

Job^{of a} Lifetime

Danianne Mizzy

Observations of an observatory librarian

If you're a self-starting jack-of-all-trades, then running a one-person observatory library might be your job of a lifetime. Betty Fridena has been at the University of Arizona's (UA) Parker Library Steward Observatory (PLSO) since 1985. PLSO houses a working collection focusing on the fields of astronomy, astrophysics, cosmology, and instrumentation. It serves Steward Observatory faculty, staff, graduate students, and undergraduate astronomy majors. The collection includes things you'd expect such as books, journals, technical and observatory reports, and less familiar materials like star charts, sky surveys and catalog atlases, which show the locations of stars and other heavenly objects.

The one-person library

When I called for the interview, Fridena was taking inventory . . . and dusting. When I asked her to talk about the rewards and challenges of being in a one-person library, it quickly became apparent that the one-person library is not for everyone. Fridena described a first day that might have proved to be some people's last. "When I first got here in 1985, there had been only student aides for five years. When I went in the office, there were books stacked up on the floor. Things they didn't want up at the telescopes anymore and that they didn't know what to do

with, they just stacked in the office. The labels were falling off the books. The way they were checking in the periodicals wasn't too accurate either. It was a big mess. Since serials was what I did at my previous job, that's what I started with. I fixed up the serials, then I cleaned out all the backlog and organized." An accomplishment of which she is duly proud.

Solo work has its pluses and minuses. Fridena does everything, literally. "I order and do the collection development, keep up with resources, fix the Web page, [and] catalog, which they don't seem to teach in library school anymore for some reason. I do the inventory, shift, and check in the serials. I maintain some special collections and a small archive, mainly of our preprints, theses, and newspaper clippings of articles that have to do with us."

Her attitude towards reference is, "You can't expect them to come to you. If they open up the card catalog, I usually go over there and say, 'Are you finding what you want?' It's important not to just sit in the office." She went on to say, "What I like about being a one-person library is the flexibility. I'm my own boss and I don't have that many meetings. I never have to wear a little suit to the office. What is hard is being invisible. I'm the only that does my job and some folks think the journals just appear here."



Betty Fridena, solo librarian at the University of Arizona's Park Library Steward Observatory.

Danianne Mizzy is assistant head of the Engineering Library at the University of Pittsburgh. Have an idea for a "Job of a Lifetime" story? E-mail: danianne+@pitt.edu

Staying current

Another challenge is staying current. "I belong to the Special Libraries Association Physics-Astronomy-Mathematics (PAM) Division and that group has a very useful conference called LISA (Library and Information Services in Astronomy). I've gotten to go once, when it was in Washington D.C., but after that it was in Munich, the Canary Islands, and Prague. I'd like them to bring it back to the States, but I understand because astronomy is very international."

Fridena was a contributor to the PAM Division's Astronomy Thesaurus. She is able to network locally with the librarians at the UA's Lunar and Planetary Lab and Science Libraries, as well as the National Optical Astronomy Observatory Library, which is conveniently located right across the street.

Up to the telescopes and down at the observatory

Naturally, I had to ask what she meant by "sent down from (or up to) the telescopes." It turns out that the once isolated setting of the observatory has been steadily encroached upon by the development of Tucson, so most of the telescopes are now located on sites

on nearby mountains. Fridena reels them off like old friends. "We have the two on Mt. Lemmon, the 90 inch up on Kitt Peak, the MMT (Multiple Mirror Telescope) on Mt. Hopkins, etc." Materials are sent for the use of the researchers at these remote facilities, reference works like "the *Astronomical Almanac*, which gives them the positions of different objects and some journals for which we get multiple copies."

Back in 1985, "Parker Library was in just one room. As time went on, we were running out of space and getting very cramped. In 1992, they built a wing onto the building, and gave us a much bigger library space. It has a nice view, three public access computers, and seating for a dozen, so more students can study. I also got a bigger office and a work area. I used to process materials on my desk, which also held the typewriter, so it was a nice change."

The long road to online access

Fridena is close to realizing the long-standing dream of providing an online catalog, a project

that has seen its share of reversals. One of the challenges of being a librarian in the cyber age is dealing with systems issues. "For four years I've been working on getting the card catalog online. I got Windows-based software, Inmagic, because it allowed me to do it myself. I have practically the whole card catalog in there now, but I still haven't got it online. I had it on my computer and I was planning to use my computer as the server, but then I got a virus. It didn't destroy the catalog but it really messed up the computer.

"After that, it was too high of a security risk, so they put the library Web page I had created on a bigger machine, a server that has more security. But when I got ready to launch the catalog, I found out that the server used Linux. Now we're back to making my computer a server again, but I need to get Windows 2000 instead of Windows NT because it

has more security. I had to order a new computer and I haven't gotten that yet."

Little pearls

Along with putting the catalog online, Fridena has been carefully evaluating and cataloging previously uncataloged observatory publications. "Going through them is time consuming because so many of them are reprints, but in there with all the yellow papers are little pearls. You have to go through it all to make sure you don't discard a paper that wasn't published in any of the journals, but was something the observatory published on its own. These can be important papers that people still ask for. I am also cataloging observatory publications that are like sky surveys. They were distributed to other places, but you don't know how many people still have them."

Looking to the future, there is another uncataloged collection that Fridena would like to make available, if time and funding ever permit. Along with many other observatories, Steward has a collection of glass-negatives produced many years ago by observer-photographers. She would like to take them out of their basement storage, digitize them, and put them on the Web. If Fridena has her way, these stars will shine once more. ■

Solo librarian

Where:

Parker Library Steward Observatory
University of Arizona

For more information, visit: <http://www.as.arizona.edu:8080/Astro/resources/plso/plso.htm>