SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2014
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High Profile

Jeffrey Lee Baskin

Library director helps Laman Grow to meet the needs of its patrons

Eric Francis
Special to the Democrat-Gazette

Finding a job in a friendly fix-up.

The future was almost broke Jeff Baskin, a mother’s love and a job at a library restored him.

A native New Yorker who has been in Arkansas since 1976, Baskin has been director of North Little Rock’s William F. Laman Library System since 1995. Before his life-changing experiences in the war, he was just another kid kicking around New York City, grew up in a goldsmith’s home, and had a dream of one day becoming a forest ranger.

But parents, Bernie and Marilu Baskin, lived in Manhattan, where his father was a goldsmith and his mother worked at various jobs, including one that didn’t sit well with young Jeffrey.

“When I was young, I didn’t like my mother very much,” he said. “All of my school friends had fat old mothers. My mother was a Clairol model — she’d come home every day with a different color of hair, different kind of gown. I wanted a fat old mother just like everyone else.”

She never accommodated that wish.

“Dr. Baskin recalled. “Even the banks didn’t want me, they turned me down. I couldn’t get my arm through the window.”

When he finished his bachelor’s degree and started thinking about pursuing graduate school in psychology, the dean of the library school — one of the largest in the country at the time — took him aside.

“He said, ‘What are you taking a master’s in psychology for? Why don’t you stay and get a master’s in library science?’” Baskin said. “I had never thought about that. He said, ‘You could be a graduate assistant, we’ll pay your way through library school. You can still stay here in your little cloister, still have a job in the library,’ I said: ‘That sounds good to me, let’s do it.’

And with that, the directionless Vietnam veteran who not long before couldn’t even find a job found a career path that would challenge, reward and complete him.

“THERE WAS A YOUNG LADY”

That path led to Arkansas as a result of his first job after graduate school, working for a human resources school on Long Island, where one of his duties was to give an annual training on how to design library spaces that were accessible for disabled children. In the mid-1970s, the assistant director of the University of Arkansas Medical Sciences library attended the training and afterward asked Baskin to come down and consult on their plans, which he did. It led to an offer for a full-time job.

“I decided to come work for a year or so, and when back to New York,” Baskin said. “But my wife and I loved Arkansas so much, we stayed.”

That was 1976, the same year he married Susan Weinstein. The two met while he was living in a small town on Long Island Sound called Port Washington. He owned a little sailboat and every summer afterward would take it out on the sound.

“One day, I’m sitting on the beach, a beautiful Sunday morning, waiting for the wind to come up, and there was a young lady in a blue bikini sitting in the sand.”

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“Let’s find a job together.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll find a job. I’ll call you when I find one.” He called her, and she went back to New York.

“She said, ‘Well, it’s just a job in the library, and I lived in a little apartment in the library.’

“That was home,” he said. “I made sure the library was shut up and locked at night.”

Sherra and Dr. Alonzo Williams.

And with that, the directionless Vietnam veteran who not long before couldn’t even find a job found a career path.

Pair give Supper & Soul the works

Helaine Williams

In October 2010, Arkansas Baptist College hosted a major fundraiser whose inaugural title was Gala for Hope. The featured entertainer was the Rev Al Green. The honorary chairmen were Bernie and Dr. Alonzo Williams.

When the Williams’ daughter Sherra and her husband, state Rep. Eddie Armstrong of North Little Rock, became co-chairmen of this year’s edition of what’s now known as Supper & Soul, their role was more than honorary. As for the couple that usually ... people who chair these events don’t do this much work,” Sherra says. “We had no idea, because they asked and we said, ‘Sure.’ We’re happy to help in any way we can. We’re expected to work hard.”

That’s exactly what they did.

Now the couple are putting the finishing touches on the 2014 edition of this fundraiser, that’s sometimes called “baptist cuisine” on the menu, while other years will be...
Baskin

“Jeff and I, and guess who are the almost senior library directors in the state,” said Bobby Roberts, director of the Central Arkansas Library System. “Jeoff and I, I guess, are almost the senior library directors in the state,” he continued. “What a coincidence! We're almost the same age.”

Baskin, who recently returned to Arkansas after living in New York City, dropped by Arkansas Democrat-Gazette offices in Fayetteville this fall to talk about his change of heart over books and the future of libraries.

“My favorite fishing is deep-sea fishing but in Arkas- sas that's hard to do. I've been fishing near my home in North Little Rock for 30 years. I'm a big fan of deep-sea fishing," Baskin said.

“If my father was still around, I'd love to take him fishing. He was a great fisherman," Baskin said.

“I've slowed down on fishing," Baskin said. "I've been doing a lot of reading these days. I've been reading a lot about deep-sea fishing."