

Snapshot

Bonnie Isman

Libraries for the People

"I'm a puzzle solver. I do needlework and put quilts together and knit. So I like to see pieces come together, to see a plan come together."

Bonnie Isman is the director of the Jones Library in Amherst, Massachusetts, and teaches "Organization and Management of Public Libraries" at GSLIS. She and her husband live in Amherst.

Q: You grew up in Topeka, Kansas. How did that influence you?

It influenced me a lot. I really *look forward* to big thunderstorms, and I can tell when there is a tornado coming by the color of the clouds. Also, people are generally friendly and optimistic in the Midwest, more so than in New England. So I think I'm much more interested in reaching out to people. I think it gave me a feel for customer relations.

What did you want to be when you grew up?

I was very involved with community theater and wanted to be an actor or a director.

But you went on to study Spanish and Latin American studies at the University of Kansas. What drew you to that?

I did a summer-long student exchange program in Mexico City. We got to do great things there that we'd *never* get to do in Topeka—like go to nightclubs, the beach in Acapulco, and bull fights!

Your mother supported this?

Oh, yes. Every time I had a birthday she gave me a suitcase!

How did you get interested in library work?

I was in Montevideo, Uruguay, on a Fulbright to study theatre and nationalism in Uruguay. That turned out to be a hot topic because it was a time of political upheaval, riots, and strikes. And then I discovered that there were NO public libraries. There were university libraries, yes, but they were on strike. Not finding public libraries was a shock, because libraries had been a regular part of my life.

How do you do research if there are no libraries? So two years later when I moved to Washington, D.C., I began volunteering in school libraries, and then went on to get my M.L.S. degree at the University of Maryland.

Then you went to the Virgin Islands for four years, is that right?

Well, actually I first went to work right here at the Jones Library as the adult services librarian. After that I moved to the U.S. Virgin Islands and lived on St. Croix. I worked for the territorial librarian doing research on library development in remote locations, grant writing, and supervising VISTA volunteers. And I worked in a junior high school media center.

Why didn't you stay in the Caribbean?

There were three hurricanes during the time I was there! Too much for me. So when I got the chance to return to Massachu-

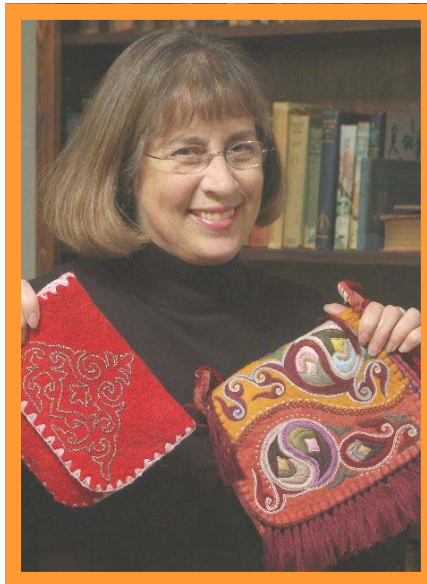
setts and work at the Jones Library again, I grabbed it.

You're pretty proud of the Jones Library. Why?

We have one of the major Robert Frost collections in the country — the poems and letters, first editions, photographs, wood-cut illustrations, and much more. We also have a great collection of Amherst archives from the period of Emily Dickinson's lifetime.

What would you say is the main connection between who you are as a person and the work you do?

I'm a puzzle solver. I do needlework; I like to put quilts together. To knit and see pieces come together, to see a plan come together. A lot of what a director does is puzzle solving, you know. And from my mother I absorbed a sense of [the importance of] community service. From my father, I developed a work ethic and initiative. It doesn't feel right if I'm not working on something.



Bonnie Isman, with bags purchased in Kyrgyzstan

What's something you're professionally passionate about?

Making the library a community center. Because that's what libraries are for! They should be connected to their communities. The biggest challenge to this happens when there's a population shift in a community. Like Holyoke has become primarily Spanish speaking. But many libraries don't have staff for new ethnic groups.

Tell me more about libraries as community centers.

The Americans with Disabilities Act has been a tremendous, positive force for opening up library buildings and services. Also when you have many languages and ethnic groups in a community, you have many opportunities for new cultural experiences, and that means libraries, too. Our local history collections should honor military service organizations as well as churches in ethnic neighborhoods, because that's all part of their community. The new phrase for this is "creating social capital," but in the 1970s we called it "libraries for the people."

What's been the biggest lesson you've learned in life?

No matter what happens today, you get another chance tomorrow. That's the Midwestern optimist speaking. Like when we were trying to get the addition built at the Jones Library in 1987. Our first proposal was turned down, then it was accepted but the money got frozen. It took three years and several tries at getting it funded before we actually broke ground. But we did it.

What advice do you have for people just entering the profession?

Don't take no for an answer. If they tell you that there's no money for your project, start looking for alternatives.

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Any personal or professional aspirations?

I'm open to a career change in retirement. I keep thinking about Julia Child, who started her cooking show in her 50s.

Has there ever been a pivotal experience in your life, something that changed your life?

Travel! My first trip was to Mexico City when I was in high school. Recently, I had the opportunity to meet librarians and to visit their libraries in Kyrgyzstan. It was a wonderful trip that taught me a lot about Islamic diversity.

Let's say you believe in former lives. Who or what were you?

Probably a Morgan horse. I grew up with horses, and my mother said that I turned into a horse for a few of my pre-teen years.

If you weren't doing what you do now, what would you do?

I'd be an ambassador overseas. Or perhaps write an exposé on all the lurid things that people do in public libraries.

Professional aspirations?

I'm developing ideas for a Melvil Dewey event and exhibit in Amherst to highlight the western Massachusetts connection to the Dewey Decimal System.

Do you have a motto?

"Never let them see you sweat."

If you could have a totally different career, what would you choose?

It would be great to have my own gallery for international hand-crafts, or a studio for knitting/weaving.

Is there a possession of yours that you particularly cherish?

One of my favorite objects is my grandmother's scissors. She went from a childhood in a little sod farm house in Oklahoma, to a career as a legal secretary at the Kansas statehouse. When I knew her, she owned her own brick house and seemed to be very self-sufficient. Among other things, she was an accomplished seamstress and did amazing crochet and tatting. Whenever I think of my own difficulties, I tell myself that if she could do that, so can I.

Interview by Victoria Thatcher

Congratulations to SCoSAA officers for Fall 2005

President : Krista Ferrante

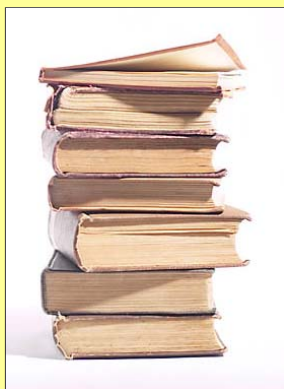
Vice President: Candice Clark Brown

Secretary: Helen Burns

NEA Liaison: Leigh Fought

Webmaster: Heather Soyka

ARMA Liaison: unfilled.



Welcome to New GSLIS Staff



Dixie Blake Foster is the new GSLIS Library Assistant for the GSLIS program at Mount Holyoke College. Before coming to Simmons, she worked for Atex, Inc., a global systems vendor in the newspaper and magazine publishing world, where she worked as an on-site installation engineer, spec writer, and QA engineer. She assists GSLIS West with reserves, requests for books and articles, and technical support. She is based in room L-403 of the Simmons Library, but travels to Mount Holyoke to offer workshops.



Jennifer Adams is the assistant at the GSLIS program at Mount Holyoke College. She earned her B.A. at Mount Holyoke College in history and design. She also worked at the college as a multimedia design and production assistant. Adams, who began attending the GSLIS West program last spring, lives in Northampton and is the mother of 15-month-old Miguel.

Ask Now for online library help

Having trouble finding articles or books for your class assignments? Intimidated by library databases? Interested in learning more about them? If so, you (or your small group) can schedule an appointment with Linda Watkins, the GSLIS librarian, or Bridget Capobianco, the library assistant, to learn about databases such as LISA, Factiva, RefWorks, Lexis Nexis, and others. Just go to the GSLIS Collection Library homepage at <http://my.simmons.edu/libraries/collections/gslis/> and select the "Ask Now" tab. Ask Now offers chat, email, and phone assistance. The online chat service puts you in touch with a live librarian Sunday through Thursday from 1:00 - 11:00 p.m., Friday from 1:00 - 6:00 p.m., and Saturday from 1:00 - 5:00 p.m. For more information, contact Bridget Capobianco at 617-521-2822 or bridget.capobianco@simmons.edu.

Folks on the Move

Adjunct faculty member Anita Silvey spoke in October at the annual meeting of the Ohio Library Association, giving lectures for the children's services division and the young adult division. She also gave the fourth Anne Scott McLeod Lecture at the University of Maryland this October, given under the auspices of the College of Library and Information Science at the University of Maryland. Silvey will present the announcement lecture for a new degree in children's literature at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, Nov. 9.