

The Decision to Retire: A Personal Story

By Nancy Bolt

Make no mistake about it, I have loved my job. For someone with attention deficit disorder (something I realized late in life that I probably have), being a state librarian was the perfect career. It is hard to get bored when the job changes almost every day. Therefore, the decision to retire was neither an easy one nor one made quickly. The path to this decision might be of some interest to others.

A state librarian's work falls into two broad categories. First, there is the work with libraries in the state, full of meetings and discussions and interactions to move the state's libraries forward in their service to Colorado's residents. Second, there is the bureaucratic aspect of budgets and personnel and advocacy to non-library groups and attending long (and sometimes boring) meetings during which about five minutes of the talk applies to and can benefit libraries and their work.

I actually enjoyed both parts of the job. I've never considered being a "bureaucrat" a dirty word. It is the bureaucratic side of the job that allows the library development side to succeed. A state library must have money, talented staff, and the support of non-library groups in order to succeed. I thrived on those five minutes of an otherwise boring meeting when I could make a point about the value of libraries or find a slight wedge in which I could insert libraries into the discussion, leading to an otherwise unavailable cooperative venture. Part of success requires being on constant lookout for those moments.

I loved even more the work with Colorado's librarians. Our successes as a state have been the result of a cooperative spirit not found in other states, a spirit that sought to move libraries forward to serve Colorado's librarians and residents in new and interesting and sometimes revolutionary ways: Colorado Library Card, Colorado Virtual Library, AskColorado, Colorado Digitization Program, Online Tutoring, CARL, MARMOT, ASCC, NEXUS, public library standards, educational technology/information literacy, finally the achievement of state aid for libraries, steadily increasing funding for DPL and systems, and ACLIN and on, and on, and on. All this was accomplished through librarians working together.

Three years ago that changed. It wasn't just the budget cuts and the resulting cuts in library programs. Those cuts were actually a stimulating challenge to the library community to find better, more efficient ways to organize how we do things. It wasn't just the futility of the state's budget under TABOR, depressing though that was. Rather it was an unrest, a shifting of interests.

One big signal was that I was using up my vacation about as quickly as I earned it. I was not as available for the State Library staff or the library community as I had been before. I became irritated at the bureaucratic side of the job. How many more times must we justify our existence and need for money ("and please, we need this on one page by 3:00 p.m. today.")? Why is it so complicated to dismiss an employee who is not performing? Where are we going to put the new staff person or intern when the building and our space in it is crammed to the fullest? After eighteen years why do we still find out about educational programs after the announcement has gone out instead of in time to get school librarians on the invitation list?

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This led to an examination of what I liked and did not like about my work. What gave me pleasure and what frustrated me? I came to realize that my work with libraries, the facilitation of consensus in a difficult situation, the projects for the Colorado Association of Libraries (CAL) and the American Library Association (ALA), finding partners for Bulgarian libraries (including importing and selling jewelry to benefit them), helping to develop and evaluate WebJunction, developing workshops for system retreats and the regular state of the state, working with the Ed Tech unit at CDE...this is what I looked forward to. However, I found myself increasingly resisting the bureaucratic side.

Revelation time! I could do what I really liked—the consulting, facilitating, presenting, importing, association work—without being state librarian! Could I retire? Three questions needed to be answered. First, could I *really* retire financially? Second, was I not indispensable? I've been in Colorado for 18 years. When the topic of retirement came up in casual conversation people say: "Oh Nancy, you can't retire. What would we do without you? You are our leader!" It is fun being State Librarian and getting special attention and recognition. Could I walk away from that? Third, was I running away from the problems? What would I do in retirement?

A quick trip to PERA soon revealed yes and no to the first question. I didn't actually have enough years in Colorado; however, I could purchase years and retire with a comfortable benefit. The second two sets of questions were answered with the help of a counselor from my church. I sat with her for several sessions and explored my indispensability and life after retirement. It soon became apparent that (surprise!) I was not indispensable. Blessed with excellent staff at the State Library and leadership in the library community, my role had increasingly become more one of reassurance to the staff that they were on the right track than real leadership. Sure, I could improve the wording in a memo or give a suggestion on strategy, but the ideas were coming from the staff. Again, my best contributions could continue to be made outside the official job. Was I not more than my position? Was I not valued and recognized for my individual contribution?

Whether I was "running from" or "running to" was more difficult to answer. I began planning my time if I retired. What would I do? The ideas flooded in. Travel more with my husband. Reenergize JNR consultants, my old consulting firm. Expand my importing business and go to more library conferences. Develop workshops and offer them to libraries and library associations. Increase my activity in CAL, ALA, and IFLA. Finally, organize thirty years of photos neatly (sort of) stored in shoe boxes. I found there was more that I wanted to do than I would ever have time for.

About this time (spring 2004) I began to leave my purse places—twice in a movie theater, once in a restaurant, behind at meetings, behind at home. It was never stolen and nothing was ever taken from it. I just kept leaving it behind. One Sunday morning I had to travel to Pueblo and back to retrieve it from a Boston.

Market restaurant. I mentioned this to my church counselor and thus came revelation number two. My purse carried valuables within it—my identity, my financial resources, my business cards. Perhaps this

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was my way of dealing with the ambivalence of leaving my job which had been my identity and provided my financial resources. Was this a constant hidden psychological tug-of-war in my decision to retire?

Two weeks later, in early July, I made the final decision. Yes, I would walk away. I quickly sealed the deal with PERA, told my boss Bill Moloney my plans, and with some sadness and hesitation, told my staff. Dr. Moloney was kind enough to accept my resignation and then offer to hire me back immediately to manage a transition to new leadership. The staff and library community were stunned, briefly, and then moved on with their own new plans. Change happens.

I am looking forward with excitement, expectation, and enthusiasm to the next phase of my life. I know with certainty I am not running from, but to new activities and experiences. I know my commitment to libraries and what they stand for is as strong as ever.

See you around.

Nancy Bolt is the former Colorado State Librarian and an internationally-known library consultant.