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Reference Librarians Do Not Work in Steel*

Mary Whisner**

Reference librarians do not work in steel; when they leave work at the end of the day, there are no tangible structures to show what they have accomplished. Nonetheless, Ms. Whisner suggests, reference librarians make lasting contributions in the lives of their patrons—they do not need to work in steel to take pride in their work.

¶1 When my uncle visited Seattle recently, he mentioned that he had helped fabricate the supports for the Space Needle. I had known that he was a welder and had lived in Seattle in the early sixties, but this project was news to me. I think about it from time to time, as I turn a corner in my hometown and see this famous landmark: Uncle Leo helped make that!

¶2 We reference librarians do not work in steel. When our day is done, we cannot point to a structure and say, “I helped make that.” Indeed, there are days when I reach five o’clock, sure that I have been busy, and yet not at all sure just what it was that made me so busy. The effect is magnified the further back I look. Maybe I can remember that this afternoon was busy because of the student who needed help with the *Washington State Register* and the public patron who needed information about our state’s child custody law, but what made the reference office so busy in March? And what did we do five years ago? If we see welding the supports for the Space Needle as an exemplar of meaningful work, then reference work might seem rather pointless. How can we say that our ephemeral, intangible work is valuable? My uncle’s very visible work led me to muse about my own work. How can I take pride in something so fleeting?

¶3 Reference shifts often include many discrete interactions. I show someone how to use the catalog. I answer the phone and tell the caller when the library is open. I direct someone to the *Congressional Record*. I help a student use the *Standard Federal Tax Reporter*. I sit quietly for a while, looking at a recent periodical while waiting for the next question. The next question comes soon. A paralegal student needs some help with the *Washington Digest*. A professor needs a printout of a recent case. Somebody telephones to see whether we own

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a particular title. And so on. The shift might be busy, but no one interaction is memorable. The next day, we might see similar questions—or even the same ones (with luck, from different patrons).

¶14 We contribute small pieces to what might be much larger projects. Often we know little or nothing about the larger project. In fact, we prefer it that way. If an attorney calls to see whether we own a particular book, we do not need to hear the full story of the important case the attorney is working on—we would rather just check the catalog and give her the call number. Of course, sometimes knowing a little about the larger project helps us to offer appropriate sources to the researcher. A patron researching free speech issues as preparation for an English class essay may not need the same material as an attorney researching free speech issues to defend a protester. Still, we suggest sources and offer assistance without needing to see the final project, whether it be an essay or a brief. It is rare that a public patron comes back and says, “You know that motion I was working on? The court ruled in my favor!”

¶15 In an academic law library, we are much more aware of what the law students and faculty are working on than we are of the disparate projects that the public, undergraduates, and attorneys may bring to our libraries. We might see one student as she casts about for a law review topic, then again as she begins her research, and more times as she nails down her footnotes. In a few months, we see her note in the law review. Maybe it is not the same as seeing a steel tower on the skyline, but it does give us an idea of where all those questions led.

¶16 I enjoy seeing the law students at different stages of their law school life—from first-year orientation when they are at once eager, nervous, self-confident, and confused, to graduation when they are happy, proud, tired, and worried about the bar exam. Each year I am pleased to volunteer as a judge for moot court, because it gives me an opportunity to see the students in action. Here is one time we can see the fruit of research instruction and reference service—in small ways, we helped the confused students at orientation become the capable advocates we see in the spring.

¶17 Here in a law school library, faculty members are special cases, of course. While we often limit what we will do for members of the public (“No, I will not interpret that statute for you”), we reach out to our faculty and ask for more opportunities to serve. If a law professor calls or sends an e-mail message, we are happy to dig to unearth whatever nuggets we can, often spending several hours on a challenging question. We are not always sure how the pieces we provide will fit into the professor’s larger project (or indeed, what the project is). But we can take satisfaction in thinking that our research has improved the content of a class, an article, or an amicus brief. Likewise, a court librarian might see the fruits of a reference question in a judge’s opinion, and a law firm librarian can see how the firm’s attorneys make use of his work. Sustained work or major projects for these special patrons—faculty in an academic law library, judges and court staff in a court library,

and lawyers in a law firm library—can be rewarding, because we see how our work enhances theirs. Sometimes we even earn a mention in a footnote or a preface.¹

¶18 In libraries we often try to gather statistics to measure what we do. Since we cannot point to a monument—or even a modest backyard fence—we mark our work with tallies of reference questions answered, tours given, books shelved, and so on. They can provide a sense of accomplishment. Each year, I enjoy going through our files of memos to faculty to add up the hours we spent. Those statistics and the list of classes we have taught help to counteract that occasional feeling that we have not been doing much.

¶19 Law librarians are service professionals who serve other service professionals. A reference librarian helps a lawyer; the lawyer helps a client. The chain does not end there, for the client might also be a service provider—for instance, a bank or an importer—so that a tangible product like a bridge or the Space Needle is still many steps away. Come to think of it, isn't that the way many jobs in our economy are? The welder like Uncle Leo who can point to a 605-foot structure (with a revolving restaurant, at that) is exceptional. Many people do valuable work that might be as hard to measure as the interactions in a reference shift. Consider the medical staff who give flu shots, treat colds, and wrap sprained ankles—at the end of a shift, do they remember why they were so busy? What about restaurant workers? They prepare and serve meals that might be lovely for a moment but are soon consumed. Think of an accountant who does the monthly payroll for several businesses—he does not have a structure to show off, but he is helping those businesses run well. Moreover, he ensures that the employees get their paychecks on schedule, have their tax records in order, keep their eligibility for workers' compensation, and so on. Like these others whose products are intangible or fleeting, we do work that is valuable, even when it does not result in a thank you in a preface. We do not need to work in steel to take pride in our work.²

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1. See, e.g., Catherine A. O'Neill, *Variable Justice: Environmental Standards, Contaminated Fish, and "Acceptable" Risk to Native Peoples*, 19 STAN. ENVTL L.J. 3, 3 n.* (2000) ("Thanks to my research assistants . . . and to the staff at the University of Washington and University of Arizona law libraries for exceptional research.") (the most recent acknowledgment of our department's work); Anita Ramasastry, *Secrets and Lies? Swiss Banks and International Human Rights*, 31 VAND. J. TRANSNAT'L L. 325, 325 n.* ("The author would also like to express her gratitude to her research assistant Lisa Boksenbaum and to the Reference Librarians at Gallagher Law Library of the University of Washington School of Law. Their assistance with research along with their patience, wit, and wisdom made this article possible.") (one of the most extravagant acknowledgments of our department's work). I value such acknowledgments. One cynic has remarked, however, that acknowledgments are like tipping generously—but with Monopoly money. Dan Pinck, *Let Me Count the Ways*, AM. SCHOLAR, Spring 2000, at 101, 103 (attributing the remark to "an essayist"). Maybe thanks are like Monopoly money, but I should give them to Mary A. Hotchkiss and Peggy Roebuck Jarrett for reading drafts of this essay and almost everything else I write.
 2. Even people who do work in steel may find that their work is not as permanent as they expected. See, e.g., Jeff Hodson, *Man of Steel Won't Watch Dome Fall*, SEATTLE TIMES, Mar. 20, 2000, at B1 (interviewing man who "spent four years overseeing a crew of 30 workers who supplied and fabricated the 10,500 tons of thick steel reinforcing bars" that supported the Kingdome, the sports stadium in Seattle that was demolished March 26, 2000).

