

A relationship built to last

Valerie Johnson may be retired from her librarianship career now but she's still an active advocate for our chosen profession. As we prepare to celebrate 75 years of achievement for the Association, Valerie looks back on a professional partner that travelled with her from her first job in Victoria on to the northern Territory and down to Tasmania, providing support, education and friendship all the way.

Fifty years – it's over 50 years since I joined the Australian Library Association. This association has influenced and informed my life and my thinking. As very junior library assistant I and others, were 'told' to attend meetings of the Victorian Section of the Library Association. Then we were encouraged by staff of the Victorian Library Training School to join as student members.

In those early days we listened, entranced, to speakers from around the world. We met with Sara Fenwick and assisted with her study of children's library services. There were writers and illustrators on their Australian tours, bringing to mind the visit of Edward Ardizzone, illustrator of children's books. An engaging speaker, he knew how to hold the attention of an audience, whether adults or children. This visit was memorable for the differences highlighted between men and women in the 1960s. In this time most chief librarians were men – and they sat up on the platform with the speaker. The few senior women had the task of looking after supper!

During question time an explosion [vocal] from the back of the room occurred; "why can't some of those stuffed shirts look after the urn?". "What was that?" asked the Chairman. "Only Consie" came the reply from somewhere. This was my introduction to Constance Pavey, when I went to help her with the overflowing urn. She sent me back to the meeting explaining afterwards that she had wanted to ask a question and the Chairman would not acknowledge her.

However, the stuffed shirts were human: while being 'the boss' at work, in Association activities they did all they could to teach and encourage younger members. When a group of young ones were given the task of organising a Section meeting we asked for, and got, help from all the Chief Librarians. With discussion groups and panel responses they shared their library experience. Today this would be termed 'mentoring'.

Encouragement was given to take on roles as assistant treasurer, secretary, and even chair, providing experience enabling us to later take on

leadership positions. In the mid-1960s the entire committee for the Victorian Children's Section were people trained this way. Conference attendance was not just encouraged, but supported by payment of all costs. In 1966 six Nunawading staff members were supported to go to Brisbane – unheard of today!

Moving to Tasmania, I became more of a 'distance' member, travelling quarterly to Hobart to share activities, including the joys of story-telling by Patricia Scott of Clarence Libraries. I still tell *Tom Tif Toi* in the manner I learned at this time. It also gave me the foundations for teaching school librarians in North West Tasmania and later in Alice Springs.

Wherever I went, the Association was by my side. From public libraries to colleges and universities, it travelled with me. The Victorian Green Triangle assisted me to relate to Kooris and other First

Australians. The Central Australian Group gave me encouragement to write for journals.

The NT Branch supported members across the Territory, so it's not surprising we linked to the new online activities. Strange as it may seem

today, I can remember when electronic media did not exist, but I can remember the early problems – like when a contractor cut the coaxial cable at Tennant Creek, cutting Alice Springs off from the rest of the world for three weeks.

For my post-graduate studies I used the postal system to survey Victorian and Tasmania libraries, while ten years later updating the results for publication was mostly electronic. The Association has kept abreast of electronic development so in this past year I have been able to undertake research using the Association's own resources through the website.

Condensing the value of 50 years of Association support into a few words means much must be omitted. But – the Association gave me training and education and it gave me qualifications through its own examination system. Those qualifications were accepted by Melbourne University, allowing me to undertake post-graduate study without a primary degree. The sharing of professional knowledge with other librarians – initially rather ad-hoc, but later via the Association's organised systems – has proved to be my standby throughout a life spent mainly in, and with, libraries.

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