

“More than Books” Column, *The Journal-Standard*, January 3, 2012

In Memoriam Nancy Smith

Nancy Smith probably isn't a household name in Freeport, although she was well known in library circles, particularly in northwestern Illinois. Nancy died December 18, 2011, but her memory will be with me for a long time.

Nancy was a public library consultant in the Prairie Area Library System a.k.a. PALS. I met her my first week on the job here, back in September of 2004. To this day, I credit Nancy's orientation with getting me excited about all the opportunities for cooperation available through Illinois's statewide regional library system. I was particularly concerned that Freeport Library, in 2004, was operating as a stand-alone library, with a stand-alone circulation system. Nancy provided the first concrete information about the heartening possibility of a shared online catalog, which is known today as PrairieCat.

I remember joking with Nancy at the end of her visit that, after meeting her, I felt like I had a pal at PALS, and it was going to be a beautiful friendship.

That is not to say I always appreciated her. You have to understand that part of Nancy's job was to give advice, good advice.

It was Nancy, for example, who urged me to enroll in a week-long training institute for new library directors, held every year on the campus of the University of Illinois, Springfield. “New directors?” I spluttered. “I've been in library administration for over 20 years! Why should I spend a dreary week with a bunch of kids at some college dorm?”

Nancy painstakingly explained that “new” also meant “new-to-Illinois,” and there would be plenty of (ahem) experienced people in attendance, and, moreover, it was a good way to meet State Library staff. I finally gave in and promptly found out that half the “new” directors were transplants from other states, a number of whom I enjoy working with to this day.

It was Nancy who called to alert me to an announcement in an American Library Association journal for a traveling Smithsonian exhibit, “Forever Free: Abraham Lincoln's Journey to Emancipation.” “Oh, we wouldn't qualify for that,” I told her. “Sure you would,” she insisted. “Have you looked at this grant application?” I asked her. “It is pages and pages.” “I'll help you with it,” she promised. “Oh, okay,” I finally agreed, “but we'll never get it.”

I was right about one thing. The lengthy grant application was an absolutely nightmare to complete. As for the rest, well, thanks to Nancy, Freeport Library found itself hosting the “Forever Free” exhibit the summer before the Lincoln-Douglas Debate Sesquicentennial Celebration.

Nancy was known for answering her telephone on the first ring. If she was out of the office, she still managed to return calls the same day. After all, those of us up against strict deadlines for complicated annual reports were relying on her.

I recall a drive we made to Kankakee for the Kankakee Area Library Association annual dinner. Nancy wanted me to see what a group of multi-type libraries on the other side of PALS had accomplished by working cooperatively. “Maybe you could get to know Judy Moore, the director at Highland Community College Library, a little better,” she suggested on the trip home.

So this is how I saw Nancy: smart, friendly, well-intended, upbeat, and persistent.

I apologize to any readers who knew Nancy if this isn't quite the way you may have seen her. Perhaps the teacher in her demonstrated a particular side to me because it was what I needed. Perhaps those of us who knew Nancy should ask ourselves just exactly what it was, for each of us, that she touched and brought out.

How did she get this way? How does one acquire such a talent as a consultant, to find the right approach for the situation and the individual? As one of her work friends observed, “She never labeled people, and she wanted the best for us all.”

Freeport was one of 140 public libraries in PALS. You'd have to multiply the help and encouragement and, yes, the prodding I received by 140 to get an idea of Nancy's impact on and value to the profession, not to mention the regard in which she was held.

Nancy lived in Mount Morris. Before joining PALS, she directed the Mount Morris Public Library and enjoyed a stint in the library at the Dixon Correctional Center.

Nancy retired from PALS in 2010 as its Manager of Consulting and Continuous Learning, and PALS is now merged into the Reaching Across Illinois Library System a.k.a. RAILS. RAILS covers the entire northern half of Illinois and, due to the decline in state support, offers no consulting services.

For me, Nancy embodied the best of PALS. I consider myself fortunate to have had her in my life when I did, for as long as I did, and I mourn her loss.

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