

Memorial: Susan Nissen Lerdal (1946–2010)*

¶1 After a forty-year career in librarianship, Susan Nissen Lerdal died March 20, 2010, from complications of leukemia. Sue began her career as a school librarian, first in Kalama, Washington, then in Laurel, Montana. She worked as the legal librarian for the Montana Power Company in Butte from 1980 to 1997. In 1997, Sue married library school classmate John Lerdal and left her beloved Montana for Des Moines, Iowa. From 1998 to 2000, she worked as the library associate at Iowa State University's Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication. In 2001, she began working at the Drake University Law Library, where she earned tenure and became an associate professor of librarianship. She retired from this position in 2008.

¶2 I met Sue at Drake. Five years out of library school, I'd been working in public library community services. Having started at the Drake Law Library six months earlier, I was charged with organizing Sue's orientation and training. I did help her learn some important things, like the organization of the collections and the locations of the coffee maker and bathrooms. However, I correctly suspected that with her more than thirty years as a librarian, almost twenty of them in law, I was going to learn much more from her than she from me. Here are some of Sue's lessons:

Lesson 1. Pay Meticulous Attention to Detail

¶3 This reminder was issued regularly in class presentations, new employee training, and reference interactions. The quality certainly serves one well in legal research and is also beneficial in many other contexts. Sue's adherence to this message helped her ensure that she finished any work she started, and it contributed to her reputation for reliability.

¶4 When Sue and I co-chaired the local arrangements committee for the 2004 MAALL/MALL meeting, this skill proved invaluable. Our computer files still include the lists of myriad issues Sue anticipated and handled, from providing detailed information for registration desk staff to assigning someone to bird dog (a favorite term in her lexicon) transportation. One very concrete way in which this trait benefited all present and future Drake Law librarians was when Sue took the initiative to transform a very brief law library faculty tenure document into a thorough set of retention, promotion, and tenure policies and procedures.

* © Karen L. Wallace, 2010.

Lesson 2. We Are Responsible for the Future of the Profession

¶5 Sue believed that as professionals, we should proactively shape library and information services ourselves, with an understanding of our patrons' needs, and not simply acquiesce to technological or other changes. This belief encouraged Sue's enthusiastic participation in professional organizations at all levels, including metro, state, regional, and national groups. She was active in AALL, WestPAC, MAALL, SLA, the Iowa Library Association, the Montana Library Association, and Special Libraries Across the Metro. Her contributions to these organizations could fill pages, but these are a few highlights:

- She was instrumental in the creation of an Iowa chapter of the Special Libraries Association and served as its first president.
- Her AALL membership began in 1980. In addition to SIS work, she served on the 2002–03 Task Force to Review the Biennial Salary Survey and chaired the 2007–08 Research Committee.
- She served on the Iowa Library Association Foundation Board, even in her retirement.
- Her considerable involvement in the Montana Library Association included serving a term as president (1994–95) and serving on the board for eight years.

¶6 Very cognizant of young people as the future of the profession, Sue was generous with her time. She consistently volunteered to help library school students, whether it was supervising an internship or being interviewed for a class assignment. Personally, I greatly profited from her encouragement and advice.

Lesson 3. “Is This a Ditch You Want to Die In?”

¶7 Sue picked up this phrase from a former colleague. When Sue believed in something, she would passionately champion it, no words minced. We had many conversations strategizing over the best way to address a problem or propose a new service. For both of us, the recognition that you are better off letting some things go was easier to accept intellectually than emotionally. Sue would often offer “the ditch question” as a litmus test to help us pick our battles.

Lesson 4. Keep Learning and Trying New Things

¶8 Sue exemplified the power of lifelong learning. Her formal educational attainments included a B.A. (1968) and an M.P.A. (1980) from the University of Montana in Missoula and an M.A. in Library Science (1990) from the University of Iowa. She embraced continuing professional development through her association work and conference participation. Sue read voraciously in the professional literature and actively monitored library blogs and Listservs. Even in retirement, she still shared articles and ideas with her former colleagues. One of the most popular databases the Drake Law Library has added over the past few years is Gale's Legal Forms, which Sue brought to our attention after she retired.

¶9 Sue also contributed to the profession through scholarship and speaking. Her article *Evidence-Based Librarianship: Opportunity for Law Librarians?* was published in *Law Library Journal* in 2006.¹ She gave numerous presentations on topics such as evidence-based librarianship, legal reference for public librarians, library services marketing, law library trends, and successful Internet search strategies.

¶10 My favorite aspect of Sue's commitment to professional development was her many ideas and her willingness to work to implement them. At the 2001 AALL Annual Meeting in Minneapolis, we both attended the program "The Death of the Reference Desk." It inspired a lively conversation back in the hotel room about our reference services, in which we outlined a proposal for a new roving reference model. Shortly after returning from the meeting, we submitted the idea to the rest of the library staff, and the next month we worked with others to put it into practice.

¶11 I also distinctly remember when Sue suggested we start using a blog for our standard communications among those working the information desk. A skeptic at the time, I now truly believe this was a stroke of genius. Sue's abundant ideas and energy led to the library's celebration of National Library Week, providing free coffee for students during finals, and the creation of numerous research guides and seminar presentations.

¶12 Another of Sue's lasting legacies was the establishment of the Cyrus Sinclair Memorial Award for student desk supervisors. Like Sue, Cyrus was a truly exceptional person who left us too soon. He worked as a student library employee, and when he died during his second year of law school, the law school community was devastated. In her grief, Sue chose to memorialize Cyrus through an award. Selection criteria reflect some of Cyrus's great attributes: commitment to the Drake University Law Library and student colleagues; courteous, friendly, and professional demeanor in all dealings with colleagues and patrons; and effective communication with supervisors and colleagues. The award is used not only as an honor, but also as a training tool that helps us introduce new staff to some of the library's ideals. The work Sue did to establish this award speaks volumes about her as well as Cyrus. She was a kind, generous, feisty woman deeply committed to libraries and investing in the future. She will be missed, but the contributions she made will remain for years to come.—*Karen L. Wallace*²

1. Susan Nissen Lerdal, *Evidence-Based Librarianship: Opportunity for Law Librarians?*, 98 *LAW LIBR. J.* 33, 2006 *LAW LIBR. J.* 2.

2. Circulation/Reference Librarian, Drake University Law Library, Des Moines, Iowa.