement as coordinator of the Maryland Correctional Educational Libraries, Brenda Vogel published *Down for the Count: A Prison Library Handbook* (an updated edition is due out this year), wrote for *LJ* ("Bailing Out Prison Libraries," *LJ* 11/15/97), and taught a course on library services for the disadvantaged. Postretirement, she's continued her efforts on behalf of prisoners: as a Lifetime Literacy Foundation board member, she's currently helping to distribute books to prison libraries, and she's shopping around a screenplay she wrote that exposes, as she says, "the tyranny of politics over justice in the application of the death penalty."

Vogel is disheartened by her observation that libraries are doing away with the graduate-degree requirement. She further fears that the exodus of retiring librarians may prompt institutions to rationalize replacing them with more nonprofessionals, which in turn could result in library school graduates without the prospect of professional positions. "We need to do the research and the math, assemble and present the data, and launch a campaign to fight," says Vogel.

And one more thing, while she's got the floor: Vogel takes issue with the professional library association advocating for rural libraries, immigrants, school libraries, service to the disabled, and "others." Replace that last word with "prison and jail libraries." Look around, she says—they're everywhere.

Peggy Goodwin

1988 "I'd like to see libraries offering a greater variety of services that keep in mind the older generation...especially since I'm one of them now."

*LJ*

's very first Librarian of the Year retired from the Walnut Creek Branch Library of the Nicholson Memorial Library System in Garland, TX, in 1993. After a few years spent looking after her ill mother, Peggy Goodwin moved to a community home in Lindale, where she participates in a readers discussion group and burns her fellow residents at mah-jongg.

Goodwin treasures her memories of working at the Walnut Creek Branch, where she especially enjoyed "helping find material for single women who wanted to know how to fix something in the home," she says, "or the best avenue for people to deal with whatever they were facing in their lives."

Keeping up on technological advancements in the library world has been difficult (she's currently without a computer), though she's fully aware of the "mind-boggling" amount of information available. All the same, she says she hates to see a loss of the personal contact she enjoyed so much in her years of public service with users today "dealing with machines more and more—I just don't want to see young people lose their love of the book."

Today, Goodwin is a proud patron of the Lindale Library. On the morning we spoke, she'd just bought at a library sale a copy of John Lawrence Reynolds's *Secret Societies*. Her plans for the book once she's through with it? "There's a little library here [at the community home] with a good selection of popular authors and paperbacks," Goodwin says. "I'm going to donate to that collection."

**Author Information**

*Raya Kuzyk is Associate Editor, *LJ*

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