

# ChangeMasters All

## An Interview with Norman D. Stevens

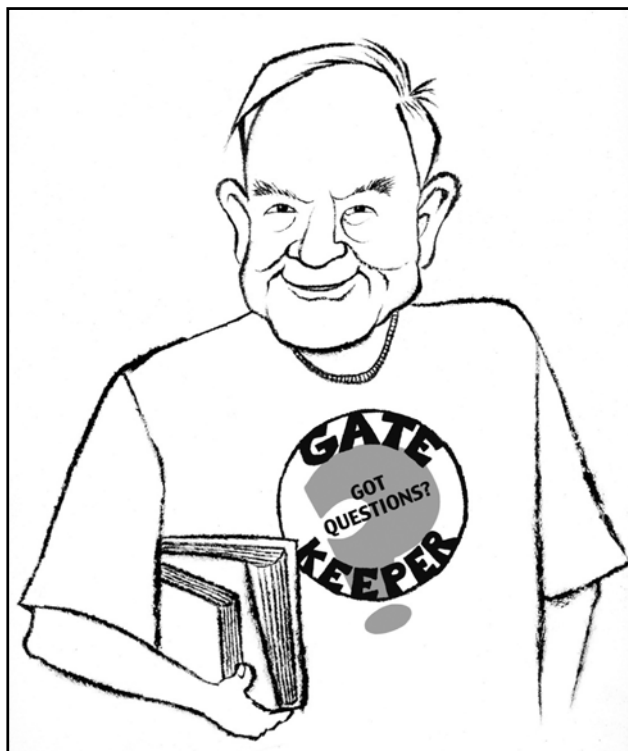
Gregg Sapp

**T**he many facets of Norman D. Stevens's complex, prolific, influential, and—he would be the first to admit—often intentionally provocative career in librarianship are abundantly represented by his numerous writings in library literature. Among his publications are the works of three distinct but overlapping alter egos: Norman D. Stevens, scholar and director of the University of Connecticut Libraries; Norman D. Stevens, library humorist and director of the Molesworth Institute; and Norman D. Stevens, library historian and collector of “librarianiana.” In reality, the three Norman D. Stevens comfortably reside in the same person, and indeed his interests range broadly over many other cultural and academic landscapes, too.

To get a sense of the scope of his interests, a sampling of his personal favorite publications include the 130 or so “Our Profession” columns that he wrote for the *Wilson Library Bulletin* from 1982 to 1995, in which he critiqued ideas and books that he thought made a positive contribution to librarianship. Writing in the persona of the scholar and administrator, his most influential works include “The Catalogs of the Future: a Speculative Essay” in the *Journal of Library Automation* (1980); “Looking Back at Looking Ahead, or The Catalogs of the Future Revisited” in *Information Technology and Libraries* (1998); and “Research Libraries: Past, Present, and Future” from *Advances in Librarianship* (1993).<sup>1</sup> By contrast, his first article on the Molesworth Institute, in *ALA Bulletin* (1963), introduced librarians to this loosely confederated organization for the furtherance of library humor, and his latest, “The Fully Electronic Academic Library,” in *College and Research Libraries* (2006), fulfilled his personal goal of having a Molesworth satire published in every major American professional library journal.<sup>2</sup> Finally, he was writing primarily as a historian and connoisseur of all things library-like in his book, *A Guide to Collecting Librarianiana* (Scarecrow, 1986). His complete bibliography includes more than two-hundred articles, on almost as many subjects.

### An Eclectic Student and Scholar

Stevens's broad interests were nurtured by his family and the environment of his upbringing. Born the fifth of six children, Stevens's love for learning was nurtured by his



family. His brother and sister-in-law, Robert and Helen (both graduates of the Columbia University library school) provided positive role models and helpful mentors to him when he lived with them in Washington, D.C., from 1949 to 1951. Their counsel proved as important as their material support while Stevens worked in several routine jobs at the Library of Congress. He plated and marked books, processed government documents, and “arranged and indexed Japanese maps, not knowing any Japanese.” At the same time, he went to school part time at American University until he was able to embark upon full-time studies at the University of New Hampshire. There he majored in political science, graduating in 1954.

At the time, his vague intention was to pursue a career teaching political science. When the opportunity to study

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**Gregg Sapp** (sappg@evergreen.edu) is Dean of Library and Media Services at The Evergreen State College, Olympia, Washington.

abroad through the Fulbright Scholar Program became available, though, he seized it and spent most of one year doing intensive research in Wellington, New Zealand. Kenneth Scott, of Victoria College of the University of New Zealand, mentored Stevens in his work examining resources in the Alexander Turnbull Library on the labor movement and the formation of that country's Labor Party, and he published a series of articles documenting that research in *Political Science*. While his research was still within the realm of political science, these endeavors instilled within him a deeper appreciation of librarianship. Inspired by Scott who "got me to begin thinking about publishing," he started to see himself as a scholar.

Upon his return to the United States at the end of 1954, he was initially dismayed to learn of the lack of scholarships available for graduate studies in political science. At this point, his brother Bob, who after a long career at the Library of Congress eventually became dean of the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Hawaii, again suggested an alternative direction. Rutgers University was in the process of transforming its curriculum, and as a result it was launching a brand new library school. Stevens got in at the ground level, surrounding himself with a faculty that included Ralph Shaw, Paul Dunkin, Mary Gaver, Margaret Monroe, and the dean, Lowell Martin, "all people with the combination of a wealth of knowledge and very practical experience." Supporting himself with a part-time job in the library's circulation department, Stevens immersed himself in the program and graduated in 1957. For the next year he was a cataloger at Rutgers, which today he recalls as "the only real, paid non-administrative professional experience that I ever had, for what that's worth."

By this time, Stevens found himself naturally gravitating toward the scholarly administrative side of the profession. When Rutgers opened its doctoral program in librarianship in 1959, he was recruited by Shaw, then the dean, as one of its first students. The new program was unique: "It consisted of a limited number of intensive seminars taught by senior faculty, and with an emphasis on the dissertation." With help from a research grant secured by Shaw, Stevens conducted a project comparing how punched card data on the properties of explosives in a military database compared with two more traditional means of accessing the same information. "From my perspective," Stevens recalls, "the problem with that work was that the punch card system tabulated data but did nothing to organize it." It became the subject of his dissertation, "Three Systems of Information Retrieval."

## Academic Library Administration

Chance provided an early administrative opportunity for Stevens. Newly married (to another Rutgers student, Nora Bennett), he needed a job, but "I wasn't looking for anything

## Norman Stevens—Select Major Publications (includes Molesworth Institute publications)

- "The Molesworth Institute," *ALA Bulletin* 57 (1963): 75-76.
- "A Computer Analysis of Library Postcards," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 25, no. 5 (1974): 332-25.
- "A Historical Perspective on the Concept of Networks: Some Preliminary Considerations," in *Networks for Networkers*, ed. Barbara Evans Markuson and Blanche Woods (New York: Neal Schuman, 1980): 29-48.
- "The Catalog of the Future: A Speculative Essay," *Journal of Library Automation* 13, no. 2 (1980): 88-95.
- "Library Networks and Resource Sharing in the United States: An Historical and Philosophical Overview," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 31, no. 6 (1980): 404-12.
- "Our Profession," a regular feature column in *Wilson Library Bulletin*, appearing from 1982 to 1995.
- "The History of Information," *Advances in Librarianship* 14 (1986): 1-48.
- A Guide to Collecting Librarianship* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1986).
- "Our Image in the 1980s," *Library Trends* 36, no. 4 (Spring 1988): 825-51.
- "The Last Librarian," *American Libraries* 32, no. 10 (Oct. 2001): 60-64.
- "The Fully Electronic Academic Library," *College & Research Libraries* 67, no. 1 (Jan. 2006): 5-14.

in particular after I got my PhD. I knew that I wanted to work in an academic library. My brother Bob told me that they were looking for an acting director at Howard University." An interview was arranged, and, today, Stevens rather modestly confesses that "with no experience of any kind, I quickly became a library director." He was fortunate, though, in having talented and supportive people at Howard, such as Dorothy Porter, who managed the Moorhead Collection on African American history and culture. Two major literary figures on the faculty, Rayford Logan and Sterling Brown, were at the peaks of their careers, but even so found time to mentor Stevens. By the end of his two year appointment at Howard, "I had learned a great deal about the historical nature of black colleges and universities in the United States," and that experience provided him with skills in building relationships and managing people.

Stevens admits somewhat sheepishly that he never had to look very hard to find a job. As his two-year term at Howard drew toward an end, he received a telephone call from Donald Cameron, director of the University Libraries at Rutgers. Cameron's long-time associate director was retiring, and he wondered if Stevens would be interested in the position. "Back then," he admits, "things were very different for job-seekers. It was common for young directors to be recruited, learn, and study as an administrative intern. I didn't even have a formal interview for the job."

So, now with three children (David and twin daughters, Sara and Elizabeth), Stevens and his family returned to New Brunswick. Then, upon Cameron's retirement in 1966, Stevens once again filled the role of acting university librarian.

One responsibility that Stevens fulfilled as the acting university librarian at Rutgers was that institution's liaison to the Association for Research Libraries. Among the group of his colleagues in ARL, he rekindled a friendship with John McDonald, which had been established in the mid-1950s when McDonald spent some time at Rutgers in a special fellowship program. Stevens says that McDonald "was one of the few ARL directors that I really wanted to work with." The feeling was mutual, and the opportunity came in 1968 when McDonald, then director of the University of Connecticut Libraries (UConn), contacted his old friend: "He [McDonald] was faced with some administrative personnel problems and was also about to begin planning for a major new building; he decided that he needed a strong assistant." At first, Stevens concedes, "my duties were not well defined," but in practice, as McDonald turned his attention to building planning, Stevens assumed daily administrative operations of the library and five regional campus libraries.

McDonald and Stevens shared a unique partnership at UConn. In 1977, while McDonald served as executive director of ARL, Stevens stepped in to function as the acting university librarian. Two years later, McDonald returned to UConn as the director of libraries, bringing the building project to completion, while Stevens was assigned the title of university librarian, clarifying his role as the administrator overseeing day-to-day operations and budgets. "At one point," Stevens recalls, "Governor Ella Grasso expressed considerable concern that there were two librarians at UConn who earned more than she did." Ultimately, when McDonald retired in 1987, the two positions were consolidated and Stevens was appointed director of the university libraries. He remained in this capacity for the duration of his career.

When asked about his major accomplishments, Stevens invariably begins by speaking about his staff. From the start, he focused on developing staff competencies, professionalism, and opportunities as a high priority. "When I came to UConn, the staff was small and for the most part homegrown." As new positions became available, Stevens began to actively recruit talented librarians from farther afield than had been done in the past. When the staff unionized in the 1970s, salaries improved, and Stevens took it as a matter of pride that librarian pay at UConn rose significantly in relation to ARL averages. The completion of the Homer Babbidge Library also enhanced the university's reputation in library circles. Through his example and his active decisions, Stevens strove to "provide the resources, support, and encouragement to staff so they could, and would do their best no matter what their duties and responsibilities. I always gave staff the widest possible opportunity to expand and develop their

capabilities." Those values contributed to an environment of openness and freedom that remains a distinctive feature of the UConn library system.

Related to those internal efforts toward professional development, Stevens also became heavily involved in consortial planning and resources sharing through the New England Library and Information Network (NELINET). He was among the system's primary negotiators with OCLC when NELINET became its New England agent, which led to a rapid addition of new members. "It brought a new and innovative library technology to the UConn libraries at a time when it was badly needed." For ten years, Stevens was the institution's representative to NELINET, eventually becoming its president and serving as a delegate to the OCLC Users Council. Later, he shifted his priority from the regional network to the newly established CONNINET, sponsored by the Connecticut State Library, to provide grants to cooperative library initiatives statewide. As chair of the CONNINET board, he oversaw its diverse projects.

A hallmark of Stevens' legacy at UConn is the development of special collections and archival resources. The Northeast Children's Literature Collection (NCLC) exists today in a large part thanks to his efforts to gather these resources and sponsor activities around them. The initial impetus came from Billie Levy, whose personal extensive collection remains a central core of the NCLC, and whose relationships with numerous children's authors and illustrators helped persuade many of them to donate original materials to the NCLC. Working with Billie, and with his wife Nora (formerly a school library coordinator), Stevens obtained such materials from Leonard Everett Fisher, Tomie dePaola, Marc Simont, Wendell and Florence Minor, Barry Moser, and others. To this day, they remain active members of the American Book Collectors of Children's Literature. As part of his involvement in an active exhibits program within the UConn libraries, Stevens curated over twenty exhibits, including several in the area of children's literature, as well as many arts and crafts. His last such exhibit was in the fall of 2008. At the time of his retirement, one of the exhibit spaces in the Babbidge Library was refurbished and named the Stevens Gallery.

Today, the NCLC is housed within the Thomas Dodd Research Center, which opened in 1994 on the UConn campus. Planning for this building, which houses the institution's Archives and Special Collections, began just prior to Stevens' retirement. At the request of his successor, Paul Kobulnicky, he agreed to serve as the acting director of the Dodd Center until a permanent director was appointed early in 1996. This gave him the opportunity to remain involved in its planning and fundraising, and to be in that position at the dedication ceremony at which President Bill Clinton spoke. For more than ten years after 1996, Stevens remained heavily involved as a volunteer within both the Babbidge Library, where he worked a few hours a week at the reference desk, and at the Dodd Center. He continues to support the university libraries in a variety of ways.

## Humor, History, and Miscellanea

Parallel to and intertwined with Stevens's career in library administration, he also developed renown for his writings, research, and collecting in myriad areas of "librarianship." Through these activities, he explored interests in far-reaching aspects of the profession, from its trivia to its pretensions, simultaneously expressing a joy for being a librarian and sometimes acerbic opinions about librarianship. He assumed both literary personalities at times in his regular column, "Our Profession," which ran in *Wilson Library Bulletin* from 1982 until 1995. The title of this piece was borrowed from the works of library humorist Edmund Lester Pearson, who used it satirically to refer to the sometimes possessive nature of librarians in defense of their social roles. Stevens attempted to shatter proprietary thinking by challenging librarians to consider ideas from different disciplines and alternative points of view.

Stevens' reputation as an iconoclast developed early. While a student at Rutgers, he and his friend and fellow library worker, Francis Johns, founded the Molesworth Institute. The inspiration for the institute's name was a series written by Geoffrey Willans and Ronald Searle, in which the eponymous Nigel Molesworth was a character in several books (e.g., *Down with Skool!*, 1953) about life in a private British boys school. The idea coalesced in a library school paper that Stevens wrote chronicling the creation of an imaginary publishing house established by Nigel Molesworth himself. From that humble beginning, "I wrote my first article, derived from that paper, to be published in a library journal . . . which outlined the goals of the Molesworth Institute."

From its inception, when writing as the director of the Molesworth Institute, Stevens took every opportunity to promote his humor vigorously. "It provided a useful way of differentiating my humorous satirical writings from my more serious professional papers." Stevens has published some sixty articles in his capacity as the director of the Molesworth Institute. These works have been published in several languages, in publications from Italy, Brazil, France, England, Sweden, and other countries. Today, the Molesworth Institute consists of a select group of fewer than one hundred librarians worldwide who have been designated Fellows, and its continuation is ensured because Stevens' granddaughter has been designated the director-in-waiting.

About the Molesworth initiatives, Stevens comments, "Apart from its entertainment value, I find that good library humor—which is what I hope I produced—allows us to take a critical look at library practices and to point out some of the fallacies and foibles of librarianship." Too many studies have no practical value, he argues, and by way of illustrating that point, he alludes to his own, tongue-in-cheek piece entitled "A Cost Analysis of a Cost Analysis." His writings managed to skewer librarianship's pretensions while lampooning its insecurities.

Stevens was not afraid to take on the powers that be. The best example is his campaign for the presidency

of the American Library Association (ALA). From early in his career, Stevens believed that ALA was too bureaucratic and cumbersome, and more about providing "ample opportunities for individual librarians to advance their own careers" than with "accomplishing much that was of significant benefit to the libraries I worked in or, indeed, the profession as a whole." So, "In keeping with my Molesworthian approach, I decided that I should run for president as a petition candidate with the simple goal of seeking to, and actually succeeding in, doing nothing during my entire tenure as ALA president." His campaign slogan, as put forth on numerous buttons seen at conferences, was "Why Not Norman?" His numerous supporters included Michael Gorman, who later would become ALA president.

At the heart of his humor, though, was a passion for being a librarian. That, to a large degree, inspired his lifelong drive for collecting things. He actively collected "librarianship," which includes postcards, souvenir items, quotations, library antiques, and of course humor. He even wrote what remains the only book on the subject, *A Guide to Collecting Librarianship* (Scarecrow, 1986). Today, the bulk of these collections, which include more than twenty-five thousand library postcards and almost five hundred souvenir china pieces, reside in the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montréal. All of his remaining papers and collections, including library humor, are designated for location in the Dodd Center.

## Reflections on Administration

If there is one lesson that Stevens says he learned about successful library administration, it is that he places people at the center of his administrative philosophy. He advises that it is necessary to "create and maintain a sense of community, if not family among the staff." The institution comprises many individuals who work together only if the leaders "let them know that you care about them, their work, and their contribution (no matter how small) to the library." Thus a large part of his administrative style involved "walking around throughout the library on a daily basis and taking the time to talk to individual staff members about their work and interests."

Stevens warns us about the conflicts of interest that can arise if the library director's personal career goals diverge from what's best for the institutions. He advises new library managers to "look for an involvement in external activities and programs that will, in the environment of the institution and other factors, bring the maximum benefit to the library and *not* the maximum personal benefit." By way of examples, he cites his work with the NELINET and CONNLINET consortiums, as well as his fundraising activities that helped create the Dodd Research Center and

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39. Peter Hernon, Joan Giesecke and Camila A. Alire, *Academic Librarians as Emotionally Intelligent Leaders* (Westport: Libraries Unlimited, 2008): xi.
40. *Ibid.*, xii.
41. *Ibid.*, 135.
42. Leanne E. Atwater and David A. Waldman, *Leadership, Feedback and the Open Communication Gap* (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2008): 2.
43. *Ibid.*, 3.
44. *Ibid.*, 101.

45. Stephen Denning, *The Secret Language of Leadership* (San Francisco: Wiley, 2007): xxii.
46. *Ibid.*, xxiii.
47. *Ibid.*, 211.
48. Annie McKee, Richard Boyatzis, and Frances Johnston, *Becoming a Resonant Leader* (Boston: Harvard Business School Pr., 2008): 1.
49. G. Edward Evans and Patricia Layzell Ward, *Leadership Basics for Librarians and Information Professionals* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow, 2007): x.

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support it and the university libraries. At the same time, he says, "Don't over-plan. Do be flexible," for there is never any way of knowing when or in what form an opportunity might present itself.

And, of course, keep a sense of humor. Stevens notes that librarians are often overly sensitive and preoccupied with the image of their profession, to the point where they become the stereotypes that they reject. His advice, in this as in most other matters involving self-importance: "Lighten up!"

## References

1. Norman D. Stevens, "The Catalogs of the Future: a Speculative Essay" *Journal of Library Automation* 13, no. 2 (1980): 88-95; "Looking Back at Looking Ahead, or The Catalogs of the Future Revisited" in *Information Technology and Libraries* 17, no. 4 (1998): 188-90; and "Research Libraries: Past, Present, and Future" from *Advances in Librarianship* 17, ed. Irene Godden, (San Diego: Academic Press, 1993): 79-109.
2. Norman D. Stevens, "The Molesworth Institute," *ALA Bulletin* 57 (1963): 75-76; "The Fully Electronic Academic Library," *College & Research Libraries* 67, no. 1 (Jan. 2006): 5-14.

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- Provide appreciation with food treats for all callers and gifts for the top caller.
- Thank parent donors and provide occasional follow-up communication.

It is expected that a library will want to tailor its approach to best fit local circumstances. However, the general plan can work to significantly benefit any academic library.

## References

1. Available through the McGill Alumni Online Community at [www.martlet.mcgill.ca/?id=MjQxNA=](http://www.martlet.mcgill.ca/?id=MjQxNA=) (accessed Jan. 2009).
2. The parents fund webpage at Purdue: [www.purdue.edu/udo/path\\_parents/parents\\_fund.shtml](http://www.purdue.edu/udo/path_parents/parents_fund.shtml); at Loyola: [library.loyno.edu/about\\_us/giving/parents\\_annual\\_fund.php](http://library.loyno.edu/about_us/giving/parents_annual_fund.php); at Amherst: [www.amherst.edu/give/parents\\_fund](http://www.amherst.edu/give/parents_fund) (accessed Jan. 2009).

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What? So What? Now What? continued from page 142

won't be a penalty from me for doing that. At least one team did stop and reflect, all for the better, but for the most part the confidences went no further than between the student and me. Regardless, the student's private realization of a problematic group dynamic was still important. I always coach each student—this is after all, his or her *What Now?* moment—to consider what they would do differently. What would they say? Some, I believe, did confront themselves and now resolve differences in a more open and satisfying manner.

*P.S.* For dog lovers and readers of this column, Bridger, the black lab is back! My daughter's National Guard unit is away for a year so B is here and teaching me new tricks:

communicating with one's tail; never forgetting to show appreciation for current, past, and future kindnesses; and finding the joy in doing your job, any job.

## References and Notes

1. For a useful discussion of facilitation techniques see Michael A. Gass and Cheryl A. Stevens, "Facilitating the Adventure Process," in *Adventure Education: Theory and Applications*, ed. Richard G. Prouty, Jane Panicucci, and Rufus Colinson (Beverly, Mass.: Project Adventure, 2007) 101-23.
2. John Lubans Jr. "Thank God and Greyhound, She's Gone," (to a Workshop,) and Other T&D Matters," *On Managing, Library Administration & Management* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2007) 35-37.