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Authors

Glusker, Ann

Edwards, Susan

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“Librarians Navigating Change” Oral History Project

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University of California, Berkeley - Library

Berkeley, California

Contact: Ann Glusker, glusker@berkeley.edu

Susan Edwards

Interviewed on April 28, 2025

By Ann Glusker

--For more information about this project, and the oral history method in general, please consult the Project Overview Document at the URL provided above

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00:00:01 **Ann**

This is Ann Glusker interviewing Susan Edwards on April 28, 2025, for the “Librarians Navigating Change” Oral History Project. This is a remote interview. Ann is in Seattle, Washington, and Susan is in Berkeley, California.

Susan, thank you so much for participating in this project, the genesis of which was you saying to me, “What are you going to research next?” Basically, I've just been saying to people—I mean, you're the narrator, so you can start wherever you want, but I've basically been saying—could you talk a little bit about your background to whatever extent you want, but mostly, with an interest in how you came to librarianship?

00:01:15 **Susan**

Sure. I came to librarianship while I was working at college, and I got a job working for the San Jose Public Library as a page. And, then after I graduated, I got a temporary six-month position working at the East Branch Public Library in San Jose, California. I decided I really enjoyed it, that librarianship seemed like a good fit, but I still thought I wanted to go to law school, because that's what you do if you're good with words and you're smart and you care about social justice. So, everyone directs you to law school.

So, in 1977, I moved to San Francisco, possibly '78, and got a job at Golden Gate University Law Library, because they offered tuition for employees. I started working as a library assistant doing reserves, ironically, and public services and government documents. And so that was funny [given my later work on e-reserves at Berkeley].

In the course of that, I realized I didn't really want to go to law school, because I didn't believe in the criminal justice system. But on the other hand, librarianship seemed like a really good option, especially then, because at that time the Briggs Initiative was going on in California [The Briggs Initiative was a failed California ballot proposition which would have banned gay and lesbian people from working in California schools (<https://www.glbthistory.org/primary-source-set-briggs-initiative>)]. And being a teacher or a social worker, which were the two other things I was thinking about, were not safe places for people who were lesbians.

So librarianship seemed perfect. [It] combines my intellectual interest with the ability to kind of help people a bit, but also not feeling overly merged. Like, I doubted whether I could actually be a social worker and contain my boundaries. So anyway, librarianship is perfect. You're helping

people, but you're not in their stuff. And you're also not responsible in a massive way, like a heart surgeon or something. Also, it seemed like it offered the opportunity, as did teaching and social work, of being a mom and having kids and being able to have some work-life balance.

So, [I] went to Library School, UC Berkeley. Got my degree in 1980. My workplace allowed me to work part-time while I went to library school. Offered me a full-time job as a librarian once I came back, which they kind of created because the market wasn't good at that point, which is true again [now]. Anyway, I got a job in 1984 at UC Berkeley, as the head of the Newspapers & Microforms room, which is part of the government documents department.

And whoa, when you say, how has it changed? Everything has changed. When I left Golden Gate, they were still using catalog cards that were typed. We were just beginning to do email. Even at a first-tier research university in 1984, there wasn't WAIS or Gopher [WAIS was a client-server database search system introduced in 1990 before the widespread adoption of the World Wide Web (<https://techterms.com/definition/wais>)] [Gopher was an early internet technology developed in 1991 at the University of Minnesota [which] allowed users to search and retrieve information through a text-based interface (<https://techterms.com/definition/gopher>)]. Those things didn't even exist yet. Not even that level of [technology]. There was some dial up near the end, of dedicated searching done by a librarian or... But bottom line, what that meant was that librarianship was an incredible resource to students. Librarians were incredible resources to students.

I remember when the main reference desk, which I was... you had to have a quite extensive training to work on the main reference desk. It was seen as a position of great responsibility and status. When you were a trainee, you had a little label around your neck that said you were a trainee because you might give bad information. People needed to understand the context of who they were getting help from, and there would be two or three people working at the reference desk, a very large reference desk, and students would be lined [up]—and sometimes faculty would be lining up, right—because those other resources didn't exist.

And so specialized bibliographic tools like the National Union Catalog, the British Museum catalog, the Social Science Citation Index, they were hard to use, and it took a lot of subject expertise. Government documents was its own world. There were three librarians in the government documents department, three full-time, highly skilled, deeply knowledgeable librarians, in addition to me. I was just a fourth filling in there and doing other stuff. Incredible,

the depth of expertise. And again, the same problem, trying to find [United Nations] General Assembly documents at that time period before the material was digitized, trying to use the census in paper, the 1970 [census volumes to] get to the block level statistics... Like, these things, they were highly, highly complex. That, I feel like, is one of the main differences between [my two stints]: my “Berkeley 1”, 1984 to 1991, and my “Berkeley 2”, 2009 to 2023—that whole level of highly trained, highly skilled, highly proud professional reference librarians.

Sorry, in my personal opinion, that is not a thing anymore. That's not a job. The concept is [that] anybody can do it and doesn't take much. What's interesting to me is that the internet gloss, the search engines and now ChatGPT have made it appear easier. But an entire world of information is not being tapped into. Nor are people navigating even those tools as powerfully as they think they are. We know that, [but] they don't know that. And yet that's not the job anymore. So that was kind of jumping ahead, to what are the changes? For me, the big changes were the role of reference.

The role of the subject liaison was a thing as well because that goes along with that. At the same time, we had the 23 libraries, they were embedded in departments. There was an extremely close relationship. There was an Education librarian, one full-time librarian, who just worked with the School of Education, there was me who worked with the School of Psychology and School of Social Welfare too. Now there would be four or five departments of that size [for each librarian position]. You can't develop [the same] subject expertise for multiple departments. So, we have ceded that, and I think that that's clear. In my opinion, that's clear, that's not the job anymore. But it was a job. It was the job, when I first came back to Berkeley, [and] even in 2009, it was still the job. It was starting to change, but it was still the job or I wouldn't have wanted it.

The other huge change, and you know this so well, but, whatever, is around collection development. When I worked at Berkeley from '84 to '91, the AUL [Associate/Assistant University Librarian] for collections had a very clear policy, which was if we buy one book and it's used by one patron in 100 years, we have done our job because we are a research library. We are a research library for the ages. Our value is not determined by quick usage statistics. That's not the timeline we're functioning on. We're not collecting for the person of today. We're collecting for the person who hasn't even been born yet. And that I'm getting... I get emotional... I'm just going to say I still see the beauty in that.

Although when I came back in 2009, it was clear that the piece of the pie—that is, Library budget—that was devoted to the collections, to that kind of collections acquisition, had shrunk considerably, as had the expertise that was required to do that kind of purchasing. So that was getting to be over. And then the question became metrics. We were metrics-driven in terms of assessing collections, which I think is a good thing, I think it's important. But the problem for me, the biggest challenge, was [that] we could never reach consensus on what the metrics are, what metrics were meaningful. I think that that's where the rubber hits the road. Once you understand that simplistic metrics like circulation are not, they're not important, they're not particularly valuable, you need something much more rich. But it was a conversation, that involves a lot of values that are embedded in people's perspective about what matters. And there was no way to build consensus across the chasm, which was, if one person needs it forever or if it's in one language that one person might ever want to read, and we are the only ones who have it, that we need to keep doing that. As you know, how that weighed against other competing economic needs was never resolved in a good way. So, we're left with these competing visions.

[00:10:35](#) **Ann**

Can you just say a word about the difference it makes to be resource-constrained? Because I'm sort of thinking of a job interview I had before Berkeley where I asked about constraints and they said, “Pretty much we can order what we want.” This was an east coast private, wealthy place.

[00:10:58](#) **Susan**

Right. Well, everything changed. Because I worked at an east coast private. And that was true, that any given book that we wanted, we could buy. Still true at Berkeley, but the whole landscape changed, as you know, because of the large packages and what happened with serials cost. And so what you couldn't say is, “We can get any journal that you want, or any data set that you want, or any computing environment that you want to work with that text” ... like, that is not a thing. So back to the monograph. Sure, yeah, we can get the monograph. But that's not where scholarship is anymore in most disciplines, in many disciplines. It's really sad. It's sad because what they need we can't necessarily get. And [I] know, [you] know this. It's always weird to talk to you because you know all these things.

[00:11:59](#) **Ann**

But thank you for talking to the transcript.

[00:12:02](#) **Susan**

Yeah, so, the inequity of we can't meet every student's needs. How do we meet some of their needs? When the resources have become prohibitively expensive it is a burden on... I think it has to do with what happened with a lot with the large journal packages, and with life under hyper-capitalism where every bit of profit is being extracted and their profit margins are outrageous. We never really figured it out how to play with it. I think we didn't figure out how to play well with Google in terms of mass digitization and the content that we had, and what we needed to get in exchange for that. There's just a whole lot of ways in which librarians were thrust into dealing with high-powered negotiators for publishers like Elsevier. Who's going to win here? So that's a big difference, that the whole concept of collections just changed. And then you move from ownership to access...

[00:13:17](#) **Ann**

By the way, ProQuest is pretty much subscription-only now, so you can't outright buy books from them, if I'm understanding correctly.

[00:13:29](#) **Susan**

Yes. So sad.

[00:13:32](#) **Ann**

So, even as you've been gone, coming up on a year and a half now, we're seeing it more... and that's let alone what's happening on the national scale right now.

[00:13:46](#) **Susan**

Right. And the court cases that were happening that were right before I left, about whether or not it was going to be too risky to move forward with the efforts to share material that was under copyright, even with all of the arguments that we made that it was the same as lending a copy because we had controls on—blah, blah, blah—the number of copies, and yet the legal environment was really scary for people.

[00:14:20](#) **Ann**

Well, thank you. Because, I love [that] this big picture context puts a lot of things in place. I hope you don't mind, I'm just going to go off track a little bit to talk about your two different times at Berkeley, very different times. I think it's okay to say you went to Amherst in between. I'm so curious about the decision to come back to Berkeley. What drove that? How did that feel? How different was it to come back? Because it's a time capsule... you left in '91 and you came back in '09...

[00:15:10](#) **Susan**

Well, I never expected to live in Massachusetts so long. When I moved there, our understanding was it was going to be about five years. But fast forward, kids get embedded in their schools and their lives, and we stayed. And then I stayed through... Yeah, we stayed. In 2009, my mother had died of Alzheimer's a couple of years before, and I had been her caregiver, so that freed me up again to be able to... And the kids were grown. They were in college. It was like, my heart had always been in the Bay and in a public institution. So, we moved [there] for family reasons, but I was free then to come back. And this job just kind of came across my desk, and it was like, this is perfect. This is a job that, you know... "These are departments that I love. This is the school that I love. This is an area that I love, and I want to get back to that." And I'd sort of had it with elite private institutions that are feeder schools for the ruling class. So, it was great. It was great. And I'm really glad I did it, and I'm really glad that Patti was my partner, [who] was willing to move with me, because it's a leap of faith to move to another state.

[00:16:36](#) **Ann**

Yes. You know I know.

[00:16:42](#) **Susan**

It's huge, and we have a lot of gratitude. So anyway, that's why I came back.

[00:16:51](#) **Ann**

And then my sort of related question to that, which I thought that I wanted to ask you even before we started talking today, is, did you have a culture shock when you came back?

[00:17:03](#) **Susan**

No, because the thing is, it's not like I hadn't been coming back and forth. I mean, I have family here in the Bay. My son was going to school at Berkeley. I had connections, deep connections. So, no, I think I kind of knew what I was getting into. Even the housing prices weren't shocking in the way that it would be to someone who wasn't from here, but it was also 2008, which was a huge crash. So that's when I was looking at housing and actually getting ready to make the move.

[00:17:34](#) **Ann**

Wow.

[00:17:36](#) **Susan**

But it was a hard time for Berkeley. I was one of the last hires in the door because... things got worse, right? We didn't see that incredible crash coming. So, that was a big budget problem right there.

[00:17:51](#) **Ann**

Yeah. Timing is everything.

[00:17:54](#) **Susan**

Yeah. Right.

[00:17:58](#) **Ann**

So, I don't know if you want to think about it [this] way, but do you see an arc of change over your time as a librarian, whether it's just at Berkeley or your whole career as a librarian? What were some of the points at which you felt there was like a pivot or a big change?

[00:18:27](#) **Susan**

Well, obviously, technology, I mean, it's huge. What I was saying, like, we went from barely using email, and that was great if you had an email account, to where we are now with ChatGPT being the latest kind of threat... Threat, [or] challenge, I guess we could say it's disruptive technology. I think that in many ways I was open to the changes, and actually involved with them, seeing the opportunities that they offered, but I also see some of the downsides. So, technology's huge. You just can't underestimate it. I think we're one of the professions that's been the most impacted. All professions are being impacted by technology, but I think librarianship is having an existential moment a lot because of that. The challenges in higher ed, the defunding of public higher ed... I didn't see that coming as badly as it came, as much as it came. So, those were the... not surprises, but the pivotal moments.

And then I would say that there's an interrelated thing that happened around technology and COVID that made it possible to break apart the concept of the library as space. And I think that that is one of THE most stressful challenges. And it was certainly one of the most stressful challenges to me as a manager, because what it meant was that people, some people, and we will be honest, they were our lower paid people, had to be on campus, they had to be working even when their exposure was high to a disease that we didn't know could be fatal, could create long term ill effects. And at the same time, people who were librarians, who had more privilege, were able to not work on campus, not be exposed. It could become a choice.

And that set in motion things that it accelerated. The changes were already happening, but it accelerated changes. So, you could have something like a university like Berkeley virtually changing, closing its reference desk. I mean, okay, there's this little something [still], but I see it as closed. It's certainly [closed] in terms of extensive hours with highly skilled people who really understand the collections, the resources, and how to navigate the research process with students. That's over. And I don't think that could have been over without both the technology and the opportunity, which was COVID saying, hey, we can do it, [we can close the desk].

But there's this other piece, which is that people wanted that. And the fact that they wanted that is an interesting cultural conflict for me as a person who didn't want that. I didn't want to lose the one-on-one, face-to-face, small group, in person, class. I didn't want to lose that. I didn't want to lose walking over to the collection, to some resource that a student would never find [on their own] and showing it to them. So, that's a moment that is one of the most profound turning points. And I don't know what it's going to mean ultimately. It means we're closing libraries. Of course, it means that. I don't know. We have a colleague who says, if you're not at the table, you're on the menu. It may have come up in one of these interviews. And I think it's a really interesting point. If people don't see librarians, I think that all of the work that's... We've always said this, that we're unappreciated, because [in] a library that's working well, 90% of the work is invisible. The book you want just happens to be there. It happens to be. Have the right subject headings. It happened to be on a shelf in the right place. Like all those things, you know, you had the right database. You understood how to get to it. The pathway was clear. Even though there's 600 databases, you could find the one you wanted.

Right? All that just works. So now we've made it even more invisible, it seems like. That didn't really take people, it just happened. And I think that reference librarians and subject librarians were the face of the library to most of our students. Well, them and the underpaid, incredible support staff who really do the work, who keep those desks open and make sure that that resource is available. So those faces, you know, they now have that face left. But the other face, that was what I think, the professional librarian face, not sure where it is.

[00:23:26](#) **Ann**

Yeah. Well, let me just back up and say when you said to me way back when, “What's your next research project?” And I really thought to myself, “Okay, all I really want to do is talk to the people who've been here a long time”—I came in 2019. I had that one year before COVID. It

was my first liaison job. And I feel like I saw the dream. I felt like, “This is exactly what I want to do.” My subject expertise mattered. Things were still kind of functioning. There was still already a lot of change, but I could see the way things had been. And when you said, “What research?” I thought, “I just want to talk to people about the way it all used to be.” So here I am doing it. But the thing that really drove me was what I saw coming, [which] was the change from liaison librarianship to functional librarianship because of cost, ease of structure, that kind of thing. Can you talk about that? Is that a correct characterization? What does it mean? Why did it happen? As a manager, I feel like you saw some of those conversations more closely than I might have.

00:24:56 **Susan**

Yeah, I think it's true. I'm not sure, though... I mean, I think that's the way it gets posed, is that it's subject liaison versus—I don't know—yeah, functional is good. But in a way, I think what's really happening is that funding is being diverted from both of those roles into other parts of the library. If we could go back to all the positions we had as subject librarians and say, “Here's our pot—now let's redefine it and see what makes sense in our current environment, with the emphasis on technology and the understanding that everything has shifted and it's not about the books in the same way anymore”, we would come up with something different.

But what's happening is we're talking about... we have very constrained things. There's no way that we can say that you are the “Education, Psychology, Social Welfare, Political Science and Public Policy Librarian”. That sounds absurd. So, we are going to call you the “Applied Social Science Collection Development Librarian”. But it's not because that made sense as a job, it's because there didn't seem to be any other option because we'd gotten so constrained. There're so few bodies left. It frustrates me because I think there should be room for both. And I think that in a good, well-functioning team, you would have both. Like, I thought having you, for example, as a data librarian on a team that also has subject expertise and other expertise in instruction or whatever is fabulous.

But when you instead have a smaller and smaller group of people, and you're just saying, “We're going to call you this and you're going to do [that], we're just re-dividing the pie, and you're getting a much bigger piece, you're still doing more”, then what falls off are some of the things that at least some of us love the most, which was keeping up on the current literature at least a little bit; like, tracking our faculty and seeing what they were doing; reaching out to them when

we had a new resource, especially the new ones; working with the graduate students, especially the master's level students that come so fast they're overwhelmed; working with our first-gen students; like, all of that. That's the piece that I feel like, there isn't time. Turning to too few people, changing the name isn't going to make it be enough time. So, we just have to be honest and say we're not doing those things anymore.

I think that those conversations about “What are we not doing?”—I've seen this at Berkeley now for many years, almost 20 between the two stints. We're not good at saying what we're letting go of. And we are letting go of things. We just aren't facing it and taking responsibility for it and saying we aren't doing this. And there's a cost, there's a loss, and we're willing to... We live with that, but we never reach consensus about that. So people fight for their own little piece. And I don't blame them because it's their heart. It's what drew them to being a librarian. But that's holistically not going to work.

[00:28:13](#) **Ann**

So, I'm kind of having a little revelation right now. Because I have resisted so much, [in] the search committees I was on, having the title be “Social Sciences Librarian” because I felt that it mattered, that the person had expertise in whatever [particular] area. But at this point, over the six years [I've been at Berkeley], my job has literally gotten twice as big. I've taken chunks of [work from] three different people that left and did not get replaced. And nobody can say my title anymore. Someone was introducing me this morning. It used to be, “There's Ann, the sociology librarian.” And now it's like, “Here's Ann, she's in the Social Sciences Division.” Because I have five things [in my title]. So, it's kind of effectively the same thing. I'm only realizing that at this very moment. I'm talking a little too much, but wow.

[00:29:06](#) **Susan**

Oh, I love it. I don't think you're talking too much. No, exactly right. So, we can just call it, I feel like you can name it whatever you want. You can say we're transitioning from subject librarians to whatever you want. But what you're really saying is we've reduced way past the point where we can... [where] any of that is meaningful. I think that would be more honest.

[00:29:29](#) **Ann**

It would be. And I don't know “now what”—I mean, you know that we in the social sciences division are about to lose probably two or three [librarian] positions. We only have about 10. Not lose necessarily, but at least not get in a long time, and probably never, but who knows? But

that work that remains to be done that has to get cut out because there's only so many bodies?
Yeah, I'm hearing you.

[00:30:05](#) **Susan**

I don't know. I think it's a really good question. I mean, I know that we know that item level selection is falling by the wayside. People don't have time for it, don't feel that it's as important. I think a lot of in-person instruction is falling by the wayside. Certainly, from Instruction Services Division.

[00:30:29](#) **Ann**

They're saying they're getting fewer requests too.

[00:30:32](#) **Susan**

Right. And it's a circle. People who had the strong instruction programs, they built them. You know, they built them or they inherited a built program. It didn't just happen. I know that for Social Welfare. I know that for what David [Eifler] did with environmental design, he inherited some and he built others. He added quite a lot. But I'm not sure that everyone sees the value in that anymore. And I think that people feeling like developing instructional materials online and telling people to work through it or whatever is an inadequate solution. And maybe that's really not our job anymore. I think it's a huge question.

[00:31:16](#) **Ann**

Yeah, it is.

[00:31:18](#) **Susan**

But then you don't need the expertise. If you're not doing collection development, and you're not doing instruction, and you're not doing reference, especially complex reference, then you don't need those people anymore, Ann. I think they're right.

[00:31:39](#) **Ann**

Okay, I feel like I need to like see you for coffee later, because I'm having like, I'm having some moments here which... like, about my own life and career. Okay. But I would love to continue with this interview.

[00:31:56](#) **Susan**

Yeah, yeah, I'm on it.

[00:31:58](#) **Ann**

So, another thing that I have written here is how strongly we all felt that it was important to the unit that you were our manager, and had the deep expertise you had, could see the big picture, and also had the value of advocating. So, you didn't just sort of sit back and accept what was coming without having a voice about it. I'm assuming that your first stint in Berkeley, you weren't a manager, but maybe I have that wrong?

[00:32:39](#) **Susan**

I was, I had three career staff.

[00:32:41](#) **Ann**

Oh, you did...

[00:32:42](#) **Susan**

Believe it or not, the Newspapers & Microforms room had three career staff and a large group of students. Just to show you the difference.

[00:32:51](#) **Ann**

Yeah, okay, so that's mind blowing. Yes, I didn't...

[00:32:58](#) **Susan**

No, I mean, you didn't know the difference. Like, now we have one support staff person who runs [it], with some students. Another thing about that job, I'm just going to say quickly, is that nobody understood microforms. They didn't understand how to acquire, preserve or access them. And secondly, it was an important part of... newspapers were seen as a primary source. Oh, yeah, I'll tell you this. We had a newspaper from every county in California. We had 47 newspapers from India in, I think, 30 different languages. So, we met with the history classes and talked through how to work with these primary sources, how to do the kind of complex searching, that you could go in the print, in the bundles, but then also how you would move it into the microform. I just think that that whole level is just so interesting to me, that that was a thing. But it was.

[00:33:55](#) **Ann**

My jaw is dropping. That's amazing.

[00:33:59](#) **Susan**

And now it's just open just a few hours and [library users] just try and find it. And if you can't find it, I'm sorry. But anyway, back to you.

[00:34:11](#) **Ann**

Well, the question was kind of about what...

[00:34:19](#) **Susan**

Oh, being a manager.

[00:34:20](#) **Ann**

Being a manager. Because I'm sort of feeling like you were the buffer between how some of the change hit us, and how some of the change was effected. And you were a voice in some of the decisions about change. I just wonder how you saw that role. I'm not sure that's the right question, but...

[00:34:40](#) **Susan**

Well, sure, it's a good question. I think being a manager at Berkeley got harder over time. Much harder. Because I think when I was hired in '84, it had recently unionized. But there was, I gotta say it, there was nothing like the level of animosity that developed later during contract negotiations between the unionized librarians and management. There just wasn't. There wasn't this sense that there was a huge divide. I think there was still more the old school concept that—there was a hierarchy, of course, but—the professional librarians had a lot in common with each other. And we're sort of all on the same team, more or less.

I don't know. I mean, it's part of what was happening in the country as a whole, about anger and class consciousness and all of that. But it got played out in Berkeley during the last several years [before I retired] in some really intense ways that I hadn't seen before. And it made me really sad, because I saw people who I really respected being treated in my personal opinion, really badly and, who had worked really hard as librarians. I felt like that was really sad, because I couldn't see how you could do it in a way that didn't still engender that us/them divide. And that is sad. It's just sad. I don't know. Hopefully it's gotten better. Not a high point for me.

[00:36:39](#) **Ann**

I mean, I don't know if this is helpful. I just want to thank you personally for how hard you worked to represent all of us.

[00:36:50](#) **Susan**

Well, thank you. It was my privilege. I truly... I mean, I love that part of the job. I loved having a team and feeling like... I love being able to fight for the things I care about and feel like I know I have the... and this is where the divisiveness against management became hard for me, because I felt like I always had my manager's back and saying, "No, this isn't right, I want to push for this." And if she disagreed, she would still want to hear, "Why do you think that? How do we get to yes on this?" Like, "We're on the same page. We want the best for our students. So what do you think we should do?" And come up with another proposal. I feel like that's the kind of leadership...

And so that's an interesting question. We got kind of conflated between leadership and management. I felt like I never really wanted to be a manager, but I did want to be a leader because I had 40 years of experience. I'm old. I care deeply. I had a lot of experience working with people in different ways, and I had worked my way up. So, I totally got how important it was that our support staff be part of the team. I wanted to bring that vision. And I love the social sciences, and I love all of them. Well, maybe not business, but... [Ann laughs] No, really. I mean, all of our departments are so interesting, and we're so lucky. Like, each one, they're fascinating, and the students are the best and the faculty are the best.

[00:38:26](#) **Ann**

Yes.

[00:38:26](#) **Susan**

So, anyway, so that tension that it felt like we're not all on the same page anymore was really, really hard. We don't all want the best, or something. I don't know.

[00:38:43](#) **Ann**

So, I'm going to poke this question in because it was on the question list, and you can choose to answer or not, and we can take it out if we want. But the question is, did you ever think of leaving either Berkeley or librarianship?

[00:38:59](#) **Susan**

Not until retirement [They laugh]. I feel like until almost the very end of my career, I still loved it and was fully engaged. And I feel like at the end, there were some things that, I do believe, started to break my heart a little bit. And then it became easier to say, "Well, okay, you know, it's

time for the next generation. It's time for other people who don't have these other visions of what it means to be a librarian in their head. They're going to set a policy and a goal for the team that fits more with the current reality, both economic and political.” And that was a good thing. But until then, no. I mean, I love being a librarian. I mean, what's not to like? Helping people find answers to their questions, helping other people feel empowered—it's the best. And working with great colleagues. So, anyway, [I] still think it's a great job.

[00:40:04](#) **Ann**

This is another question that I suppose we each need to be careful of, but when I was sending you the reference timeline [that] I took from the ACRL [Association of College & Research Libraries, part of the American Library Association] every other year “Top Trends in Librarianship” [reports]* and, traced that over 20 years, the most recent one had “politicization of libraries.” I feel like there's a lot of people now that are feeling the way librarianship used to be, [that] I loved. I went into it, but it's changing, and its role in society is changing. You can't just go into a gathering anymore and say, “I'm a librarian” and have people say, “Oh, that's so great [Susan laughs].”

[00:40:55](#) **Susan**

I think you mostly can. I mean, I feel like I hear that all the time. But why they think it's so great is because they say, “I love to read.” And you're like, “Yeah, that has nothing to do with my job.” But, that's really too bad. I feel like libraries have always been political and not value neutral. I was drawn to librarianship because I think it's a force for positive social change. Because it's like education. Education also is a force for positive social change in that context. Right? Not for proselytizing or for creating little mini-mes who have the same ideology, but for allowing people to develop themselves in ways that are really important. That's inherently political when you have a society with a lot of class divisions and a lot that's preventing people from having information. I mean, information is power, and all that cliché. It's true. I've always seen them as political in the sense that they're trying to share power, share access to power through information that people need to change their lives.

[00:42:16](#) **Ann**

I was just gonna say you just reminded me of a guy that used to come to the public library every day. Every day. A new FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] request. We called him “FOIA Guy”, and he was awesome.

[00:42:32](#) **Susan**

Wow.

[00:42:33](#) **Ann**

But, yeah, that helping him access power, in a way, it was interesting.

[00:42:39](#) **Susan**

Oh, totally. And, you know, because you worked in public libraries and in public health, but when I worked in the public library, people would come up, and that was how they were. I mean, they didn't have the internet to look up their symptoms, but they were looking for information about whatever it was that they had. But even now, you need the journals. You need stuff that's behind a paywall. If you really want to go deeply into anything, you need that access, even if it's a disease that you have and you're trying to figure out what's the best treatment modality.

[00:43:12](#) **Ann**

Well, thank you for that. Okay, so I feel, for some reason, like this is the time to ask about your advice for the incoming generation of librarians.

[00:43:36](#) **Susan**

Well, it's funny, because I've just had a couple of, [well,] not colleagues, [but] people that I've met recently, one of whom I directed to you, who wants to be a social work librarian, who's a social worker and thinks that that might be the perfect job. And she's a fabulous young woman. I feel like it's really hard for me to know what to say to people who want to be a subject librarian, because everything we've just talked about is that there are very few of those jobs. So what I tried to say is, "Can you be interested in other things, too? Could you have a portfolio that included some other things?" And also, it feels to me like, "Do you have any interest in data?" It's really important because so many of the people I talk to say, "I'm not good with numbers. I'm not good with math." The classic, "You know, I was an English major." I don't see a ton of growth in that area right now. I think that's not really it.

The other people that I feel like I'm very interested in are, one of whom is Latinx, she works at [a] public library in [the Bay Area] and is getting her library degree. She still wants to go. I feel like then that's also talking about other kinds of paths. Like, I think that public libraries do still provide sort of a path for people who want to do community outreach and engagement and who use their skills as a bilingual person and be a role model to other people. So it really depends a

lot on who the person is, and what they think their career arc will be. But the person who is really naive about how that world has changed and that they don't... they still think we're just sitting around reading, those people I have concern for because I think that they don't understand what it's like to be a librarian at this point, even an academic librarian.

[00:45:47](#) **Ann**

Yeah. I mean, we never sat around reading.

[00:45:51](#) **Susan**

No, we absolutely never did. When I was a page at the East Branch Public Library, I would pick up books as I was shelving them, and sort of glance at [them]. And I had the best boss, who came by at one point—I was saying, “oops, you know, I'm reading”, and she said, “I love to hire people who can't help but glance at the book before they put it on the shelf. That's who I want.” More of that sort of traditional thing. Like, of course, don't just sit down with the book and read it, but intellectual curiosity. We haven't really talked about that, but I feel like that's a thing that's been so important in this career to me. I try to understand what other people who are asking, “Should I go into librarianship?” [think about this]. Are you curious about many things? Because it helps a lot, we are the Jack-of-all-trades kind of profession.

[00:46:40](#) **Ann**

Yeah. By the way, when I met with that person that you referred to me, they must have just been like, “Oh, here we go. Not the data discussion again!” Because I said the same thing. I said, “What are the jobs going to be when you graduate? You have to think [in] those ways, and so make sure that you set yourself up for those in advance.”

[00:47:08](#) **Susan**

Right. And, if they're not set up for that, then they say, “Well, I think I'll go into archives because I still just really want to work with print”. And I just feel like, “Oh, my. I mean, do you have any idea what's happening in archives? Archives is about digitization. It's about staffing constraints, it's about budgetary constraints.” Again, it's not [that] you get to just sit down with a box of documents and kind of really understand how this should be organized and work it through. I don't know. Yeah, I don't.

[00:47:50](#) **Ann**

I mean. Oh, well.

[00:47:54](#) **Susan**

Um. Oh, well, yeah.

[00:47:58](#) **Ann**

Another thing... I don't really know if you want to get into this or not, but in this conversation and other times we've talked about Berkeley exceptionalism. You know, Berkeley's different. Berkeley stands apart in some ways. I don't [know] if you wanted to add anything about that...

[00:48:23](#) **Susan**

Well, I think that historically that had been sort of... Berkeley had that reputation [that] maybe people who work there thought that they... The reputation is they think they're a little bit better than other libraries or other institutions or other librarians, and not particularly into sharing. I think that's really changed. I feel like partly the budget crisis, and again, back to technology, because we can [all do more], that's really shifting. But there was huge resistance around sharing resources, even within [the University of California]. Trying to work with our colleagues, trusting that they were going to keep it [safe], that we could rely on them if they said that they would [do something], I think that that's been an issue, and that's been true with some of our associations with the privates, too. Especially one that's nearby.

It's been hard to trust that we are all in it together, [so it] has been great to see all the universities that are signing on to this. And not [just] universities. I mean, the small colleges, the community colleges. How ironic if something that comes out of this incredible attack on higher ed might be more of a sense of, "Oh, we are in this together. We aren't better than this. You can take this out, but we aren't better than the CSUs [California State University] or the community colleges. We're an important piece of the landscape. We should all work together. We should share our resources." You know, I think that's always been the way.

[00:50:03](#) **Ann**

Thank you for even saying that because I'm totally with you. I'm thinking back to when we did the Big Data interviews, and there was actually someone that said, "You know, Berkeley thinks that it's agile and innovation-focused, but actually getting concrete things done about permissions and procedural this and that, about getting my data up and running, has been harder at Berkeley than elsewhere." Because, it's such a complex organization and more hierarchical than it likes to think, is my opinion.

[00:50:42](#) **Susan**

Yeah, I agree. It's an interesting combination. It's hierarchical, but it's also very much—at least gives lip service to—collective decision making, or informed decision making, or multiple people. Things have to get run by multiple people, and each and any of them can be a logjam and who has the power? And then so often when you really get to the power, it resides outside of the library. That's always eye-opening. That could happen with data on the data side, but it has also really happened on the space side, where it seems like we [the Library] would control it, but where a question like how you deal with students who are refusing to mask who are in a library space, and what tools are in your enforcement belt, that became a decision that was made outside of the library because it has to do with risk assessment and all kinds of litigation potentialities that are bigger. You would think... or I didn't think they were, but anyway, bigger.

[00:52:00](#) **Ann**

Actually it's been very interesting watching Berkeley approach the issue of AI in general and on campus, because I think that it's taken them longer than some places to respond because of that. I couldn't quite put a finger on it. Is it, they couldn't figure out which department should be responsible? No, it wasn't that. Everybody had their own kind of approaches. But that was partly that, where are you going to get sort of agreement and consensus and buy-in from so many different strongly focused and opinionated separate units, who are used to having their individual power and silos? It's so interesting,

[00:52:48](#) **Susan**

Right? And the library is just one player there, and often not the most powerful player. The other place where I really saw it was with trying to rethink the way in which Native American collections were handled, both in the Bancroft and in our libraries. And that became this very large, very hot question about repatriation of information, about handling of sensitive information, about tribal input... Recommendations will be made, and then years later, there's still an implementation bottleneck. Right? This is an example where we have not been on the leading edge. I think that's really true, sorry. But when you get to the repatriation of actually human remains, it feels like [Berkeley] could have and should have moved much faster. The library's relationship was really a smaller piece. Much smaller. It's much less intense. And yet documents that have people's names in them, that have their stories and their voices have a lot of power for people on people, descendant communities want a voice about how that's handled, the amount of time that it's taken. And there's a very slow process.

00:54:23 **Ann**

Yes.

00:54:28 **Susan**

I understand that the tribal liaison officer that they hired, I don't know, I'd have to look at the date seven years ago? None of the things that we had asked for [related to that] have actually happened. Right? It's just so slow.

00:55:20 **Ann**

Yeah. So, the only other real question I have is how would you like your work to be remembered? But if you have anything in the notes, you said that you had some notes... Is there anything that you feel like you want to capture before that kind of wrap-up question?

00:55:42 **Susan**

Well, one of the things that I didn't say was that was [one of] the differences between '84 and '91, and coming back... I think Berkeley really had shifted in terms of much more family-friendly policies. In '84 to '91, very few librarians had kids, and there was a lot of, kind of pressure against it. It was sort of a stigma, and I think that the family friendly policies have been great. There also was, around LGBTQ issues, people were very closeted. I mean, that was also a really bad time in the midst of AIDS, and the whole country was kind of awful, but people were very closeted at Berkeley. It's not that people didn't maybe know each other, but to see the kind of openness when I came back... And it's interesting because when I interviewed for the job, in 2008, I said, "So my partner and I had... SHE..." I had to say it a couple times because I thought, I don't know, has Berkeley changed a lot? But they need to have changed a lot, or I don't want to come here, because I don't want to move back into a hostile environment, or bring my partner 3,000 miles into an environment that doesn't feel warm and accepting. And it has absolutely been great. It's not an issue.

So I think I saw a sea change in that, and also in the commitment to really dealing with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion more broadly around race, around ethnicity. I think all the work with NAVCAL [a fellowship which assists incoming nontraditional students in navigating the University of California, Berkeley campus through a near-peer/student-to-student approach (navcal.berkeley.edu)] and the other student groups that the library [works with] have been doing, I think there's been a genuine commitment, and among the staff and to diversifying our staff. That was great. So, there's some positives, because I kind of talked about the negative,

which was that I think it was much harder to be a manager. I think there was more hostility, especially in the latter part, than there had been in the former part. So those are some positives.

[00:57:45](#) **Ann**

Thank you.

[00:57:46](#) **Susan**

Yeah, they're really good. Let's see what else... I think that's it. Great. I don't think I have [anything else].

[00:58:09](#) **Ann**

Great! I mean, I feel like we've covered all the stuff, except I would love to hear if you had any thoughts of how you would like your work to be remembered, if that question feels relevant.

[00:58:27](#) **Susan**

Well, honestly, what you just said, that you felt like I supported our team and also fought for our team and was a leader that you respected, thank you. That's a huge part of how I would like to be remembered. I feel like I care deeply about the people and the collections and the students, and so hearing that that came across, that means a lot to me.

And I think that the other thing that I felt really probably the proudest of was what we did with e-reserves [e-reserves, implemented during COVID, replaced print reserves (where students could borrow heavily-used hard copy items for classes for short periods) with an online version] during COVID, and trying to make sure that students had access to the textbooks that they needed to do their work, and to understand that the affordability, the textbook affordability crisis, was particularly horrendous for some of our students, and how do we make that right? I think that working with a team of all support staff, actually, who are equally engaged in that question and passionate about it, was really a great experience for me.

So, I hope that gets remembered institutionally, as some people who have been sort of overlooked could really step up and take on leadership roles. I think that we underutilize some of the careers, to have talent that we have, maybe a lot of it, because I think that many of them care just as passionately as the reference librarians, as the professional librarians do. They care deeply. And have amazing skills and aptitudes. So that was the other thing, I think that that would be nice.

[01:00:31](#) **Ann**

Awesome. Thank you. Let me just take one last look at my notes. Yeah. are you feeling okay to wrap up? I feel great.

[01:00:51](#) **Susan**

Yeah. It's lovely to talk to you, as always.