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Our Oldest Alumna: Viola Bird

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Beyond Billable Hours

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At the age of 101, Viola Bird (LL.B. '50, M.L.L. '52) can be described in many ways: lawyer-librarian, teacher, world traveler, lifelong learner, Husky fan. But if you ask her, life is all about the people you meet and the network of family and friends you create.

She used the concept of a mosaic to describe their different ages, nationalities, and relationships: "I feel as though my life has been like a beautiful stained glass window with the people who have shared the journey with me each being an interlocking brilliant color ... that gives me joy and makes each memory precious to me."



our oldest alumna Viola Bird

Bird has a long and deep connection to the UW and its law school. She started her legal studies at the University of Southern California but transferred to the UW in 1928 when she married Dr. Win Bird, a UW Speech Department faculty member. She interrupted her studies to raise her family, re-enrolled after World War II, and received her law degree in 1950.

After law school, Bird pursued a career in law librarianship, studying under Marian Gould Gallagher and receiving her master's degree in law librarianship in 1952. For the next 20 years as the assistant librarian at the UW law library, she managed reference and circulation, edited the Current Index to Legal Periodicals, taught first-year legal research classes, served as president of the American Association of Law Libraries, and mentored a generation of law students, law librarians, and lawyers.

To say she was important to the UW law school community is an understatement. When Bird was honored

with the UW School of Librarianship's Distinguished Alumna award in 1981, Marian Gallagher wrote, "The first time she and Win took a European vacation, the law school faculty took it very hard. I never have forgotten the sight of the professor who came charging out of the elevator headed for Viola's office with his problem in memorandum form in his hand. When he said 'Where is Mrs. Bird?' and I said, 'She has gone to Europe,' he uttered a strangled cry and clutched his head."

After retiring from the UW in 1972, Bird started her next career as a law firm librarian, one of the first firm librarians in Seattle and one of the first dual degree firm librarians in the country. She worked at Preston, Thorgrimson, Ellis & Holman for 10 years and also filled in at other firms and at the King County law library.

At age 81, Bird retired again, at least from paid work. Looking around for a community service project, she saw a need for teachers of English as a Second Language. She took a short course at Seattle University and then tutored through North Seattle Community College and Highline Community College. Although her tutoring was usually done on campus, Bird spent several years visiting the homes of two Mexican families and tutored the mothers, children, and friends who would drop by. She stayed close with the families, and they became part of her mosaic, calling them "her daughters."

Another piece of Mrs. Bird's mosaic is Wing T. Ho. During World War II, Ho, serving as a Flying Tiger, met Dr. Bird who was then an Air Force liaison officer to several Chinese attachments. Ho was one of the youngest pilots and became close to the Bird family. Although Ho lives in Singapore, Viola refers to him as "my son."

Viola Bird has truly seen the world. She has been to every continent except Antarctica and has revisited some remarkable places, including Russia (five times), China (five times), and Tibet (three times). Although she enjoys visiting a place more than once to make it "hers," she claims no one place is her favorite. She traveled alone or with family, preferring a group tour because of the efficient use of time and, to no surprise, the opportunity to meet people.

For Viola Bird, it always comes back to the people. In correspondence and conversation, she reflects on and gives credit to others. She is infused with the joy of the connections she has with individuals and groups – her stained glass window, her mosaic.

By Peggy Roebuck Jarrett, Librarian, Gallagher Law Library, UW School of Law.