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Looking Forward with Heart

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There are many aspects of librarianship that draw us to this profession and make us glad we made the career choice we did. Even the most stout-hearted librarian, however, experiences bouts of burn-out. We all recognize the culprits that drain us of our energy: computers that don't cooperate, ungrateful or cranky patrons, materials that stubbornly refuse to fit Library of Congress subject headings.

Luckily, most of us stouthearted librarians have at least one thing, one aspect of our job, that reinvigorates us during these lulls in our biblio-zeal—a talisman or crystal that revitalizes the bruised enthusiasm. For me that talisman is teaching. Specifically, the true joy I experience when teaching senior citizens, or, as I prefer to call them as I approach joining that demographic, “older adults.” Just the process of writing about my experiences with them brings a smile to my face.

I am fortunate to have the opportunity to teach older adults in a variety of settings. I teach classes for the Learning in Retirement program run through the University of Oregon's Continuing Education Department. I have also branched out into offering workshops to OASIS, an education and volunteer program in Eugene. Both of these programs are geared toward people over the age of 55. I have had students who ranged from

55 to 90+. I've taught “Introduction to the Internet”, “Power Searching,” and “Researching in the University of Oregon Library.”

My courses have evolved over the years. When I first began teaching “Introduction to the Internet” a few years back, we would spend time working with the mouse, pointing and clicking. I was a very proud mother hen after a recent “Power Searching” class when some of the students who had attended one of my first “Introduction to the Internet” courses were discussing scanners, digital cameras, and DPI as if these things were second nature.

Teaching, at its worst, is like pulling teeth without anesthetic. Motivation is not always part of the average undergraduate's demeanor when they walk into a college classroom for a library session. They are there because they are required to be there. Some actively participate without prodding, but others just don't see the value or feel they already know the information.

Older students are a breath of fresh air. They are at a point in their lives where they could easily rationalize a life spent on a golf course or relaxing on a beach, yet here they are, spending the day in a classroom.

Instructors could not ask for better students than the older adult. They energize a room with their enthusiasm and desire to learn. They bring with them an appreciation for the opportunity to learn. They readily admit what they don't know and are anxious to fill the gaps. Whereas some regular classes can drain an instructor because they take so much effort to encourage participation and active learning, a session with older adults only leaves me excited and happy about my chosen profession and feeling very appreciated. Almost every older adult class ends in applause—quite an ego booster.

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Katy Lenn enjoys the enthusiasm older library users exhibit.

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To be fair to the undergraduates, they are often concerned about grades, tests, or assignments. One of the benefits of an older adult class is that they are unencumbered by these burdens. Many sessions are run in more of a workshop fashion. This arrangement makes it easier for the instructor, and also creates a more relaxed learning environment for the student.

As with most learning experiences, the teacher usually learns something in a class. For me, that effect is magnified in a class of older students. The lifetime of experiences they've had and share with the class can be fascinating. Their research topics also reflect their life experiences and diversity. The stereotypical geriatric topics—Medicare, social security, and health problems do not dominate their interests. I've learned about artists, other countries, historical events (from people who participated in the events), and wines by helping them with their research interests. In addition, as I am unlikely to know the latest hip-hop star, I appreciate that older students understand my references to older topics and events.

Finally, at a deeper level, I think I enjoy this group of students because I find them reassuring. It is exciting to see what the "third age" has in store for me. I have living proof that the mass media stereotype is not the norm.

These instructional experiences touch many of the reasons I became a librarian. I am able to share my knowledge, work with people, delve into interesting topics and information needs, and create independent researchers all while working with a receptive and grateful audience.

I hope that every librarian has a talisman that invigorates and reinforces their reason for being a librarian as much as mine does. ☞

In addition to working with older adults, Katy is involved in UO's Get Ready Program and is the education and linguistics specialist. Katy can be reached at klenn@oregon.uoregon.edu.

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(at a public library information desk) it just doesn't flip my switch the way a really good cataloging challenge can. When I got hired to catalog at the StreamNet Library, Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, it was just what I was after: a challenge. How does one catalog on OCLC for a library with a very small budget allowance for OCLC? The cataloger has to do a lot of original work. I try. In fact, OCLC owed us money for a couple of months. I hope other libraries find my work acceptable.

And how does all this show in my daily life? Check the introduction. I cataloged myself for fun! My work is a challenge. I thrive on challenges. It's an exercise to look up the rules, find the correct MARC tag for a Provenance note, and look up the class number for a person. I could have chosen other classifications to be sure, but my life revolves around organization and accurate, detailed description of the world around me. To look at my house, one would never guess just how passionately I feel about my chosen profession and cataloging. I vibrate with emotion; my soul sings out with glee that I have found a field where I get to feel this joy every day of my life. I WANT to go to work everyday, and not just because they pay me. I would volunteer to do this work, but my husband has this thing about paying the bills.

My husband says I'm a workaholic. I'm not really because I don't view what I do as work. I'm playing a grand and wonderful game. This is FUN. Reading is FUN. Being around so much information is FUN. Being able to find out what the outhouse down the street is worth to a collection is FUN. Classifying the hundredth book in SH167 is FUN. Finding out which MARC tag the Hydrologic Unit Code belongs in is FUN. Creating the perfect catalog record is the ultimate bliss. I have yet to reach Nirvana, but I strive for it everyday.

Cataloging is not the be all and end all of librarianship for me. I enjoy playing sleuth and tracking down that elusive unpublished manuscript for the scientist working on white sturgeon. I get a kick out of helping the fifth-grade student find a recipe from Medieval times. There are times I even find myself enjoying the administrative that comes with running the whole show. But if you want to know what makes me soar, it's bringing order to chaos: creating structure out of the ambiguous, disembodied information landscape that occupies my desk and fills my work week. Give me my AACR2R, LCSH and all the other cataloging tools, lock me in a room and I'll catalog the carpet if you leave me there long enough, loving every minute. ☞

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