Classically MODERN

Jeff Baskin, longtime director of North Little Rock’s William F. Laman Library, appreciates historical books, artifacts and literary classics. While keeping these important works in the limelight, he has helped modernize the library system in this ever-evolving Information Age.

By Jillian McGehee  |  Photography by Rett Peek

The man whose unprecedented leadership established the Laman Library System as a cultural haven never had childhood ambitions to become a librarian. The steps leading up to Jeff Baskin’s position as library director – a post he’s held for nearly 20 years – comprise a series of unplanned events.

After serving in the Vietnam War, Jeff returned home in 1969, jobless and alone. C.W. Post College of Long Island University, where he was enrolled prior to the draft, wouldn’t accept him back. He wandered the streets of New York City, finding warmth and comfort in the libraries throughout the boroughs. “I would start at one branch, read a book, then walk to another branch and read some more. I would walk from branch to branch all day long,” he says.

“My mother finally caught up with me, and promised to get me back in school.” A former Clairol model, Jeff’s mother contacted the C.W. Post College administration and fulfilled that promise. The college hired him as the library night manager, where he lived in an oversized closet and showered in the college’s gymnasium.

After completing his undergraduate studies in ’72, the dean of the library school suggested library science for graduate work. Quite familiar with the logistics and nuances of a library setting, Jeff followed the advice and worked as a library assistant while earning his master’s degree. His first job following graduate school was with a Long Island human resources school. His career specialty became designing libraries with handicapped access and one of his duties at the school was leading a training seminar on the subject.

One summer, planners from Little Rock with ideas to build a library at the University of Arkansas for Medical Science attended Jeff’s training. “They asked me to come look at the blueprints, and then I moved to Little Rock for a year to help with the process. That was 1976 and I’ve been here ever since.”

He and his wife, Susan, raised three children in Little Rock. Their older son, Bernie, lives in Singapore and publishes travel books. Daughter Meredith is a nurse and lives in Little Rock, and their youngest, Danny, is an artist with plans to pursue a master’s in fine arts at U of A in Fayetteville this fall.

Jeff credits his upbringing in Manhattan for his passion for the arts. “There are so many wonderful museums there and they’re free,” he says. “I lived on the tip of Manhattan Island surrounded by parks, and as a kid, I would take the train to visit the museums. My favorite was the American Museum of Natural History, and of course, I loved the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I loved the Hayden Planetarium at the history museum, and the three-dimensional wonders such as the armor and mummies at the Met. As an adult, I enjoy wandering museums and taking in more of the fine arts sectors.”

While he loves traveling to New York, to Singapore to visit his son and all over the map, Jeff is happy at home in Arkansas. “I love New York, but the hustle and bustle is too much. I’ve pretty much adopted Southern ways and the slower pace of things here.” Immersing in the arts is easier here, he notes. “In New York, you have to be extremely wealthy to be involved. Here, everyone can be involved and going to the theatre or symphony is affordable, and it makes such a positive impact on people’s lives.”

During his tenure as Laman Library director, Jeff’s greatest achievement is the library’s expansion into more than a book-oriented facility. “Laman has established a more modern library outlook,” he says. “We bring learning in every form to the public – music, art, theatre, lectures – we hit the whole gamut of intellectual curiosity.”

Housed in a bright, cheery building, Laman Library welcomes everyone. Last year, the library documented more than 433,000 patron visits, 86,300 website visits and more than 41,590 people attended exhibit hall displays and programs.

From the more recognized Writers Fellowship program to Live at Laman and the homebound program for adults to the summer reading program, Laman offers a variety of interests for all ages. With the newly renovated Argenta branch open, the library system provides even more to interest guests.

The Argenta branch has embarked on a comprehensive project to catalogue and organize its extensive collection of railroad history. When Jeff joined the library in 1986, he discovered storage boxes containing railroad materials. Spread across tables, chairs and the floor of Jeff’s office are photographs, papers and books related to this North American history. The display focuses on railroad history west of the Mississippi River. “It will have a national impact and attract people from all over,” Jeff says.

Jeff relishes sorting through the railroad artifacts. Since taking a graduate school class on the history of printing in the U.S., he has been fascinated by old papers and books. So much so that when he moved to Arkansas he became an apprentice to a bookbinder to learn the trade using hand tools. Hand tools are rare, Jeff notes. “My friend’s uncle had a bookbindery business in Dallas, and when he closed, he stored his equipment in a barn. I went to see the tools and it was like walking into a turn-of-the-century bookbindery. He initially didn’t want to sell anything, but I asked him how much, and after he would talk business, he made me sew a binding. I thought there was no way I could afford all the equipment, but after talking and talking through pitchers of iced tea, he made me an offer. I got a great deal on those tools.”

Jeff assures that the value books bring to culture and history isn’t waning anytime soon. “People are still reading, the number of books checked out continues to grow and the number of patrons continues to rise,” Jeff says.

As the community flourishes, Jeff hopes the library continues to be an essential amenity. “I hope over time it also becomes the leader of cultural events. Libraries are part of the largest industry in the U.S. – information and technology. That industry may change rapidly, but with dedicated leaders like Jeff, maintaining relevance evolves naturally.”

Clothing provided by The Independent  |  Shot on location at the William F. Laman Library