

*Five librarians show how they've used their skills
to become prime players at their companies*

Crossing Over... to the Corporate Sector

By Margaret Thomas

THEIR JOBS ARE fast-paced, well paid, and sometimes tenuously balanced on the cutting edge. Most of them are old enough to have actually used a card catalog but young enough to know that Java doesn't always come in a cup. Some have started their own companies or invented new products; others work in sales, data management, or web design. All of them are stretching the definition of librarian.

They don't just tolerate risk, they go looking for it. *Library Journal* recently caught up with five librarians who have crossed over, chronicling their transition from working in public and academic libraries to jobs with dot-coms and library technology companies.

"One thing I've always liked is to be on the ground floor of companies as they're up and coming," says Don Kaiser of Fretwell-Downing Inc., a vendor of library automation systems. "There's a lot of flexibility in what you do, because everything needs to be done."

Marci Cohen of Evanston, IL,

Margaret Thomas is a Reference Librarian, South Puget Sound Community College, Olympia, WA

Cindy Altick Cunningham

Amazon.com

Behind the young, blue-haired male receptionist, a sign mounted on a slab of unpainted corrugated metal reads: Amazon.com. Cindy Altick Cunningham appears from an upstairs office. Take the stale stereotype of a librarian, turn it on its head, and you get Cunningham: a 45-year-old blonde, in

learned the hard way that the risk is real. Just out of library school, the 35-year-old signed on as a usability specialist at fledgling Tunes.com, a music web site. She liked finding out firsthand what kids were listening to and playing music loud at her desk.

While Cohen was tapping her foot, the company morphed into Rolling-Stone.com. After that, another company swallowed the music site just before about a third of the employees—including Cohen—were laid off. "I was a full-time employee for a year and two days," says Cohen, who now works in the media section at the Northbrook Public Library, IL. "I prefer something with a little more stability."

The risk isn't without rewards. None of the librarians profiled here

hip black outfit, a faded denim jacket, and faux leopard-skin sandals.

The Seattle-based dot-com was just three years old—still selling books only—when it recruited Cunningham in 1998. Amazon wanted customers to be able to browse its holdings online by subject and needed a librarian's cataloging and classification skills, says Cunningham, seated in her small office,

would divulge an exact salary figure, but everyone said their jobs paid more—in some cases a lot more—than most library work. And some come with stock options, a fragile nest egg. Says Amazon.com's Cindy Altick Cunningham, "Even though I was raised in Reno, I'm not a gambler."

Anyway, there's little time to track stock prices. Sarah Gregory left a job as a law librarian at the Northwestern School of Law Library, Lewis & Clark College, Portland, OR, to go to work for Intel. Says Gregory, "I've had to work harder and more every single day here." Jane Burke, president and CEO at Endeavor Information Systems, works at a similar pace. "I wouldn't even think of going to the grocery store in the middle of the week," she says.

You might assume techno-savviness was the ticket that took these librarians to the business world. Instead, most say it's traditional library experience that's the key to recruitment. Companies value their understanding of library culture and their connections. Cunningham's advice to anyone who covets a job like hers: "Go work in a library first."

a perk reserved for managers. "They knew they needed an atypical librarian," she says. "It's not a very comfortable place to work."

By that she means the lunch-at-your-desk pace, an expanding product line that ranges from tools to toys, and the ever-present threat of layoffs as the company struggles toward profitability. Think you have a lot of those little box-



es of outdated business cards? Cunningham has had four different titles, each with its own job description, since going to work for Amazon. In her latest incarnation, U.S. Catalog Librarian, she's responsible for assessing software efficiency and the quality of catalog data. "Everything changes very quickly around here," says Cunningham. "It's a very challenging job."

Still connected

Through it all, she has maintained strong connections to the library world. Until last spring, Cunningham was president of the Washington Library Association, steering the organization through a contentious revision of its outdated intellectual freedom statement. Today, she speaks in classrooms and at conferences all over the country, crossing nimbly over the chasm between traditional libraries and commerce.

Cunningham worked in the library during her undergraduate days at Stanford. After attending library school at the University of Washington (UW) in the mid-1980s, she accepted one of six internships offered by the Library of Congress (LC), where she opted to work with the budget manager. Among the highlights: helping to brief incoming Librarian of Congress James H. Billington on the LC budget.

Budgets, like technology, are part of the underpinnings of organizations. Understanding them gives you options, says Cunningham, who turned down five other offers at LC to accept a job in the Congressional reference area after her internship. In 1989, she moved to

UW's graduate library reference desk, her ticket back to the Northwest. There, Cunningham participated in setting up a catalog database with a new graphical interface. "That was a great foundation for [Amazon]," she says. "I know it was one of the things on my résumé they were drawn to."

When Amazon came along, Cunningham was happily employed as head of reference for the Kitsap Regional Library in Bremerton, WA, where she coordinated public services for nine branches and sometimes put in weekend hours on the desk. The Amazon offer was a chance to shorten

her commute and try something new, says Cunningham. "For me, it has *so* paid off."

Sarah Gregory

Intel

Since going to work at Intel a little more than a year-and-a-half ago, Sarah Gregory recalls only two days when she didn't feel like going to work—and that's counting the week she spent 90 hours at the office.

"I love it; absolutely love it," says the 33-year-old former law librarian. As a user-interaction manager for the computer-technology concern, it's Gregory's job to make sure that 13 products in various stages of development for residential customers are easy to use. She helps design interfaces, the elements with which users interact. Using real people, she then conducts tests to find out where and when they get confused. It's Gregory who ensures that it is obvious which cord plugs in where.

She typically leaves her Portland, OR, office at 5 p.m. daily to claim three-year-old son Max from preschool. But after putting him to bed, she often gets out her laptop and works until midnight or later. "Crazed," she says of the pace. "It's really, really hectic." Personal time is the 25-minute commute to and from work.

An interface design class she took in library school at the University of Illinois precipitated her career change. But it was a comment from the dean that changed her way of looking at work, says Gregory, who attended the university's then-new Internet-based library program in the late 1990s. From the Virgin Islands to

Alaska, students listened to live lectures via Real Audio from their home computers and participated in chat room discussions. To facilitate group projects, they learned to create and share web pages.

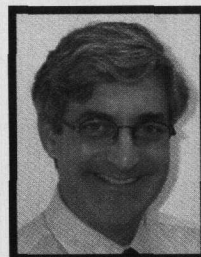
Tolerating ambiguity

Things didn't always go smoothly. The program and the technology were changing fast. Some students didn't know any more about computers than they did about car engines. At an early on-campus meeting, the dean urged them to develop "a tolerance for ambiguity"—to get comfortable with not always understanding right away. Those words took root with Gregory, who later signed on as a technical writer at Intel. Moving into user-interaction wasn't much of a stretch. Writers at the company commonly test their manuals on readers, and that library school course on interface design was all about usability.

Now Gregory says she wouldn't trade her nine square foot cubicle for the big office with a door she left behind at Portland's Lewis & Clark College law library. And it's not about the salary, which is nearly twice as big at Intel. "Here, you're always a half-step or a quarter-step behind," says Gregory, who likes the fact that there's always something new to learn. "[It's] taking 'tolerance for ambiguity' a bit further and learning to thrive on ambiguity."

Duncan Smith

NoveList



Duncan Smith spent nine years at North Carolina Central University in Durham teaching, coordinating educational events for librarians, and streamlining registration procedures. He was

vested in the state retirement system. But Smith had another, riskier life, too. For a couple of years, the entrepreneurial Smith spent evenings and weekends with two partners, prototyping a new product.

Throughout his own tenure in libraries and several years of working with other librarians, he knew that one of the most dreaded reference encounters began something like this: "Can you suggest a good book?" After he stopped trying to get them to read what he was reading—"Dickens was a hard sell," Smith says with a laugh—he began

to listen. Finding out what one genre-buff liked often helped when another came along. And, along the way, Smith discovered that most people just enjoy talking about what they've read. "It's about being seen and being heard," says the 47-year-old, now a nationally recognized authority on reader's advisory.

Listening, though, has its limits. What librarians clamored for was a tool that would help them quickly match virtual strangers to books they might like to read. Smith's idea became a reality in 1994, when an Illinois library bought the first copy of NoveList, a new electronic reader's advisory tool that arrived on a dozen floppy disks.

Later that same year, CARL Corp., a company specializing in computerized products for libraries, offered to take NoveList under its umbrella with Smith as manager of the new business unit. "I had some sleepless nights," says Smith, who had to decide whether or not to leave his university job. "If I hadn't [left NC Central] it would have haunted me. What if you had done NoveList?"

Smith stayed on as manager after EBSCO Publishing acquired NoveList in 1999. Today, he heads an eight-member team working in a small office in Durham. He spends about 30 percent of his time on the road meeting with customers, potential business partners, and corporate officials. In preparation for this month's launch of a new version of NoveList, Smith drafts web site materials, comes up with ad ideas, prepares the sales team, and explores possible business opportunities associated with the growing product.

"A reader's paradise"

When NoveList entered the library market seven years ago, its database contained 22,000 titles and about 1200 reviews. Today, the title list has more than quadrupled, with more than half of those titles linked to annotations, reviews, or summaries. Two years ago, an *LJ* reviewer wrote, "NoveList is a reader's paradise and a reference librarian's dream."

Leading the charge, Smith insists that he's still a librarian. People tell him it's obvious: NoveList was created by someone who understands readers and reading. He treasures those remarks. Smith says he didn't just luck into a good idea—lots of people have good ideas but lack the willingness to follow through. "For this one, I just felt passionately enough about it to pursue it."

Jane Burke Endeavor



Most libraries were still typing overdue notices when Jane Burke went to work for the country's first library automation company in 1974. "I was into technology so early that I've grown up with it," says Burke, 54, now head of Endeavor Information Systems, a library automation vendor she helped found in 1994. Now an Elsevier Science subsidiary, the company has grown from five to 165 employees and boasts more than 800 customers, including the Library of Congress. Deloitte & Touche recently ranked the Des Plaines, IL-based firm third in its annual listing of the Chicago area's fastest-growing technology operations. Burke herself was recently inducted into the Chicagoland Area Entrepreneurship Hall of Fame, and the *i-Street Reporter*, a Chicago-based publication, recognized her earlier this year as one of the top 26 women in Chicago's technology sector.

Burke started out on the reference desk at a public library in Libertyville, IL. From there she worked as a software trainer for what was then CLSI, the nation's earliest commercial library automation company, according to Burke, who later went to work for Illinois's Northwestern University selling library automation software. The university sold that operation to Ameritech, which eventually combined two of its units, Dynix and NOTIS Systems, and consolidated work forces.

"I was fired," says NOTIS's former president. "If anybody had told me in library school that I'd have to learn about noncompete agreements, I'd have thought they were crazy." As soon as that agreement allowed, Burke joined four other former Ameritech-NOTIS employees who had founded Endeavor. Today, she averages ten hours a day in the office and three out of every five days on the road.

Not long ago, Burke returned from London on a Friday night flight and flew to Minneapolis the next morning to meet with a group of law librarians. "To me that's very important," she says. "I learn how to manage the business by being out in the marketplace."

Burke, whose husband, Mike O'Brien, is also a librarian, credits librarianship for her business success. Li-

brary school and her brief tenure as a public librarian gave her an understanding of the not-for-profit library ethic. "My business life revolves around my profession," says Burke.

Don Kaiser

Fretwell-Downing Inc.

Don Kaiser developed an early interest in library automation: It was the early 1970s; he was in high school and was employed shelving books, along with coconspirator Carl Grant—another librarian who is now president of library automation firm Ex Libris (USA)—at the Rock Road branch of the St. Louis County Library. "I don't remember the details," insists Kaiser, now Western U.S. sales manager for Fretwell-Downing Inc., a library automation firm based in Kansas City, MO, and affiliated with the Fretwell-Downing Group of Sheffield, England.

As an undergraduate, Kaiser majored in computer science. Libraries were an afterthought. "I always figured the computer was really a tool and that you needed to know an application or a business to go with that," says Kaiser, who took cataloging under duress. "Having a library science degree is the 'union card' to the library world and gains the respect of librarians. I can speak the language and understand the issues."

He was right. After library school at the University of Illinois, Kaiser was hired in 1978 as a programmer and systems analyst at the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), in Dublin, OH. Following stints at Geac Computers and CARL Corp., he went to work last December for Fretwell-Downing's new U.S. subsidiary. "I was employee number 12," says Kaiser. His salary falls somewhere between library pay scale and what he might have made at the now perilously positioned dot-coms he considered before signing on at Fretwell-Downing. Today, the 46-year-old is back in the basement, this time working in his home office in Highlands Ranch, CO. The arrangement allows him to see more of his wife and two sons.

These days, the office is anywhere with a phone line and an electrical outlet. About 40 percent of the time, Kaiser is on the road doing demonstrations, attending trade shows, or meeting with company officials. Evenings are spent returning phone calls and e-mail, often from a hotel room. "In the days before laptops, I used to go to a movie once in awhile while traveling, but now there is no escape!" says Kaiser. ■