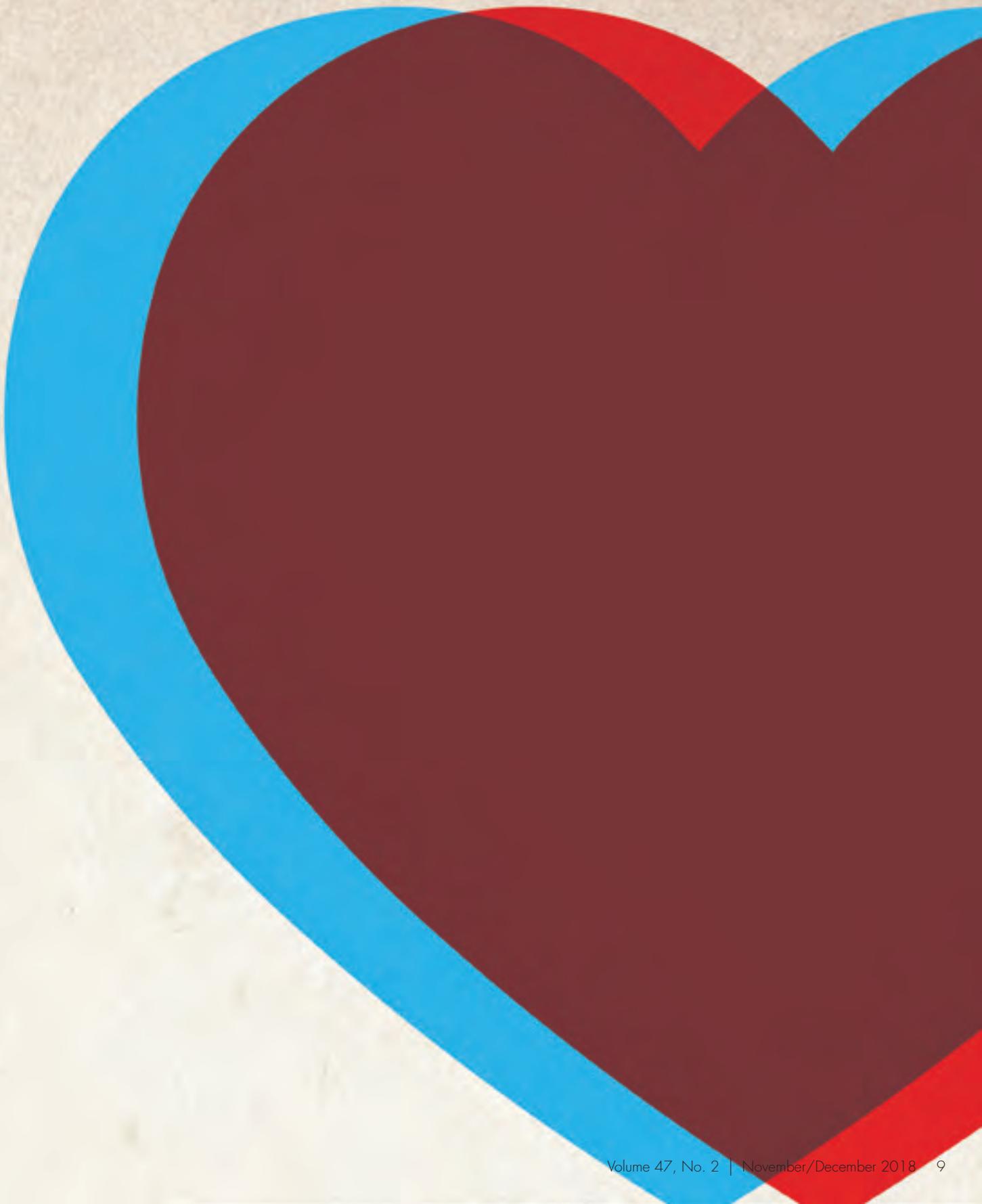


living the life i love

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I am a planner, and yet I never could have planned my life. Looking back from the vantage point of a fifty-year career I am amazed at where I am and where I have been. If you have been in the workforce for even twenty years, you probably can say the same. Except on birthdays and anniversaries, we aren't conscious of how the days grow into years and the years into decades.

Along the way we grow, learn, and make choices, and these take us down roads we never imagined. We often take our growth for granted since we didn't realize it was happening. I can remember being at an ALA Midwinter Meeting and speaking with one of the major names in the field. He had lost his job after many years and was moving to a new state and position after the conference and feeling very uncertain.

Based on a recent experience I had, I told him he was going to find out that he was going to be appreciated at a level he would find surprising. Six months later, we met up again at an ALA Annual Conference. He eagerly told me how right I had been. His new colleagues and superiors were highly impressed by his knowledge and abilities—knowledge he didn't realize he had accrued and that had become part of who he is. No one takes us for granted more than we do ourselves.

Stepping into the Unknown

My professional life can be divided into two parts: being a building-level school librarian and being "retired." Few librarians I have met planned to enter the profession. Like them, I, too, am an accidental librarian. It was 1962. I was graduating from college expecting to become a high school English teacher and about to be married. My job search was intense because it would affect where my husband-to-be and I would live.

One high school English teacher job application I filled out asked for any additional information that would give them a further reason why I should be hired. I stated I had worked two years in a public library as a page while in college. I got an immediate call for an interview and was offered the job as the school librarian if I would take two courses over the summer to get an emergency license. I jumped at the opportunity and began working on my MLS at Columbia University (which has not had a library program in years). It was the best decision of my professional life.

I could have said "no." I was getting married the day after the semester ended. I certainly didn't need more stress. It might have been easier to find a job as an English teacher, the job for which I had been trained. Had I not taken that chance who knows what sort of professional life I would have had.

I had just made the first of many choices that would characterize my future. I started on a brand-new path. I often remind librarians that to grow we must move out of our comfort zones. Accepting this school librarian job was a scary step. I was very young and very much out of my comfort zone. I would be stepping out of that zone again and again.

The world was very different then. I had a library council consisting only of girls. I also had an A-V club for boys. Their duty was to set up and often run the 16mm projector for teachers. I think I have witnessed the entire tech evolution from silent filmstrips and opaque projectors to the vast array of resources school librarians manage today.

My first few years were far from brilliant. I wasn't rehired after the first year, but I knew I loved my new profession far more than teaching English. There was another

rocky year before I got my MLS. I eventually spent some time working as a YA and assistant children's librarian in a public library. Then there was a span of about seven years in which I had my children. After the time away, I eagerly returned to school librarianship as an elementary librarian in a brand-new school modeled after the British infant school. I had no idea what to do as an elementary librarian, so I made up my library program based on what the teachers wanted and what seemed logical to me. I didn't have training for the elementary level, but I learned by watching good teachers.

Fortuitous Fork in the Road

I had been working in this unusual elementary school when I heard that, through its library school, Rutgers University was offering the course work to get a Certificate in Supervision. I didn't need one. I had a Master's degree, and there was no chance the district would be hiring a supervisor for school librarians. Yet the possibility appealed to me. I recognized my job in many ways was affected by how administrators perceived me. I wanted a better handle on how they thought and what they valued.

So, I took a chance. After being out of school for ten years, I was back. The choice took my life in a new direction I could never have predicted. In the required library course work I met Ruth Toor, who became my friend and writing partner for thirty-five years. In one course we both did our final papers on the same topic. Our fellow students urged us to write a book on the subject.

Talk about leaving your comfort zone! I had never written a book and had no idea where to begin. One of my library volunteers, a college professor, connected me to her editor, who gave us guidelines for

writing it. Scary as it was, Ruth and I tackled the project. Our first draft (typed of course) came back with tiny pink slips pasted on the edges of pages telling us how to make changes.

I was sure we had failed miserably. The editor reassured us with a sentence I never forgot. "We never correct bad writing. Only good writing is worth the time." In one year we wrote *The Elementary School Librarian's Almanac: A Complete Media Program for Every Month of the School Year* (Center for Applied Research in Education 1979). Long out of print, it was the first resource for librarians that wasn't a tool such as *Commonsense Cataloging* or a book on children's literature. Our book sold over thirty thousand copies.

The publisher asked us to do a monthly newsletter and *The School Librarian's Workshop* was born. Another step out of our comfort zone. How would we fill sixteen pages ten times a year? We had no idea, but we figured something out. The newsletter proved very successful for many years.

Moving to a Larger Pond

All the while, my professional life continued to evolve in other areas. I became active in my state association after the president of the association spoke with me and said it was time I stepped up. I took another step out of my comfort zone by running for president of my state school library association: New Jersey Association of School Librarians now, but Educational Media Association of New Jersey then. I won the election and began learning to be a leader as I moved from vice-president, to president-elect, then president, and past-president. This office entailed running our annual conference. If you have done it, you know what a huge undertaking it is. And all the while you are making decisions, being accountable, and—above all—growing as a leader.

I joined ALA/AASL and served on committees. I learned about strategic planning and met the leaders in the field, all of whom were uniformly helpful and informative. I could talk about school libraries with fluency, communicating to teachers and administrators that I was an expert in my field.

Over the years I have served on countless AASL committees. Each of them brought me in contact with school librarians I knew and added many more to my growing community of friends in the profession. Each of them expanded my knowledge base. It is true that serving our professional organizations takes time and usually money as travel and registrations are often needed, but the return on investment is enormous. I have often said I should have gotten continuing education units for most of my committee work.

After not working at the high school level since my first unspectacular entry into the field, I was transferred from the elementary school to the high school. My superintendent let me know she wanted me to work on building a new library. The existing one was impossible to renovate. My thoughts bounced from "Wow, this is going to be phenomenal!" to "How am I going to do this?"

Obviously, I had no experience with a project of this size, but I accepted the challenge. Technology was making huge inroads. Encyclopedias were becoming available on CDs. And yes, I made several mistakes, among them holding onto the card catalog, although the library was automated, because I didn't think I could get enough computers, and not noticing that the floor outlet for the circulation computer was nearly covered by the large circulation desk. But the finished project, one of the first to automate a school library, was

applauded by the students, teachers, and administration.

I do need to mention that being in AASL put me in contact with some of the first adapters of automation. Through their help I was able to choose a system, get it approved, and then work on what was then a multi-vendor, complex process to get the card catalog converted and books barcoded.

More Huge Leaps

A new principal came to the high school, and we butted heads over almost everything from the budget to my closing the school library when there was no coverage for my lunch (even though I always ate in the library so I could teach classes). When my supportive superintendent of schools decided to retire, I looked at how things would be after she left. I took another risk and, after twenty-two years in the district, applied for a job elsewhere. I shocked many. Educators don't usually choose to leave the security of tenure. Once again, moving out of my comfort zone and choosing a new path proved to be correct. It was my experiences at my new high school that led me to give the advice I did to that apprehensive library leader I mentioned earlier.

Ruth and I continued to write books for her husband, Jay, president of Library Learning Resources, Inc., who took over *The School Librarian's Workshop*. We were regular presenters at our state conference and, on several occasions, were invited to give workshops for other state associations. Both of us became increasingly active in AASL. Ruth served as 1992–1993 president.

Entering the Second Phase

I continued in my new school until July 2004 when I officially retired from being a building-level librarian

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and entered the second phase of my career. I loved my job every day, but I was ready for more flexibility in my schedule and to see what else I could do.

As any educator who retires at the end of the school year can tell you, you don't feel retired until school restarts. For the first few years I would look at the clock and note what class period we were in. You don't turn off so many years all at once, but I was looking for new challenges and experiences.

At the beginning of the new phase, nothing much changed in my writing career. Ruth and I could now work during the day rather than after I finished the school day. But my life changed again. To quote from a favorite Langston Hughes poem, my daughter reminded me of my own "dream deferred." Despite all the books Ruth and I had written, I never wrote the fiction book that I had wanted to write since my college days. In June of 2005, when school was still in session, but I was no longer working, my daughter took me with her to the International Women's Writing Guild's Summer Writers Conference. There I began writing a novel. It would take several years before I completed it, but my YA fantasy, *Woven through Time*, now published by Mundania Press, is still available. Someday I may even finish the sequel I have started.

Ups and Downs

Ruth and I began writing for ALA Editions. Our first book for ALA Editions *New on the Job: A School Librarian's Guide to Success* was published in 2007, and we were pleased by readers' appreciation for the book. (In 2015 a second edition was published.) But there was sadness as well. Ruth's health took a turn, and in 2012 I took over *The School Librarian's Workshop*, which her husband had been publishing for most of its history. I had never contemplated owning my own business. Now I had to file the paperwork, open the bank accounts, and get some help. (My daughter proved an invaluable help.)

I made *The School Librarian's Workshop* into an e-newsletter since the drastic cuts in budgets, school librarians, and libraries had seriously reduced the number of our subscribers. Despite my best efforts, a few years later, it became obvious that continuing publication in any form was economically unfeasible. It felt like failure after thirty-five years of publication. I was at a loss. I didn't know what I was going to do with my days. No matter how many years of experience a person has, no matter the many successes, I have come to accept that failure is always possible. And as always, what you do after a failure determines your life.

I nearly closed down The School Librarian's Workshop Facebook group. I am glad I didn't. Today it has over 7,800 members from around the world. The interchange among members continues to amaze me. I also contribute to the group regularly, and my weekly blog posts from www.HildaKWeisburg.com are posted on Facebook each week.

Still Risking

After years of serving on numerous AASL committees, I became chair of AASL's Advocacy Committee. If

you know me, you know I am always pushing advocacy for librarians and libraries. Part of the responsibility as chair was to be on ALA's Committee on Library Advocacy, as that committee works with all divisions in ALA. The experience was enlightening.

I had and have so many friends in AASL, I was very comfortable there. Suddenly I was dealing with people I didn't know from other divisions. Who didn't know me. It was a lot like starting over. But like my experiences when I first attended AASL meetings, when I met and worked with members of other ALA divisions I discovered how welcoming and supportive librarians are as a profession.

As I write this in July, I am on two ALA Council Committees: the Committee on Professional Ethics and the Intellectual Freedom Committee. These are very much interrelated. Both have always been very active committees, but in today's political climate it seems we deal with hot-button issues every day. As a staunch supporter of the First Amendment and intellectual freedom, I appreciate and am proud of ALA for being willing to tackle the difficult topics and be there to guide librarians, whether they direct large public libraries or are solo building- or district-level school librarians.

Along with many retired friends, I now teach pre-service school librarians. I was offered the opportunity, and it seemed like a logical extension of what I have been doing to promote leadership for school librarians. As an adjunct at William Paterson University in New Jersey, I almost always teach one of two courses each semester. I delight in my students' learning as much as I did with my high school students. Course work is both different and the same as in my own days in library school. Cataloging is still cataloging, and Children's

Literature is still Children's Literature. But advocacy was never mentioned back when I was a grad student. It was assumed that schools would always have libraries and librarians. Now advocacy is present in both my courses. My students learn that lesson well. If we don't become skilled advocates, our profession will cease to exist and our K–12 students will suffer the consequences.

Still Looking Forward

Because I am no longer tied to a five-days-a-week school schedule (the flexibility I wanted when I retired), I am free to give workshops when and where I am asked. The questions and feedback extend my understanding of the challenges school librarians face and, to be honest, it's gratifying to know that what I offer has value to others. I do many workshops within New Jersey but have also presented in Texas, Florida, and at BOCES (Boards of Cooperative Educational Services) in New York. Last year I gave a keynote for the Alabama School Library Association. This year I did the same for the Wyoming Library Association's School Library Interest Group.

I have had the most fun with my latest book for school librarians, *Leading for School Librarians: There Is No Other Option* (Neal-Schuman, an imprint of ALA 2017). In a dinner discussion at an ALA Annual Conference, my acquisitions editor expressed concern that the subtitle was too confrontational. A quick check with some school librarians confirmed to her that I was right—and librarians around the country have agreed. A few groups have studied the book for professional development, a circumstance that is extremely gratifying.

The highlight of my career so far came in 2016 when I was the recipient of the AASL Distinguished Service Award. Being recognized and honored by my colleagues who

are such great librarians and leaders was an honor beyond my imagining. My mementoes of that occasion are among my greatest treasures.

I urge you all to be willing to take chances and move out of your comfort zone. As James Bryant Conant reputedly said, "Behold the turtle. He makes progress only when he sticks his neck out." We all need to take risks. Leadership and advocacy don't happen behind the closed doors of the library. And those who are leaders have the responsibility of mentoring other librarians. As a number of people in the business world have said (though it's hard to find solid attribution), "Leaders don't create more followers, they create more leaders."

What's next for me? I don't know. I do know something is around the corner. By the time you read this, someone will have asked if I am interested in doing one thing or another. It will be a bit scary. It will take me out of my comfort zone, and I will take on the challenge, knowing I will learn something new and will grow as a person and as a leader.

Yes, I am still growing. Although I am looking back at a long career, with twists and turns I could not have anticipated, I am not ready to stop. I believe if we aren't growing we are dying—and there is so much more to learn. My life seems to exemplify one of my favorite quotations. Ursula K. Le Guin said in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), "It's good to have an end to journey toward, but it's the journey that matters in the end." It has been a fabulous journey, and I have enjoyed every step of it so far.



Hilda Weisburg was a school librarian for over thirty years and is now an author, speaker, and adjunct instructor at

William Paterson University in New Jersey. With Ruth Toor, she coauthored fourteen books for school librarians, including the most recent ones for ALA Editions: *Being Indispensable: A School Librarian's Guide to Becoming an Invaluable Leader* (2011) and *New on the Job: A School Librarian's Guide to Success, 2nd ed.* (2015). In 2013 ALA published *School Librarian's Career Planner*, which was her first work without Ruth Toor. Hilda's latest book is *Leading for School Librarians: There Is No Other Option* (2017). A past president of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL), she serves on two ALA Council Committees: *Committee on Professional Ethics* and *Intellectual Freedom Committee*. Hilda also serves on the AASL Publications Advisory Group, and is once again a NJASL delegate to AASL's Affiliate Assembly. In 2016 she received AASL's Distinguished Service Award.

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