CSUF librarian fulfills childhood dreams with job

BY SASHA BELANI – POSTED ON APRIL 30, 2014
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It was 4 p.m. on a Wednesday, and the reference desk at the Cal State Fullerton Pollak Library was a hub of activity.

Students went in and out of the library, approaching the desk asking for everything from research information to a stapler.

This was just another day for Sharon Perry as she sat behind the desk, wearing a white cotton dress with little blue elephants printed all over, at the general reference section. Perry is the university archivist and special collections librarian. She looks after the 56 different collections located in Pollak Library South 352, which is closed due to the recent earthquake.

However, throughout the week, she helps students find the research and information they need.

Another student approached her and asked for information on the library science program. She patiently directed him toward the San Jose State University’s School of Library and Information Science for information on the course.

Next came an instant message question asking about how to write a thesis or research question. These words pop up in a small box at the side of the computer screen.

"If they were standing in front of me, this would be so much easier," said Perry as she peered at the screen through her dark rimmed glasses, typing up a response.

Sometimes students come in and do not know what they are really looking for, she said. They might say what they want is information on boats, but what they are really looking for is information on the Titanic.

As Perry gives a tour of the Special Collections and University Archives room, it is obvious that she cares about the items.

"A lot of the materials have acid in the paper, and if they weren’t stored in acid free folders that acid could migrate to other materials," she said.

She walked to the end of the room and pointed to an ancient machine that looks much like a typewriter.

"This is the old teletype machine. Before the Internet, this was how they would send information from one part of the world to another and over the wire," she said.

As she walked back to the front of the room, she veered towards the right where a collection of campus memorabilia from the 1980s is safely placed in folders and acid free boxes. She opened a folder.

"This was just a Pee-Chee folder with the seals," she said. "I thought it was very pretty."

Although Perry enjoys being a Librarian, it is a job that may not be for everyone. It can be lonely at times, but she does not see it that way.

Perry said staying up in the third floor in the special collections and archives section is solitary—not lonely—and some people may not like that.

However, there are certain joys that come with being in charge with this section.

"There’s something wonderful any time I want," she said, "I can touch history through a periodical or a novel, or a book from the turn of a century."

Professors and enthusiasts from all over the state, country and world come to look for specific items in the Special Collections. The more popular items, according to Perry, are in the science fiction collection, which includes Ray Bradbury’s original manuscript of Fahrenheit 451, books by Philip K. Dick and Frank Herbert as well as the Star Trek series collection.

"It’s a pleasure to work with the people who like to use the materials up here," she said.
How it all started

It was in high school when Perry realized what she wanted to do for a career. She wanted to be a librarian.

Perry first started working in the library when she was a junior in high school.

“It sparked my interest,” she said. People would always ask her what she wanted to be when she grew up and now she feels like she can tell them.

A California native, Perry graduated from Cal State Fullerton in 1968 with a bachelor’s degree in history. She went on to receive her master’s in library and information science from the University of California, Los Angeles, before coming back to CSUF to graduate with a postgraduate degree in history in 1978.

“She’s the institutional memory,” said Anthony Davis, a colleague of six years. Sometimes, when something is wrong, she will point it out during the department meetings and correct it for us, he said.

Perry has been the university archivist and special collections librarian for 29 years. Prior to that, she was a reference librarian for 16 years. Making it a total of 45 years she has been with the Pollak Library.

Susan Tschabrun, Ph.D., library department chair, described Perry as a “treasure trove of Cal State Fullerton information.”

“There wasn’t anything I could ask her that wouldn’t summon up a detailed story of people, places and events,” Tschabrun said.

Tschabrun said Perry is recording information about all the collections in university archives and special collections into a database so that when she retires, other people will have detailed background on the collections.

“Sharon has devoted her career to building our University Archives and Special Collections, and she is like an encyclopedia when it comes to remembering what we have preserved,” Tschabrun said.