

The kind of job you could only have in Washington

If steering the course for the world's largest museum library from an office on the National Mall sounds like something you aspire to, then being the director of the Smithsonian Institution Libraries (SIL) might be your job of a lifetime. After a distinguished career including positions at the Library of Congress, the Council on Library Resources, and the Research Libraries Group, Nancy E. Gwinn joined the Smithsonian in 1984 as assistant director for Collections Management, and has served as director since 1997.

I asked Gwinn what originally attracted her to SIL and she responded, "I had been working at the Research Libraries Group (RLG) in California and I decided that if I was going to come back to Washington, I wanted to come back to the kind of job that you could only have in Washington. The Smithsonian itself, and the fact that it was a unique organization, fit my criteria of a job you could only have here. Once, during the interview process, I walked across the Mall and looked up at the U.S. Capitol and down at the Washington Monument. I said to myself, 'You couldn't be more Washington than this.' It was really only after I took the job that I began to understand this institution in its political, bureaucratic, and financial complexity. Let us say it was a slow courtship initially, but eventually, along the line somewhere, it turned into a marriage."

Beyond the castle walls

When I asked Gwinn what people might be most surprised to learn about her position, she

replied that, "Most people don't know there is a library here at the Smithsonian, if we're talking about the general public, and it may even be true in certain parts of the library profession. The second surprise is that there is no library building, and the third one is our size, the fact that we have 1.5 million volumes—including 40,000 rare books and manuscripts—that we have a \$9.5 million dollar budget, and that we have 20 libraries that all report into central administration. Just the magnitude of the enterprise is a surprise to people."



Nancy E. Gwinn, director of the Smithsonian Institution Libraries.

All meetings, all the time?
Gwinn chuckled when I asked whether a director's job is really all meetings, all the time. "It was an interesting question for me, since I came up from the ranks myself. A lot of administration is dealing with people and that can happen in all kinds of ways, individually and in groups. Groups can be very effective, which means meetings. Another huge part of the job, which really has only become so prominent in my tenure, is fundraising.

Starting in the mid '90s there were changes in the White House and in Congress that made clear the Smithsonian was not going to be as well supported federally as we had been used to. If we were going to maintain current programs, much less grow, we were going to have to get into fundraising in a big way. In fact, the current Smithsonian secretary (which is the title of the top person, just like a cabinet secretary) has dictated that all directors should spend

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a minimum of 20 percent of their time on fundraising activities.”

Two of Gwinn’s major accomplishments in this area were the creation of a national SIL Board to assist with fundraising and the creation of the Spencer Baird Society, for donor recognition and annual giving.

Change isn’t easy

On the topic of implementing change, Gwinn said, “I think wherever you are implementing change is not easy. In large institutions and bureaucracies, it’s probably even harder. The need for fundraising required a tremendous cultural shift here. My staff and the staff we serve still periodically ask me if we aren’t ‘off mission’ because we are doing events and trying to raise our image, visibility, and stature in order to attract outside funding. When we began to digitize and develop our Web site, although we raised funds for it, we still had to reallocate some internal resources.

“With any new operation, some feel that it detracts from money that would otherwise be supporting whatever they think the core mission is. I’ve spent a lot of time talking to staff about how the Internet and our electronic offerings are now part of the core mission.

“I remember the same thing happened in the ’80s when I first came and began to enhance our preservation program. People were saying, ‘Oh this is adding to our workload, we can’t possibly do this. It’s taking books away from the stacks etc.’ After five or six years, it became a standard thing and now the question is why can’t we do more of it. You have to introduce these things, be consistent in your message, and continue to try to show the benefits. Over time, the change is embraced and becomes part of the general picture.”

Inventing as she goes

While still assistant director, Gwinn launched another important outreach effort, the SIL exhibition program. She recalled, “Starting one within a museum like the National Museum of American History, where there is a lot of competition for attention, was no small matter. It wasn’t like having a few cases in your library lobby or rare book room. We had no internal funds, so we had to start raising money for

exhibitions. Now we’re 15 years down the line and are constantly doing exhibitions that have been well received. We’re carrying ourselves within the American History Museum in terms of visitors. That was all new and we had to invent it as we went.”

One of Gwinn’s current projects is piloting SIL’s \$20 million capitol campaign. “This was a new thing that I needed to learn how to do, and I’ve relished the challenge. Initially, we thought we were going to be part of an institutional campaign that would be the normal five-year sort of thing. Then the new secretary came in and said that the institution wasn’t going to do an institution-wide campaign at all. Every unit was charged to do what it needed on its own, although there was some seed money given from central funds to help.

“We pedaled back a bit to put the infrastructure in place that we needed if we were going to do this on our own. We won’t kick off the public phase until we’ve raised a good half of the funds or more. We’ve raised about 25 percent, so far. I’ve had to fight a lot of internal battles along the way and it has been, let us say, a process again of inventing and moving one step at a time.”

Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be

Gwinn had a very interesting response when I asked for her advice to those aspiring to be directors one day. “I have to poke at your assumption that I had aspired to lead an institution some day. There are people who start out their careers saying that their goal is to be the director of a major research library. My main aspiration was to always be in challenging and interesting jobs. I moved from job to job with that idea, not necessarily thinking it was going to lead me anywhere in particular.

“It is really quite amazing to me that at the Smithsonian, I found a place so constantly challenging and interesting that, rather than moving on after five years, which had been my past pattern, I ended up staying. I have really thrived on it because the job itself has given my career new dimensions. At this point, even in tough budget times, I can hardly imagine being anywhere else.” It sounds like it’s been a perfect match. ■

Director of museum library
Where: Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
For more information, visit: www.sil.si.edu