

AN UNFLAGGING CHAMPION OF LIBRARIES



The unstoppable KERRY SMITH, former associate professor at Perth's Curtin University, and previous ALIA President, supposedly retired in 2013, but she is still a hugely active advocate for libraries including as part of the ALIA Retirees Group Committee. After the presentation of her HCL Anderson Award in 2017, we asked Kerry to tell us a bit about herself and her working life.

WHEN YOU WERE A CHILD, WHAT DID YOU THINK YOU WOULD DO AS A CAREER?

I wanted to be a pilot like my dad, but I wasn't sure how I would go as I was prone to car sickness and I would get pretty queasy on the Manly ferry if the voyage was rough. I collected shells from a very early age from Sydney's Northern Beaches, which is where I grew up. They fascinated me, and I found ways to catalogue them. I also loved photography from an early age – and still do. As a kid I was always organising my books and hobbies, and my mother told me in her later years that she thought I might become a librarian. In those days there was not much choice: stay at home, teacher, nurse, clerk, secretary – and librarian was probably there, but it wasn't obvious to me at the time.

WHAT ROLES DID YOU DO BEFORE JOINING THE LIS PROFESSION?

My first job was as a shop assistant at a local toy shop over Christmas after finishing the Leaving Certificate in the early 1960s. That's where I met my future husband, Ray, who was driving the delivery truck during his uni holidays; he was studying geology. After the Christmas holidays, I became a clerk for a federal government department, but once it was known that I was engaged and would eventually

Kerry Smith

have a family, I lost my permanent career position. So I left the public service and moved to girl Friday work – as it was known at the time – in which I had my best job at the Sydney University Medical Society in the mid 1960s. That got me interested in politics and also in the dedication that the med students of that time had to their student society and their studies. I was offered a couple of teachers' college scholarships after the Leaving Certificate but I didn't want to be a teacher. History proved me wrong, as I entered academia in the early 1990s. At the end of 1967 we went to Canada and upstate New York for two years, where Ray had postdoctoral placements. We returned to Australia in 1970 and, as he was based in WA, we headed to Perth for a two-year posting; we're still here.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB IN THE LIS SECTOR?

Motherhood came along, and I soon found that having coffees and chats with other mums was not for me, so I trotted off to what was then the Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT), met with a careers advisor and told her I wanted to study for a part-time degree that would enable me to find a job the moment I graduated. She recommended physiotherapy, occupational health, teaching and librarianship. I chose librarianship. I enrolled in 1974 as a very part-time student and I also took out student membership with the Library Association of Australia, as ALIA was known at the time. I had nearly completed my studies in the early 1980s when I had a mild panic attack and thought I'd better get a job, as my studies were coming to an end. I heard about a part-time librarian position with a small WA-based mining company, went for the interview,

and when asked what I knew about geology, I answered that I was married to a geologist. When I gave his name, I was hired. It was a steep learning curve but it was also great fun.
WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST SATISFYING ASPECT OF YOUR CAREER?

Being involved with IFLA and meeting so many committed professionals from all over the world, including countries that are economically and politically much worse off than ours, where their communities and governments show obvious love and respect for libraries of all kinds.

WHY DO YOU KEEP CONTRIBUTING AND ACTIVELY WORKING IN THE INDUSTRY INSTEAD OF PUTTING YOUR FEET UP FOR A WELL-DESERVED REST?

What libraries stand for gives me hope and inspires me to continue. It's why I took on the vacant position as Convenor of the IFLA Library History Special Interest Group and why I'm also working on a library history network here in WA. I cannot believe the almost nonchalant attitude that so many of our elected members and bureaucrats have towards libraries. We in the profession obviously believe in them, but my IFLA journeys to other parts of the world have shown me that many nations act on these beliefs and follow them up with real and active support. I only wish Australia was more demonstrative.



Kerry Smith (left) receives the HCL Anderson Award from ALIA President Vicki McDonald

WHAT ROLES HAVE YOU TAKEN ON SINCE RETIREMENT?

Probably too many. The busiest is as Honorary General Secretary and working in the office of the Wildflower Society of WA. I am also the society's Honorary Librarian.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY DOING WHEN YOU'RE NOT WORKING?

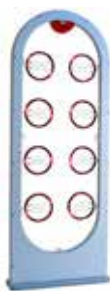
Travelling around WA to see the wonderful native flora that we have. Growing West Australian native species and encouraging wildlife into our garden. 🌿

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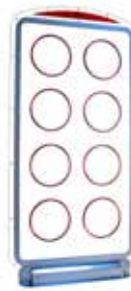
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