



*The colors, patterns, and textures handed down by our foremothers weave the fabric of today's profession.*

## Inspired by the Past to Serve Our Learners Today

**Rita Reinsel Soulen** | [soulenr19@ecu.edu](mailto:soulenr19@ecu.edu)

In my role as assistant professor, I dance around the tenets of school librarianship in a whirlwind of meetings, proposals, conferences, reviews, manuscripts, and publications. My teaching, my research, and my service all revolve around the role of the school librarian in ensuring that students are effective users of ideas and information, as set forth in *Empowering Learners Guidelines for School Library Programs* (ALA 2009) and further outlined in AASL's 2018 *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*. But these ideas did not develop in a vacuum. There are many who have come before us whose ideas have coalesced into our idea of school librarianship today.

School librarianship, for the most part, has been stitched together by women and dominated by individuals who by their very birth provide a feminine perspective. The colors, patterns, and textures handed down by our foremothers weave the fabric of today's profession. For me, personally, certain women have been highly influential in my education as a NxtWave Scholar. Within this female-dominated field, however, there are some notable exceptions, including Charles C. Certain, who chaired the committee that developed the first standards, *Standard Library Organization and Equipment for Secondary Schools of Different Sizes* (ALA 1920), and Ross J. Todd, champion of evidence-based school library practice.

This issue of *Knowledge Quest* rolls out with "MVG and the Power of the School Library Ladies: Our Legacy/Their Vision" in which I present some of the history of school librarianship through mini-biographies of my role models. Foremost is Mary Virginia Gaver (MVG)

who studied levels of libraries and the influence on student achievement, a topic that I continue to include in my research agenda. As the story goes, in the early 1900s MVG, then a child, and her mother collected \$200 to establish a school library for children in her Virginia mill town. MVG's work grew from those roots. Today, I find myself soliciting funds to develop a digital library for our university lab school, which serves mostly African American children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families and which does not have space for a traditional school library. I spend a lot of my time thinking, talking, and writing about levels of libraries ranging from traditional and digital to unconventional such as Little Free Libraries, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, and the International Children's Digital Library.

Next Mary Keeling, another role model, describes the complicated legacy of school librarians as teachers. I have known Mary for many years as a district library supervisor and adjunct instructor in library science. As she says, her "missionary zeal" for use of an inquiry process model could set certain people on edge, a quality that I find highly appealing. As I share with my MLS students, if I have you at the edge of your comfort zone, then you are right where I want you to be. Similarly, Mary Keeling finds herself at the edge of her own comfort zone as she questions the contradiction between prioritizing information literacy instruction and the power of stories. She advocates using the power of story to dismantle political structures that prevent students' access to information and ideas while directly promoting legislation that has the potential to provide for school libraries and school librarians across the nation.

---

*Through all of these articles thread the themes of growth, unfolding, and transformation.*

---

In her feature article Becca Munson, content editor for this issue of *Knowledge Quest*, describes how the past informs our profession today. She presents role models as historical influencers who continue to shape our practice in the present. She outlines how visions and goals outlined in the second edition of *Information Power* (AASL and AECT 1998) and in today's AASL Standards have influenced her practice. She also shares the value of attending the AASL conference to enhance collaboration with teachers and fellow librarians in the "shared mindset of the group" and enhance opportunities "to be better at what we do." These shared foundations contribute to the consistency of our beliefs while allowing for the change that is inherent to our profession.

In the next article, Shirley Dickey reminds us that librarians are innovators and problem solvers. The transformative nature of technology has led her to explore the maker movement in her school library as an innovation center, with creative ideas to engage her high school students. For her students, testing and failure are a starting point for creative thinking that can lead to the joy of success while teaching and learning resilience, collaboration, and teamwork along the way. Shirley Dickey's curriculum-connected makerspaces teach and reinforce classroom content in an atmosphere of acceptance that is central to her school community. Her students push this library space outward to include school clubs and service projects, and to embrace social media. Looking toward the future, she sees school librarians as advocates for student rights with a determination to support curriculum, community, and, of course, our students.

Andrea Trudeau leads from the heart. Harking back to the origins of the school library as a warehouse for shared books focused primarily on academics, she sees the development of early libraries not only as increasing access to information, but also as the locations of "guardians and guides to information." She sees 21st-century librarians as maintaining "the tenets of access and intellectual freedom from times past even as we embrace a broader whole-child approach." As part of this approach, she advocates an emphasis on shared relationships that impact students both socially and academically. She suggests the school library as

a feeling that welcomes, sees, and values our students through space, collection, instruction, programming, and self-care. This human-centered approach "allows us to build upon the foundational work of those who came before us while our practices evolve to meet the diverse needs of our school communities." By seeing the potential in each student, Andrea Trudeau encourages the "lifesaving librarians" to pay attention, ask the right questions, and change lives.

Through all of these articles thread the themes of growth, unfolding, and transformation.

As school librarians, we stand on the shoulders of the giants in our field who were often quite small in stature but enormous in their visions for our profession and the learners we serve. They might be surprised to see the expansion of the school library program as technology evolves and the library becomes more and more embedded in the lives of our school children. They certainly would be saddened at the current ambush on students' rights—but encouraged by the response of school librarians to those who would restrict access to diverse ideas. Let us hope that the proposed Right to Read Act ensures that all students have access to an appropriately resourced school library staffed by a certified school librarian. We have inherited a proud legacy. Let us lean on each other to push our vision forward with every power in our being.

---

**Dr. Rita Soulen** is an assistant professor teaching in the Library Science program at East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina. She is a *NxtWave Scholar* and researcher of school librarianship. She serves on AASL's *Knowledge Quest* and *School Library Research* editorial boards.