

Presentation of the Tennessee Library Association's Honorary Membership Award

To Jeanne C. Sugg, State Librarian and Archivist

April 9, 2009

The TLA Honorary Membership Award recognizes an individual who has made significant, sustained contributions to librarianship in the state of Tennessee.

I think it is customary when presenting such an award to describe the person first, and then announce the winner's name. But I find that in listening to such comments I'm always so busy trying to figure out who it might be, that I really don't listen. So I'm going to let the cat out of the bag at the outset and tell you that this year's award winner is our State Librarian and Archivist, Jeanne Sugg.

Jeanne has been working in libraries ever since she graduated from Peabody College's Library School in 1966. She first went to work for her undergraduate alma mater, Trevecca Nazarene College. Her career followed that of John Sugg, her husband who is a pilot, taking them to Jacksonville FL, to Puerto Rico where Jeanne spent a year as an elementary school librarian (I have trouble imagining that), and following a short stint with the Nashville Public Library she went to Saudi Arabia, of all places. There she spent ten years in charge of 26 libraries run by the ARAMCO corp. serving residential compounds of expatriates working in the oil industry.

Among the difficulties of her job in Saudi Arabia was dealing with library materials in an environment where censorship was enforced by the state. Jeanne once told me that she ordered a new set of World Book Encyclopedia for each of her 26 libraries, but had to throw away all the "I" volumes because the government did not approve of the article on Islam. (That's why she's receiving this award instead of the Intellectual Freedom one.)

In 1988 Jeanne and John and their two sons returned to Tennessee, and in the next year she began her remarkable career at TSLA. She has held nearly every important post in that agency, including director of Public Services, director of Technical Services, Assistant State Librarian & Archivist for Administration, and, since 2005, State Librarian and Archivist.

Throughout this successful career Jeanne has been a truly exceptional leader and a dedicated advocate for libraries. Her experience with small libraries in Saudi Arabia gives her a special understanding of the needs of Tennessee's rural libraries. Her experience with narrow-minded Arabian politicians may also come in handy sometimes on Capitol Hill.

One of Jeanne's strengths has always been her willingness to embrace new technology. In a career that has seen the transition from rubber-date-stamps to laser receipt printers, she has had to adapt over and over again. Jeanne was the first person at TSLA to get a cell phone in the early 1990s. She was also the first to accidentally flush her cell phone down the plumbing.

Jeanne was responsible for the Herculean task of automating the catalog at the TSLA. Not only was it one of the state's largest library collections, it was also the most historical and diverse – making cataloging a huge challenge. With her usual can-do attitude and ability to lead by example, Jeanne conquered that challenge as she has so many others.

At the same time, she was working with then-state librarian Ed Gleaves to bring the Internet to the state library (something the political leadership thought was a passing fad and didn't want to fund). This success helped usher Tennessee libraries into the technological age, and Jeanne continues to lead that charge through her masterful leadership of the Tennessee Electronic Library and other on-line services.

I had the privilege of working under Jeanne's leadership for seven years. She was an unfailing support and consistent mentor to me. Jeanne leads with her head but understands from the heart, and she is that rare mixture of a successful and aggressive businessperson who also knows how to use praise and encouragement to bring out the best in her staff.

For all of these reasons, and many more, I think you'll agree with me that Jeanne Sugg is a most worthy recipient of the TLA Honorary Membership Award.