

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

By Eileen McIlvaine

On the Occasion of the Celebration of 35 Years of Reference Service at Columbia University,
March 12, 2004

Jane Winland said that I didn't have to make a speech but I do want to take the opportunity to report that 35 years of providing reference at Columbia University passed quickly and very happily.

I came to Columbia in 1968. At that time Columbia had a policy of hiring a few extra librarians to fill positions that might come open in the following year. The extras would be placed in the Butler Reference Department where they would learn about the Columbia libraries and become trained in working with Columbia readers. I was one of these librarians and shared a kneehole, a desk drawer, and a chair with Carole Rennie, now Carole Moore, head of the University of Toronto Libraries.

I was offered the head of Butler Circulation and replied that I was a reference librarian and wanted to stay where I was. I've never regretted that decision.

Reference at Columbia is ideal: great collections, brilliant students and faculty, gifted reference librarians. I am reminded of the quotation: I am standing on the shoulders of giants.

So I leave you with 3 challenges and 1 bequest:

1. Continue to seek new ways to offer help and strengthen existing techniques, both for individuals and for groups.
2. We've made searching so easy that readers get an overload. The challenge is how to get the reader to the best sources.
3. When Professor Alan Brinkley, newly named Provost, came to talk to the library staff, he mentioned that he could not foresee a time when paper resources were not critical. So we have to find a way to incorporate all formats, deliver them quickly, and archive them.
4. And finally: I bequeath my glee, my outright joy in knowing I've done a good job in answering a reader's question, providing a useful consultation.

So I thank you, Columbia, for 35 years of sheer enjoyment.

As Yogi Berra said, "I want to thank everyone who made this celebration ...necessary."

Thank you Jim Neal whose idea of a celebration this is.

Thank you Patricia Renfro, Jane Winland, and the Reference Coordinating Committee, for all of your efforts to make this day special for me.

And, finally, to my friends and former colleagues who have come to join me on this memorable day, I am touched and grateful.

Thank you.