OBITUARY


With her death from cancer on December 28, 1995, MLA lost a gallant member. From the niches she occupied during her professional career, Martha influenced, if not dominated, the health sciences library scene in the South in a remarkable way. Her name was a byword. Hospital librarians lionized her; medical school library directors accorded her a respect that they normally reserve for their own. At heart, she was a hospital librarian, and even after she moved into academic librarianship, she never forgot the one-person library, which must produce so much with so little. For more than twenty years, she practiced her art with a gusto and a verve that left most of us too exhausted to even contemplate undertaking what she attempted and accomplished.

What set Martha apart was the way she did all this with little thought for her own advancement or aggrandizement. Instead, she acted out of conviction. Dedicated, forthright, and honest, she saw what needed to be said or done, and went ahead.

Martha Catherine Campbell was born (and raised) in Knoxville, Tennessee, on September 30, 1947 (the surnames Childs and Watkins, by which she was later known, came with marriage). As a child, she played “library,” so her career path was early determined. In one of life’s cruel ironies, her mother died at the same age as Martha did, from the same cause.

Martha graduated (in biology, cum laude) from the University of Tennessee (UT) in 1969. She went on to Emory University, receiving her library degree there (summa cum laude) the following year. Her first professional post (and her only career venture outside the South) was at Clatsop Community College in Oregon.

Returning to the South two years later, Martha became clinical information coordinator with Dr. Alan Solomon at the UT Memorial Research Center (he is a renowned oncologist and was to become her consultant and confidant during her illness). Next came her appointment as reference librarian and, later, as director at its Preston Medical Library. There she remained until 1987, when she was recruited by Mercer University Medical Library to be its assistant director.

Martha joined MLA in 1975, served on two of its continuing education subcommittees and attained distinguished membership in the Academy of Health Information Professionals. But it was the Southern Chapter that benefited most from her activity. She served on most of its committees and chaired many of them. Martha was chapter chair in 1990 and was later made an honorary member. She was instrumental in the chapter’s fundraising for the Cunningham International Fellowship, which won for it the first Chapter Project of the Year Award.

Other local, state, and regional organizations held great attraction for her. The Knoxville Area Health Science Library Consortium and Martha Childs were synonymous. In Georgia, she belonged to the statewide health science library association, to a local group based in Macon, and to the state’s rural health association. The training of rural health care providers was one of her splendid endeavors, high priorities, and great successes. At the regional level, she was appointed to the advisory council of the Regional Medical Library program. She was co-founder of the Southeastern Conference of Hospital Librarians (SCHL), which helped make her the region’s doyenne of hospital librarians. She held all the principal offices in SCHL and won its Librarian-of-the-Year Award in 1993. The group has recently dissolved, but the remaining treasury (plus funds to be raised) will be used for scholarships in Martha’s memory. The program, to be administered by the Southern Chapter, is to encourage hospital librarians to attend and participate in its meetings.

Martha was a go-getter where grant funding was concerned and secured money for resource improvement, for resource sharing, and for training. She was a teacher and a consultant (at the Roosevelt-Warm Springs Institute, among others) and had numerous publications to her credit.

Her teaching ability was unsurpassed. Students warmed to her and were enthused by her. She learned quickly, and imparted to others what she had mastered. The expansion and continued success of the Georgia Information Network (GAIN) is largely due to her efforts. As her admirers attest, she translated library-ese into everyday English, and countless health care personnel benefited from the instruction she provided. Her straightforward thinking helped drive our profession towards excellence.

Space considerations prevent a listing of Martha’s other pursuits. She was certainly not “all library.” Her love and knowledge of Southern literature should be mentioned, as should her skill with
needle and thread and her artistry in quilting. Happy were they who received the products of her hands (and heart). Characteristically, she was the editor of her church bulletin.

Her condition was diagnosed in 1990. She struggled valiantly and made it to the annual meeting in 1992, but she had to give up work shortly afterwards. Friends and colleagues were happy to see her, jaunty as ever, at the Southern Chapter meeting in 1993, but that was the last time for many of us. She retained an active interest in everything till the end.

Martha married John Watkins in 1985. They were childless, yet she had lots of children. The many librarians she had nurtured, encouraged, and trained often called her "Mom" and even sent her cards on Mother's Day. They join her husband, her father, and her sister, not in mourning her passing, but in celebrating her life and her ebullience. Martha would never rest in peace!

T. Mark Hodges
Director (Retired)
Eskind Biomedical Library
Vanderbilt University
Nashville, Tennessee

(I acknowledge with gratitude the help of Martha's friends and colleagues in the compilation of this tribute.)