

Rita M. Barsun

Rita Barsun retires from a unique position within the library community. Rita served the Walden University program for over 10 years, beginning as a part-time reference assistant and retiring as the head librarian for the program. Walden University is a distance learning institute based in Minneapolis that has a contract with Indiana University Libraries for library services to Walden students working all over the United States and the world. It certainly was not the expected final destination for this librarian with two degrees in French, one summa cum laude from Thiel College in Greenville, Pennsylvania, and the other a Master of Arts in Teaching from Indiana University. However it became not only the right destination for Rita but a cause. Over the years she made herself into a national crusader advocating the rights and needs of learners at a distance for library support comparable to that provided for traditional students.

By her own account, Rita was a late bloomer. She started library school at age 49, working slowly until she completed her library science degree in 1993. In 1994 she began her association with Walden University. This unique opportunity was perfect for an equally unique librarian. Rita thrived in this entrepreneurial environment. The social contract aspect of the Walden profile also fit Rita very well. Libraries are a service organization and Rita is the epitome of that ethic. She was tirelessly devoted to the Walden students, learning to know them individually and committed to helping them succeed in achieving advanced degrees while continuing to work in their own communities. At graduations Rita was a full participant with family and friends to wish new graduates well and to celebrate their accomplishments.

While working on ways to serve the growing number of Walden University students, Rita learned much about herself. She found that she had a natural interest in research and in “spreading the word” about library support for distance education initiatives. She carved a strong role for herself in the distance education community, making numerous national presentations and publishing over a dozen articles. She concentrated particularly on how to identify support systems for distant learners in their own communities and what services were most critical. Building partnerships with faculty to make sure that library services were embedded effectively in courses also was a prime activity for Rita. Her national role reflected well on both Indiana University and Walden University. Certainly the work of Rita and her team to provide the best possible library service was pivotal to the accreditation Walden University continues to receive from the North Central Association.

Rita’s strong activity in publication and national conferences was not a requirement of the job. It was Rita who saw such development as essential to doing her job well. It meant being prepared, engaged, and always learning. Rita is the consummate reference librarian. She can find the article, the Web page, or the methodology you need when you need it! I also want to mention her mentoring role. It was more than once that Rita was referred to as “Info Mom,” since she took to heart the development needs of library student staff as well as her distance students. Their needs became hers. She pulled resources for them from wherever she could, working with colleagues within the IU Libraries and outside. Her eager involvement in the libraries helped us enhance our own services to distant learners within IU.

The other area where Rita shined was in service outside Walden University. She was active in the library honor society, Beta Phi Mu, the Association of Research Libraries Distance Learning Section, the Indiana Library Federation, the Off-Campus Library Services Organization, and the School of Library and Information Science, among others. Service to Rita was not simple membership in a group: it was active in every sense of the word. No one ever had more projects in the air at one time than did Rita Barsun.

It is hard to imagine how such an engaged, active, and intellectually curious person goes into retirement. I doubt it will be quietly! Rita has suggested that there could be new pursuits in belly dancing, rock climbing, or sky diving. It also could be more prosaic and include getting her new house and yard into shape. Rita will be able to spend more time connecting with her family, including her husband, Fred, a longtime Crane engineer and her true life partner. Rita has two sons, Hans and Stephan, also successful engineers.

There are four grandchildren and her mother, all of whom are also ready to be a greater part of her life in the future.

While we certainly wish Rita all the joys that retirement can provide and thank her for the energy and commitment she brought to her work with us, we all know that such a vibrant person always will be part of our library lives. She took a young program to the next level in terms of professionalism and success. It is something that she can consider with pride and a sense of accomplishment for years to come.

Patricia A. Steele