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Full Circle

By madams | February 27, 2013 | No Comments |

I had just finished my first semester (Spring 1987) working as a graduate assistant in the history department at St. John's University, and since there was no GA work during the summer, I needed something to do, I hoped with pay. As a grad student working on a master's in American history—and as someone long interested in genealogy—I had spent many hours doing research in libraries, including in the Long Island Division at the Queens Borough Public Library's Central Library, in Jamaica, Queens. In those days, QBPL always needed staff. (A year earlier, I had filled out an application at the New York Public Library and had been offered a full-time library assistant position, but I chose to go to graduate school and work as a GA instead—free tuition and modest salary!) The Queens Library's personnel department staff member told me she had just the job for me. I would work during the summer as an hourly-rate employee in the Preparations & Book Receiving Division, just off the loading dock at the rear of the Central Library.

I started on June 30, 1987, and worked no more than twenty hours a week, opening boxes of new books from Bookazine and Yankee Book Peddler, and I started to learn a new vocabulary: packing slips and invoices, firm orders, approval plans, blanket orders, Greenaway, Gaylord, and multi-forms. Some books immediately went to Preparations, where books were covered, stamped, and tattle-taped. Others were brought upstairs to Acquisitions. My co-worker Napoleon told me all about the Philippines. By Labor Day, it was time to go back to grad school.



One year later, still a grad assistant needing summer work, I called my former supervisor and asked if she needed help. She immediately invited me back. I still had my ID card from the previous year—I was so unimportant that they hadn't even taken my photo. Napoleon had gone back to the Philippines, and someone (jokingly??) said that he had become mayor of his village. The work was the same: open boxes, unpack books, match titles against packing slips,

send invoices upstairs, prepare books. Well, at least I'd be finishing my master's in six months, and then I'd be a history teacher somewhere.

FEATURES

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RECENT COMMENTS

After graduating, I did teach history during the spring and summer of 1989, but then had nothing permanent lined up. I had a few job interviews at local high schools but no offers. While visiting the Central Library to work on some genealogy during early fall 1989, I stopped in to see my old supervisor. She asked me what I was doing, and when I told her that I didn't have a job, she suggested I once again fill out an application with the Queens Library but this time for a full-time job. One day a week, I think it was Wednesday afternoon, one could just show up, fill out an application, and take QBPL's typing test. Having been taught touch-typing by a nun years earlier in high school, I could type both fast and accurately with my eyes closed and breezed through the test. This time, I was offered a position as an office aide in the library's Programs & Services Division, working for the three age-level coordinators (Adult Services, Young Adult Services, and Children's Services). I started on December 2, 1989.

The people were nice and very professional, but some of the duties were tedious: filing *LJ* and *SLJ* book review cards. This was before Al Gore invented the internet (or at least before the general public knew about it). The work involved photocopying reviews from other library periodicals, and then clipping and filing them, typing correspondence and contracts for people who did programs for the library, typing memos, and answering phones. While thumbing through a 1989 issue of *American Libraries*—never saw *that* magazine before—I came across an article about Holocaust “revisionists” leaving copies of their pamphlets in libraries. (*There are actually people who deny that the Holocaust happened? I think I'm going to write something about those people someday.*)

My supervisors encouraged me to go for an MLS and told me about the librarian trainee program, where I could do librarian work, but get paid *less* than a librarian. (*Where do I sign up?*) I was accepted by the Queens College GSLIS and was promptly made a trainee by QBPL, which started me at Queens Village before sending me to Flushing a few months later. Talk about sink or swim. I was working in the reference room at Flushing, the busiest branch in the Queens system, and I hadn't even taken the introductory reference course yet. After transferring to the Central Library, I worked in History, Travel & Biography; Fine Arts & Recreation; a special project in Automated Systems; then Social Sciences (*Who is this loud Dan Cleary fellow working next door to me in Business, Science & Technology in 1992?*); a month-long reassignment in the Young Adult room; back to the branches at Jackson Heights and Veigh; and then assistant manager of Ridgewood and Howard Beach.

I had already published a few articles and book reviews and had applied for a few academic librarian positions. After being turned down by a few, including in CUNY, I was offered and accepted the Evening & Weekend Librarian job at York in September 1995. I hated the schedule but enjoyed working with students. And when a colleague later left for UT-Austin, I was able to move to the day shift. Years went by, and after being tenured, I was made head of reference, which I did for seven years, eventually adding webmaster and electronic resources to the mix. Four years as acting chief/chief librarian, and then it was technical services, handling acquisitions and also cataloging while a colleague was on leave. Now it's “just” acquisitions and collection development. But no matter which position I've held at York, I have always continued to work at the reference desk and teach since guiding students with their research is what I enjoy the most.

So there I was on Monday, July 2, 2012, opening boxes of books from COUTTS, checking titles against packing slips, and setting aside invoices for payment. I realized that it was twenty-five years later, and I was *still* doing the same thing – and still working in Jamaica, Queens. And *still* working with Dan Cleary. “Hey Dan,” I said, “it's twenty-five years since my first day at QBPL, and I'm *still* doing the same thing—opening boxes of books.” “Yeah,” he said, “but they're paying you more.”

Yep, they're paying me more. And I have my picture on my ID card.

John Drobnicki (York)