

# GOD'S WORK IS IN THE LIBRARY

By Rebecca Blair '80



## *Susan Peterson Barhan*

Libraries may seem too quiet, too sedate for a life of service, but to Susan Peterson Barhan, class of 1973, her work in the library forms her life calling, a calling she finds incredibly exciting. When asked about what motivates her work, she replies, "There are those who are addicted to adrenaline-producing activities. My adrenaline is produced in the quest for an answer. The library is all about questions and answers." Since her job brings daily contact with those seeking answers to their questions, the interaction with people energizes her as well. And, for Barhan, this energy flows outward as an act of service. Indeed, she deeply believes in the principle of service contained in the words of John F. Kennedy "that on this earth, God's work must truly be our own." For Susan, God's work is in the library.



Barhan was imbued with a spirit of service not only within her personal life, but also as a consequence of the cultural atmosphere in which she grew up. Her father, Dr. Erling Peterson, is an ordained minister in the Congregational Church of Christ who left the formal ministry to pursue a second calling as an English professor. During the 1960s, her mother trained to become a nursery school teacher, taking a course called “Rearing Children of Good Will.” Her parents’ examples made a big impression on Susan, particularly her mother’s dedication to her studies coupled with her attitude of service to families, and her father’s commitment to justice and equality as he accompanied college students from North Central College in Naperville, Illinois to Alabama, where they marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The examples of service in the home, the pulpit, the classroom, and the culture shaped Barhan’s conception of service as a life calling.

Her acquaintance with Indiana Central College was also a family affair. In 1970, her father moved from North Central College to Indiana Central, taking the position as English Department chair. By this time, Barhan, a college junior, realized her desire to pursue

an art major, an option not offered at her current institution, George Williams College, a now-defunct Illinois college named for the founder of the YMCA. Since her father’s position offered a tuition-free education at ICC, a college with a comprehensive art program, Barhan transferred. She quickly found the faculty at Indiana Central to be “personable, interesting, and dedicated,” and the campus atmosphere to be focused upon “a strong sense of family.” These elements facilitated her transition, making her feel instantly at home.

Barhan recalls that the faculty viewed their roles as mentors to “all of us who knew them.” Individual faculty members stand out for her as significant influences, including Dr. Gerald Boyce and Dr. Earl Snellenberger in the Art Department, Dr. Richard Clutter in the History Department, and Dr. Ross Ludwig in the Humanities Department. Of these professors, she observes that “they all treated the students with respect and curiosity. They shared our journey through the confusion of college and the 70s, which were pretty tumultuous times to mentor anyone.” Yet, in this context, these professors “led us to finding our own answers by using our own minds and talents, a gift that [has] last[ed] the rest of [our] li[ves]. They gave us confidence in ourselves.”

Still, even with dedicated mentors, Barhan struggled with choosing a major, experiencing a passion for study in many disciplines. It was only after marriage and a brief hiatus from work when her children were young that she discovered her true interest in library work. Initially, after graduation in 1973, Barhan pursued a career in the public schools, working as a classroom assistant in the Indianapolis Public Schools and the Washington Township Public Schools. She married fellow Indiana Central graduate Mark Barhan, who now works as an investment advisor. When their children were born in 1978 and 1982, Barhan temporarily left education but returned to work as a classroom assistant in 1985. Learning of an intriguing job opportunity at her alma mater, she left the public schools to become the Circulation Supervisor for the

Krannert Memorial Library at the University of Indianapolis in 1988. “It was there that I finally realized WHY I had so much trouble choosing a major,” Barhan observes. “I am interested in just about everything.” With the support of her husband Mark, Susan pursued a Masters in Library Science while working at the university library. This path of study allowed her to develop her passion and fascination about the research process. As she affirms, “I truly love finding resources, doing research, writing papers, working with books and now computers.”

The clarification of her calling as a librarian came during an interview for the position of Children’s Librarian at the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library. “One of my interviewers stated that she felt that being a Children’s Librarian was a calling, a type of mission work,” Barhan recalls. “Our pay is not as high as other professions and our working conditions are often challenging. I had been asking God for a direction in my life and thought this was as close as anyone gets to a direct answer.” Barhan credits the former Indiana Central for helping her find her calling, despite the fact that her discovery did not come during her time as a student nor did the college offer a degree in library science: “Even though I didn’t get my Masters in Library Science at the University of Indianapolis, this school was the reason I chose to get that degree.”

Barhan believes that the school’s motto, Education for Service, “was modeled for us in every aspect of our college experience, from the classroom to the registration line, to the food line.” Her experience at Indiana Central prepared her for a career focused on service “by continuing to open [her] mind, filling it with ideals and ideas, skills and experiences that have helped [her] throughout [her] life.” Barhan views her work as a Children’s Librarian as service to both youngsters and adults: “People are in need of information on all levels, from the third grader doing a report to the retiree who needs to know how to create an e-mail account or how to understand the latest

medical diagnosis in layman's terms. There are the younger patrons who want to know how to maintain a house or a car, now to set up a business or find a school. There are lonely people who need personal contact and little people who need a good book. Everything I do is a service to people in one way or another."

Not only does Susan's work fulfill a personal sense of calling, but it also supplies an essential community need. She remembers an old saying that stresses the importance of libraries: "Libraries can get you through times without money better than money can get you through times without libraries." And her experience demonstrates the truth of this aphorism. People who are out of work depend primarily upon the library's resources for help in finding a new job or developing a business idea. Barhan remembers a particular day in which she assisted "four patrons who had just been laid off from different jobs, and they all needed to write a résumé. Each of them had their own set of skills and handicaps, not the least of which was a lack of computer experience." Since "the rest of the library was quiet that morning," she engaged in working with all four simultaneously, guiding each through the process of filling out résumé forms online "until they each had a pleasing and professional-looking" document. The job "took an hour and a half, but they were each so grateful when we all finished." This experience still moves Susan, feeling the gratitude of those she helped serving as a deeply satisfying reward for her efforts.

Of course, her principal focus as a Children's Librarian leads Barhan to spend productive hours with many "little people who need a good book." One particularly enjoyable activity for her is her monthly Story Times at several of the elementary level public schools in her service area. Over the course of the school year, she read books to students in those schools, watching the children's' engrossed faces as the stories progress. Barhan remembers one program presentation in 2003 during which she heard



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a small voice "saying softly, 'Miss Susan, Miss Susan, Do you remember me, Miss Susan? You read me stories at Manual High School last year!'" Susan Barhan remains deeply impressed by this moment since "it is not often that we can feel the long term impact of what we do, but that moment made my entire year worthwhile. A child remembered me telling stories!"

And so, Susan works out God's calling in the library. Drawing on her own life experience, she encourages today's students to prepare themselves for their futures by "working directly in the fields they are interested in." Through internships, volunteer work, and other opportunities, they will be able to "discover what skills they have and use them to their best advantage in an environment that suits them. Even in libraries there are different environments, academic, public, and special. They each have a distinctive working environment, and I chose the one that best suited me." In conceptualizing service, Barhan still hears the echoes of John F. Kennedy's words in 1961: "President Kennedy's inaugural speech epitomized the motivation for my generation. He said, 'Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.' As a Christian, I was raised for service, to care for those less fortunate." The idealism of her

generation combined with the Christian ethos of her parents and the climate of the college prompted Susan Barhan to embrace an active faith centered on service to others.

Still inspired by the idealism of her youth and her life experience, Barhan urges us all to "never underestimate the need for simple service in this world." She identifies one pitfall in contemporary society to avoid: "We have so much technology, but we've begun to forget about the people. Technology is just a tool; it will be replaced, it will age, and it will change. The need to love and be love will never be replaced, will never age, will never change. Service is the way to use that love to meet the needs of God's or Allah's or Buddha's or whoever's people in this world." Susan Peterson Barhan reminds us that "that is what we are here for, that is what service is about, meeting the needs." While the needed "knowledge, resources, and skills for someone who does not have them" may be complex, the impulse to meet them is innately simple for the librarian who believes that "God's work must truly be our own."

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1. Susan Barhan dressed like a witch for “Story Time with Children” at public library in Indianapolis; photograph provided by Susan Barhan with permission to reprint.
2. Susan Barhan dressed like a witch for Story Time at Indianapolis public library; photograph provided by Ms. Barhan with permission to reprint.
3. Photograph of Susan Barhan with little girl at public library in Indianapolis; photograph provided by Ms. Barhan with permission to reprint.