Arlee May, 1940–1996

Arlee May, the consummate medical reference librarian, died, surrounded by family and old friends, in Louisville, Kentucky, on April 15, 1996.

Born in Louisville in 1940, she excelled in school and served as valedictorian of her high school graduating class. She attended the Catherine Spalding College, also in Louisville, where she majored in chemistry and began her love affair with libraries. In her junior year in college she was chosen for a summer study project at the Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies in Tennessee, where she spent her time in the technical library. After graduation from college she joined the Peace Corps and served for three years in Malawi teaching chemistry, mathematics, and health sciences in a high school. Being Arlee, she also reorganized and operated the school’s small library.

Upon her return to the United States, she pursued her M.L.S. studies at Case Western Reserve University. Arlee’s first professional position was at the New England Regional Medical Library Service (NERMLS), the National Library of Medicine (NLM) regional library located at the Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard University. Between the years 1969 and 1983, she served in all the NERMLS professional positions, ending her tenure at Harvard as the NERMLS associate director. With her professionalism and high standards, she became the voice of NLM to the New England health sciences library community and also conscientiously took the community’s concerns back to NLM.

Arlee really enjoyed imparting her knowledge and love of the organization of medical information. While in Boston, she taught a medical librarianship course at the Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science and developed a variety of NERMLS library skills workshops for librarians and library managers around the region. One of the NERMLS workshops was an annual, intensive week-long Library Training Institute (LTI) for untrained hospital staff who were put “in charge” of the hospital’s library. Those who attended the LTI were exposed to enough of the basics to be effective first-line paraprofessionals, while opening up the lines of communication between themselves and the NERMLS staff. While working at NERMLS, one of the writers of this obituary, Marion Levine, spent many a weekend with Arlee, in the basement of Countway, working on course outlines, handouts, and hands-on exercises scattered with carefully worded queries—others would call them “trick questions”—to get the LTI participants to remember the differences between the various references sources. These fun times showed me the mischievous side of Arlee’s personality. Many current medical librarians began their careers in librarianship at these NERMLS LTI. Sandy Clevesy, director of library services, MetroWest Medical Center, Framingham, Massachusetts, and Kathy Moeller, library director, Overlook Hospital, Summit, New Jersey, are LTI alumni. Both are Distinguished Members of the Academy of Health Information Professionals.

When the New England Region was merged with the Greater New York Regional Medical Library in 1983, Arlee moved to Long Island to take the position of assistant director for public services at the State University of New York (SUNY) Stony Brook Health Sciences Library. Her exemplary service and dedication to the users of the health sciences library throughout her time at Stony Brook were recognized by two prestigious awards. The first was the SUNY Stony Brook President’s Award for Excellence in Librarianship for providing “exceptional service to the University community” and the State University of New York’s Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Librarianship, “bestowed upon University professional librarians who have demonstrated extraordinary professional achievement in the field of librarianship.” By example, she served as a mentor to library school students who did their practica at the health sciences library. With her encouragement, an undergraduate student employee was awarded the prestigious Louisa Giles Minority Scholarship by the American Library Association. This former student assistant is now a law librarian and in writing about Arlee said, “I can best describe her qualities as superlatives—intelligent, bright, pleasant, and most importantly, deeply committed to the profession of librarianship. Ms. May played an integral part in my decision to become a librarian.” Arlee’s enthusiasm, dedication, sense of style, and ready smile were much appreciated by users and colleagues alike.

Arlee’s skills and interests carried over into her involvement in professional organizations. She was very active in the Medical Library Association, and was elected to the MLA Board of Directors in 1979. She was also very active in building and sustaining the North Atlantic Health Sciences Libraries Chapter of MLA, serving in many capacities ranging from treasurer to coordinator of one of the annual meetings. While at Harvard she served on university library system
committees and on the Massachusetts Statewide Advisory Council on Libraries. Upon moving to Long Island, she continued her professional involvement by joining and becoming active in the New York/New Jersey Chapter of the Medical Library Association, serving on the Executive Committee, the Strategic Planning Task Force, and the Continuing Education Committee. She also served as president of the Medical and Scientific Librarians of Long Island. As a member of the Hospital Library Services Program of the Long Island Library Resources Council, she developed many workshops that fostered cooperation and resource sharing among the many types of libraries on Long Island.

Arlee May presented a quiet reserve and dignified face to the world. But her reserve could be broken when she was compelled to speak out on issues that concerned her, such as the need to provide professional service to the library's patrons or to correct MLA's weaknesses. Her sense of humor and fun also peeked through her dignified demeanor. Picture her boarding the plane after MLA's Disneyland annual meeting wearing those antenna-sprouting headbands with the colored balls bouncing as she walked. She also enjoyed sweets, a good movie, an exotic trip, shopping at the drop of a hat, useful or silly gadgets, and her feline companions. She was an enduring friend who wanted each of us to succeed in life and as a professional.

Marion Holena Levine, M.L.S., M.S., AHIP
Lyman Maynard Stone Library
University of Connecticut Health Science Library
Farmington, Connecticut

Kathryn W. Nesbit, M.L.S., AHIP
Edward G. Miner Library
University of Rochester Medical Center
Rochester, New York