

Snapshot: Valerie Diggs

"In the public schools today, you have to be willing not only to work hard, but to work hard with grace and aplomb."

Q: *How did you first get interested in library and information science?*
I worked for three years as a teacher (just out of college) then had a string of "jobless" years at home raising four children. One day, I got a call from a family friend, an elementary school principal in Littleton. "Valerie," he said, "I have a challenge for you." So I visited him and he brought me into a large classroom with an enormous pile of books in the middle. They looked as if they were stacked for a bonfire. He asked me: "Can you make a library out of this mess?" I thought: I'm in way over my head here. But I said I'd try. So I picked up some information on the Dewey Decimal System from the local public library, grabbed some parent volunteers, got people to donate some shelving, and got to work. The mountain of books was put in order, I began a library program, and I fell in love with the world of libraries.

But by 1992, I had become a single parent living on a very low salary as a librarian in a parochial school. I was supporting four kids and struggling to make ends meet. I knew I had to further my education or I wouldn't be able to stay in my home. I also wanted very much to do something I loved. Simmons was a natural choice, and that first year I fell in love with Simmons—the atmosphere of the College, the fourth floor library, the people. I've never really left! It opened so many doors for me.

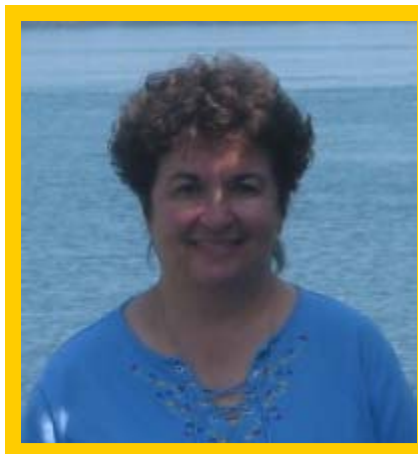
What do you like most about your job?
Everyday I touch the lives of so many students. Before they start their projects, I developed a presentation that all students watch, called "Responsible Authorship". It deals head on with plagiarism, which is a huge issue in high schools. Students have to come to terms with it, or they will fail in college. Public school libraries are in the forefront in terms of dealing with plagiarism, teaching students what it is and what it means to adhere to an honor code.

What's the connection between who you are as a person and the work you've chosen?

I'm organized and focused and I work hard. I've always been a determined sort of person. And I'm someone who's devoted to "going the extra mile," no matter what job I'm tackling. Often, especially in the public school system, that extra dedication to the profession is an essential ingredient for success. Just to function and stay positive in the public schools today, you have to be willing not only to work hard, but to work hard with grace and aplomb.

What are you passionate about?

My Greek heritage! All of my grandparents came over from Greece. The grandmothers were girls who just left everything, got on a ship, and came over to marry men they'd never met. My first husband was Greek; I speak Greek fluently and my children speak it, too. I love the Greek countryside and I cook my own pastichio, spanokopita, moussaka, and baklava. I'm also very involved in my Greek Orthodox church. And I especially love that Greeks are family people, that family comes first. When I had difficult times, the whole family was there for me.



A professional passion is mentoring. I just mentored a young woman, a single mom who worked for us as a library assistant in Chelmsford. She was terrific in her job, and I encouraged her to go further, to get her degree, to take risks. She just graduated from Simmons last May, started working in the Andover public schools, and has tripled her salary. I'm so proud of her!

What was an experience that changed your life?

Making the decision to further my education and having the courage to change my life and step out alone into uncharted waters. Doing that allowed me to break from the past, think for myself, and eventually meet my current husband. He's been a driving force in untying my wings and brushing me off for future unfettered flights.

What do you like to do when you're not working?

I love to be on the seacoast of Northern Maine—Eastport to be exact—in my travel trailer, parked ten feet from the high tide line. I like exploring the coastline, having time to read good books. Lobsters, crabs, steamers on the picnic table—what could be better?

Who would you have been in a former life?

Pearl Buck. She lived an exotic life, wrote beautifully, and knew both the western world and the orient equally well. She was an independent, free-spirited woman with a gifted pen and a flair for life.

What accomplishment in your life are you most proud of?

When I was growing up, I was told not to spend much time thinking about school or a career, because I would be getting married and my husband would care for me. Overcoming this mind set and saying to myself, "I am as good and as strong and as smart as any man" was hard to do, but I did it. Maybe this isn't relevant to young women today, but for women born in the fifties, this was a hurdle of Everest-like proportions.

If you had a motto, what would it be?

Love yourself first; all else is secondary. (Is that a bad thing to say?)

What is a favorite quotation?

"The journey is the reward" (a Taoist saying).

If you were to pick one object that is or represents something very significant to you, what would it be?

Sea glass. Dropped into the ocean, raked across sand and stone by the tide until it's smooth and worn. Yet it emerges even more beautiful than before. That's how I think of myself: having emerged from the sea of life more polished.

When all is said and done, what would you like people to say about you? That I was a person with a gift who gave it away.

Valerie Diggs ('96 LS) is director of libraries of the Chelmsford Public School system, where she directs eight libraries and also teaches high school students. She has taught Organization and Management of School Library Technology Centers since graduating from GSLIS. She has four grown children dispersed between Amherst and Lowell, Massachusetts; Orlando, Florida; and Stockholm, Sweden.