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Interview/ Betty Oktay

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Lightning Visits — Betty Oktay

Recently my family was up in Poughkeepsie, New York, poking around. So — we dropped in on Vassar and spent time with the fabulous Betty Oktay and her crack staff at the Vassar Library. Many times we are too busy to have time to really talk to each other. After a few minutes conversation, here is some of what I learned about the soft-spoken Betty. — Yr. Ed.

Betty Oktay has worked at Vassar for 26 years, much of which was part time. She has worked in everything from acquisitions to cataloging. In October 1986 she was appointed Head Acquisitions Librarian. She has a staff of eight and a materials budget of over 1 million dollars. Besides that, she is an incredible sportswoman who swims regularly, folk dances, and is a crack tennis player. She also enjoys visiting art museums, studying John Rawls' writings on justice and speaking Turkish. She even gave a presentation to the Matthew Vassar reading group on Turkish translations. Still and on top of all that, Betty especially likes ordering books for the library and when she has time she reads them too. She was especially effusive about Paule Marshall's *Daughters*. "My job and my life," she says, "it's called working away and making sense of things."

ATG: What about Vassar — is it a church supported institution?

Betty O: No. Vassar was endowed by an individual, Matthew Vassar. It is a private school. Matthew Vassar was born in England. He moved to the United States and made his money in Poughkeepsie brewing beer. Poughkeepsie is an Indian name that means place by the water and it was an ideal location for a brewery. Matthew had a cousin who endowed a hospital in England, and he decided that he wanted to do something like that. So he founded a women's college in 1861 to give a liberal arts education to women. "Matthew Vassar's purpose was to offer women a liberal arts education equal to that of the best men's colleges of the day," it says in the Vassar 1993/

94 catalog. Matthew hired Maria Mitchell, an outstanding woman astronomer, to enhance Vassar's reputation. In 1969, Yale wanted Vassar to come to New Haven, but Vassar decided to go coed and to keep its current location. Now, there are the same number of women (1400) as when Vassar went coed and almost as many men.

ATG: Where did you go to college and library school?

Betty O: I have a Bachelors in Literature from Antioch College and a Masters in Library Science from Columbia University. When I was in library school I worked as a research

assistant to the director of Columbia Libraries. I suggested quarterly meetings for department heads. The division heads were all men and the only women in the library administrative structure were department heads and I thought they should be more involved in the library operation. The director took my suggestion and started having department head meetings. I also initiated a program to cut down on missing books. I went to library school because I wanted to do something with a significant purpose that was also intellectual. I have tried to keep up my coursework and have taken courses at Vassar on philosophy, political science, literature and art history.

ATG: Where were you born?

Betty O: I was born in West Orange, New Jersey and New Yorkers

always make fun of that. I got married as an undergraduate and my husband Sevgin got a job in New York with IBM. Our son Feza was born. He is grown up now and is married. He got his bachelors in computer science from Brandeis and his Masters in Public Administration. He is CFO for the Patriots' Trail Girl Scout Council, Boston. He is also a photographer for Bachrach Studios.

Back when he was born there was really no child care and having a career was frustrating if not impossible. I feel that I have been playing "catch up" because of all that. The Charleston Conference has helped me. Charleston has shown me the way. I was able to avert the serials crisis which was coming to Vassar because of what I learned there.

ATG: Where did you meet your husband?

Betty O: I met Sevgin at Antioch College. There was a Sadie Hawkins Day like in the comic strip 'Lil Abner' and the women were supposed to ask the men out but Sevgin called me up and asked me out. I was teaching canoeing and tennis and folk dancing and I had been teaching Sevgin to folk dance.

Sevgin is Turkish and we were planning on going to Turkey to live. I figured I could be a librarian in Turkey. You know, have library card, will travel. I studied Turkish and even Ottoman Turkish. I figured that a knowledge of Ottoman Turkish would assure me a job since Turkey had moved to the Roman script but there were still many records in the Arabic script of Ottoman Turkish. And here I am at Vassar. Sevgin got a job at IBM and we ended up here.

We plan to go to Turkey in June for a meeting that Sevgin is coordinating. I am really looking forward to it.

ATG: So you like to travel?

Betty O: Yes. I took an Arts of Japan course in 1984 and went to Japan in 1984 and 1988. I went to the Soviet Union in 1988 for a course sponsored by Vassar. I have been to Turkey 4

times to visit family there. Sevgin has sisters with husbands and children and lots of cousins and aunts over there.

As life would have it, I first went to Turkey in 1975 after Sevgin and I had been married over 17 years so I guess his family was stuck with me. They had to accept me.

Sevgin has his private pilot's license and we have traveled by single engine plane all over the United States and Canada. We have been to Nova Scotia and Alaska, all the way to Nome and the Arctic Circle. One year we flew to the Charleston Conference. And we go to Oshkosh, Wisconsin, when we can. That's a convention of pilots and others where we talk about building planes and flying them. I like to fly. It gives you a whole new perspective. The airport is a huge camp ground and everyone camps out on the grounds in their tents. When the planes fly in, there is no radar or anything, they just tip their wings at each other. There were even Harrier jets from England. One year there was a tornado threat and everyone was nervous but it veered off to the North, thank goodness.

ATG: Tell us about your jobs at Vassar.

Betty O: I got this position in October 1986. For three years I did serials and documents half time and was a half time associate in the director's office, doing things like surveying personnel needs. As Head Acquisitions Librarian I am responsible for acquisitions, collection development, serials, documents and gifts. I became Head Acquisitions Librarian in October and I went to ALA June of 1987. I met **Ed Lockman** who was then with Book House, and he told me that I should go to the Charleston Conference. I have been in Acquisitions 7 years and I have been to 6 Charleston Conferences. It has been an inspiration and a real eye opener to the acquisitions and serials business. I have worked on RFPs for automated systems, set up and trained staff on the selected system INNOPAC, and have been through a comprehensive serials review. Under the leadership of a new director, I am working on the development of the electronic library, additional approval plans, setting up a liaison program for faculty, and assuming increasing responsibility in collection development. I look at the collection as a whole

and pay attention to student needs as well as faculty needs. The drama changes from one year to the next.

ATG: What's life in the acquisitions department like at Vassar?

Betty O: We have a materials budget of one million dollars plus. Half of it is endowment and is earmarked for specific subject areas. We have just moved our acquisitions area around and we have nearly doubled our space. We have added a half time person. We have a very flexible, autonomous structure which is under development even as we speak. We probably have more questions than answers. In our collection development statement we have a 60% cap on journals expenditures, but why? Where do document delivery services fit into our structure? We have a document delivery budget under the reference department. We are still developing policies. Where does document delivery fit in? Who should pay for it? I agree that it should not come out of the acquisitions budget. These are items that the library will keep and will be added to our permanent collections. We are all working through these issues. The waters are muddy.

ATG: Tell us about the acquisitions staff.

Betty O: We have eight people who work in the Acquisitions Department. There are two librarians counting myself. **Christine Fitchett** is the serials and documents librarian and she is currently gearing up to go to NASIG. **Jean Vanek** is our walking serials encyclopedia; she oversees serials check in, student overuses, and our binding prep. **Mindy Howe** works with gifts and also does monographs ordering and processing. **Jean Strom** takes care of paying all the bills and keeps a steady eye on the finances. **Greta Davey** is our coordinator of monograph ordering. **Priscilla Kolson** is our half time documents person as well as **Mary Beth Will** who has recently joined us from the Cataloging Department to help with U.S. documents. We are a selective federal depository and take 20-24% of the federal documents. When Vassar first became a selective depository in 1943 all documents were cataloged. Now, however, for many years, the collection

has been split with some titles cataloged and the majority, including all the microfiche, housed in a separate SuDoc collection. We bind all materials. We have the INNOPAC system and are very pleased with it. Last but not least, we have **Veronica Kendrick** who is a temporary worker taking the place of **Susan D'Angelo** who is on maternity leave. **Veronica** does a little of everything — serials, monographs, and even secretarial. We have 10 student workers who put a total of 100 hours per week in the Acquisitions Department.

ATG: If you could change one thing about acquisitions or collection development what would it be?

Betty O: I think it would be for our profession to have more recognition. We're doing something about it, I know, and it's changing rapidly. It's just that thing called "status."

ATG: Do you have any humorous anecdotes about your job?

Betty O: I remember how I became full time at Vassar in July and there was a meeting of the Eastern New York ACRL chapter at Vassar in September and it was on "Electronic Services in Libraries." The Head of User Services who was coordinating the meeting became ill and could not do it so I was put in charge. I had to coordinate all the eating arrangements and registration as well as set up PCs and phone lines. There were over 300 people coming and Vassar was not at all automated back then the way we are now. I took my trusty screwdriver and lots of materials from Radio Shack and hooked up modems and phone jacks. I remember the nightmare of the red, black, green, and yellow phone lines. Luckily everything worked for a day and then it had to all be put back the way it had been. It was a quick christening to full time library life and work.

Whew! That as they say, is that. There was obviously a lot more to talk to Betty about, but time and space run out . . . We'll have to save the questions when next we see Betty, hopefully at the 1993 Charleston Conference if not before. In the meantime let's be happy to have a colleague like **Betty Oktay**. We love you, Betty, oh yes we do! ☺