

BOOM OR BUST: THE NEED FOR SENIOR SERVICES LIBRARIANS

by Katelyn Angell

In the grand scheme of things, a student of social justice deserves as high a grade as a left-brained economics major. As an undergraduate at a leftist liberal arts university, I quickly learned this paramount lesson. Perhaps neither the world nor the university administration personified perfection, but my arms and voice held steady and true, and from early on I determined to use them both as tools to mend as many snags in the fabric of social justice as possible. Specifically, I channeled the majority of my activism toward ameliorating the situations of senior citizens, as I perceived this group as a sector of the population often fringed by a culture socially and politically dominated by youth.

During my college years, I participated in a city-wide program in which volunteers delivered library books to homebound seniors. An aspiring librarian, I considered it part and parcel of my social and professional responsibility to provide information to older individuals physically unable to acquire it themselves. On a biweekly basis I brought two 90-year-old women books and conversation, and in return they unknowingly helped set me out on a specific yet roughly paved career path: I desired to become a librarian focused on the provision of materials and services to the senior population.

However, independent research, personal inquiry among public and academic librarians, and perusal of the syllabi of Master of Library Science graduate programs revealed a highly evident absence both of courses geared toward and library positions concentrating solely on serving senior citizens. The majority of courses seemed to be directed at either technical services aspects of librarianship or at students intending to work with children and/or young adults. While it is pivotal to recognize the enormous value and relevance of courses intended to produce future catalogers, indexers, and archivists, it is equally important to offer interested students courses on the social in addition to the technical aspects of librarianship.

In fact, according to the American Library Association (ALA), a major component of librarianship is a commitment to the rectification of social inequities. “The broad social responsibilities of the American Library Association are defined in terms of the contribution that librarianship can make in ameliorating or solving the critical problems of society.’ What could that be but a declaration of the social mission of librarianship?” (Rosensweig 40). Thus, a lack of attention paid to certain social responsibilities, such as adequate preparation for and formation of a field

of librarianship dedicated to serving specific underserved populations, in effect violates the very foundations of the ALA's mantra. Despite this commitment, graduate library programs allot only minimum time and resources for students desiring to coordinate special programs for and learn proper methods of interacting with individuals from underserved populations, such as senior citizens.

Additionally, while library students are given the option of courses pertaining to several age groups, research shows that the vast majority of age-group-related classes are limited to children and young adults. According to Marks, "services to children are overemphasized in library programming, inevitably displacing library services to adults" (8). This statement describes the situation in library graduate school. A review of the catalogs of three New York MLIS graduate programs, St. John's University, Pratt Institute, and Long Island University, clearly reveals that there is a startling lack of courses intended to prepare students for a future career in geriatric librarianship. While St. John's catalog boasts seven elective classes targeted directly at children and young adults, including "Library Services for Young Adults" and "Library Services for Children," only a single course mentions services to senior citizens.

Titled "Materials and Services to Diverse Populations," the course is designed to educate students on "information needs of diverse populations, including the aged, illiterate, individuals with disabilities, and racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities" (St. John's University). However, an asterisk next to the course description states that the course is only "offered upon sufficient demand." Thus, the graduate program does not deem the objective of the class significant enough to maintain it as an annual course; students must band together and request it of their own volition. Additionally, several diverse groups are lumped into a single course, raising the question of the ability of an instructor to thoroughly cover the experiences and needs of all included groups.

The class might, of course, benefit students if the professor utilized critical teaching methods like those of Ira Shor. In the words of Shor, "my habit is to include students through a co-developed syllabus which gives preferences to subjects nominated by students. If the remote, abstract nature of schooling involves academic-teacher talk about topics unilaterally chosen by authorities, then a critical-democratic practice invites students to select materials for study" (39). With this instructional approach, a professor would invite library students to both spearhead research on and foster discussions regarding topics concerning the specific underserved populations that the students envision themselves working with in the future. Such a class would well serve individuals interested in less recognized fields of librarianship.

Some might argue that there is little need for senior services librarians; after all, perhaps older individuals rarely visit the library, or do not necessitate special services and treatments based solely upon an advanced

age. However, statistical research shows that 22% of present library users are 55+, and the inevitable aging of Baby Boomers will result in a doubling of the 65+ population over the next 25 years (“Lifelong Access Libraries Initiative”). Additionally, some older people are unable to frequent the library due to physical difficulties. Thus, as a group senior citizens certainly deserve to be a focus of library services.

In 1975, the ALA created a set of guidelines to aid librarians in the process of providing senior citizens top-quality services. Revised in 1999 to keep up-to-date with a changing landscape, the guidelines maintain that it is:

essential for the leaders and policy makers of the library to understand that service for older adults is not a fad; that the need and demand for library services will only increase; that the stereotypical perceptions about older adults and libraries no longer holds; and that nothing short of a total moral and financial commitment to library services for older adults will meet the needs and demands of the present and future older library user. (“Library Services to Older Adults Guidelines” 25-7)

From this statement it is evident that the ALA urges a commitment from both librarians and policy makers to devote more physical, mental, and financial resources to the senior population.

Despite the establishment of the above guidelines and the fact that seniors constitute nearly a quarter of library patrons, extensive Google and e-journal database searches yield very little information on librarian positions dedicated exclusively for the elderly. Many public libraries do offer services geared directly toward seniors, such as read-aloud programs (Tang), homebound library services (Joseph), computer training (Bean and Laven), bookmobiles (Karp) and reader’s advisory programs (Ahlvers). However, a legitimate question to posit is: Why does a sector of the American population, comprising roughly 36 million people ages 65 and up (“Senior Citizen Facts Provided by Census Bureau for Older American Month”), the majority of whom have funneled tax dollars into the maintenance of public institutions for decades, not to merit the creation of more specifically elder-services-focused jobs? Where is the fairness in a lifetime passed funding public entities only to be disregarded as a library user group? This especially at a time when, in retirement, the elderly possess both great amounts of time and need for library services, and maybe even have either new or increased desires to use libraries.

The prime reason for high library use among seniors is retirement with its often endless stretches of free time. As many people are employed for the majority of their adult lives, the onset of retirement can cause quite the shock. According to Roalkvam and Costabile:

Individuals in the first throes of retirement often begin to do the math and realize with alacrity what a free treasure house of

information exists in their local library. The time they never had before for leisure activities stretches out before them and all the things that were put off become possible... Whether they are looking for information on new careers, volunteer opportunities, or just planning the next trip, this cohort will be a large, and perhaps new, user group in the library. (141)

Thus, the influx of senior citizens into the library system alone should justify the creation of more librarian jobs aimed at information retrieval for seniors. Such a claim clearly reiterates the idea that it would behoove library and information science professors, and the profession as a whole, to develop training programs dedicated to serving elderly patrons.

As people age, their social lives and health are subject to dramatic changes. Faced with serving individuals trying to navigate these life changes and attendant complications, it is only reasonable that senior service providers, such as librarians, should be aware of these difficulties, and should be prepared emotionally and professionally to understand how to help their elderly patrons meet such obstacles. Specific health problems like loss of vision, decrease in mobility, and loss of hearing only become handicaps in libraries if the system is not set up to accommodate afflicted individuals. Senior-specific librarians would be trained to offer such individuals high-quality services in spite of the existence of physical problems associated with advanced age.

More communities should follow the lead of Glendale, Arizona, whose library “may be the first library in the country to have a Senior Advocate on staff who ‘directs and connects’ seniors and their children or caregivers to appropriate social service agencies and organization.” (Nevill 256) The advocate’s services are very much in demand, and she is kept busy planning and organizing senior-requested daytime activities such as memoir writing, scrapbooking, and webpage design. Additionally, she runs a once-a-month, themed Community Resource Day. On this day, “staff from agencies and organizations that provide particular services for seniors, according to the theme, are available in the library to talk to residents” (257). Such a position is one which other public libraries should quickly begin to emulate.

In regard to interacting with elderly patrons, Ahlvers recommends the following model: “Older adults are often cut off from their support systems... Try to keep in mind that some older adults crave human contact and may only get this from their library encounters. Look at this as a customer need and understand that you may have to spend more time working with older adults in order to help them find library materials” (306). As the system stands now, with librarians generally juggling senior services with other tasks, senior patrons could very well not be receiving proper amounts of attention. Social cues enable one human to perceive if another appears harried or rushed; in such a case, the latter would not likely approach the former, worried that it might be a disturbance. For example, Ahlvers observes “the ‘Silent Generation’ (aged approximately sixty-four

to eighty-four) has a strong stoic streak and doesn't want to be a bother" (306). However, if elder-services librarians existed, and seniors were familiar with this special service, it is reasonable to assume that efforts and funding to create these positions would not be spent in vain.

One plausible explanation for the lack of senior services librarians is ageism. As a result of American society's fixation with youth, aging individuals are "othered," their wants and needs slighted by a population largely preoccupied by youth. American seniors constantly battle negative stereotypes created by an exceptionally ageist society. Despite the fact that the senior population is steadily increasing and will continue to do so, survey data suggest that with regards to age discrimination an end is not in sight. In a survey of 84 individuals 60+, Palmore discovered that "the majority [of respondents] reported several incidents of ageism and over half of the incidents were reported to have occurred 'more than once.' The most frequent types were persons showing disregard for older people, followed by persons showing assumptions about ailments or frailty caused by age" (572). Thus, encouraged by a youth-centric culture, people generate stereotypes about advanced age and project them onto senior citizens.

As a result of this tendency, seniors as a whole are assigned negative stigmas and are both discriminated against and ignored, their wants and needs deemed less pressing than those of younger people. Castelli, Zecchini, & Deamicis (135) describe the victimization of senior citizens, listing the various mechanisms through which ageism is practiced, either intentionally or accidentally, by non-seniors. "The interaction with an aged person is often characterized by the adoption of an oversimplified and patronizing language. In a related way, elder adults are less likely to be provided with important information than young adults" (135). This can certainly be applied to the plight of senior citizens in relation to the library, as it is commonplace for libraries to possess both a children's/young adult's room and accompanying librarians, while seniors are rarely offered either reserved space or their own information consultants. In addition, it is worth noting that those individuals who do work with senior populations should take extreme care not to condescend or generate assumptions about elderly patrons based on age.

As a result of age group disparities, pioneering senior services activists are beginning to advocate for both themselves and the elders of tomorrow, determined to increase the size of their slice of the community resources pie. The library is one such institution in which seniors and their allies are currently taking steady steps to literally get their money's worth. Allan Kleinman, a librarian at a public library in Old Bridge, New Jersey, is currently working on an initiative which will create a designated room at the library for seniors. Called the Senior Spaces Project, Kleinman assures that it is "more than just tables and chairs... it is a shift in philosophy in public library services for older adults. Ten years ago very few libraries had 'teen spaces' - now that seems the norm. So, too, in ten years we will have 'senior spaces!'" (Kleinman). Thus, he and his patrons recognized a

discrepancy in a system which did not fairly provide for the varying age-groups prevalent at the library, and resolved to alter this practice. Although he acknowledges that his project is not the current norm, Kleinman projects that in the future more people will follow in his footsteps and increase the level of services for seniors.

Another inspiring example in the burgeoning field of elder services librarianship is Richard Bray, a librarian at Alameda County Library in California. Bray's official title is Senior Services Director, and he "has become a librarian who helps seniors with their social and spiritual needs as well as their intellectual ones" ("Interrupted Life" 43). In other words, Bray does not serve solely as a bibliographic reference for his patrons; he also provides vital life assistance which his clientele might not otherwise receive. "Bray says that because the library's senior services are well-known in the community through its programming and the "Homeward Bound" strategy (a "literary meals on wheels"), seniors often treat it as a social service referral agency" (43). In my opinion, Bray exemplifies the true spirit of librarianship – an individual who kindly and efficiently supplies his community with assistance and answers to their information inquiries.

In conclusion, the cultural obsession with youth has resulted in the relegation of senior citizens to the ranks of the underserved in a wide variety of settings, including the library. The lack of senior-specific library positions both reflects and reinforces the paucity of substantial graduate school preparation in this area, and vice versa – a cycle which slights, if not abandons, seniors. A small but growing number of individuals have realized the injustice of this situation, and are making strides against its continuation. Although this process will take considerable time, money, and advocacy, this paper demonstrates that there exist individuals staunchly committed to the cause, and it can only be surmised that their ranks will increase in the future, raising a collective voice of protest to a volume that simply cannot be ignored.

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