

Interviews with Laura Meyer,
35-year children's librarian
for Seattle Public Library



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by Casey McNerthney

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by Clay Eals

Excerpts from Casey McNerthney interview of Laura Meyer, September 1998

[Storytelling for] I guess 28 years. Lake City Library was my first library, but I had done some storytelling before that. I used to work in summer Bible schools, and my first puppet show was the story about in the Bible where Jesus says the disciples will be fishers of men done with potatoes as puppets. I was probably about 11 or 12. [When started at Lake City Library] I was 22. It opened in 1965 and I didn't come until 1969, but it was still pretty new.

I usually do stories and puppets and short film, but yeah, it's still called the Story Time. I was usually doing just preschool ones at that time, but once a month we had a big extravagant puppet show with two puppeteers, and we did a really fancy thing. We used to, on some Saturdays, have up to 400 kids here, which was really big. We don't usually get that many kids now. I see.

In the past sometimes we had two children's librarians here, and we used to switch off doing Story Times or tell stories together. Or for big ones like Halloween, one would tell one story and then the other one would tell a story and then the other one would tell a story and we'd switch off. And we had two people to do puppet shows then so we could do more elaborate puppet shows with more props and more characters and stuff.

I think the biggest puppet show I was ever in was The Wizard of Oz. We had the Flying Monkeys and Toto and Dorothy and the Wicked Witch, and I was the Cowardly Lion and the Scarecrow and Toto. That was down at Green Lake Library and we did it at Green Lake Northeast, Lake City, Henry Branch. We did it at five different libraries. It was right around 1980 probably.

I have probably about 10 puppet shows that I have all the puppets for and I know all the lines and I can just kind of pull them out and do them. And I sometimes in the last few years have gotten together with somebody else to do puppet shows but it's harder to get the time now, there just aren't enough staff people.

We're so busy and we don't have enough staff people to pull people out of one place to get together and do puppet shows very much. It's really neat to do that, but it just doesn't work as well now. We don't have as many people.

The ones that I'm doing right here are the family Story Times, so we get kids from about 3 years old up through, I'd say some of those kids are probably at least 10. And there are sometimes big brothers and sisters that come, even older than that, and a lot of parents come to the show, too. And I am getting second-generation kids now. There were little kids in my Story Times years ago, and now they're bringing their own children, and I think that's really neat.

[Became a librarian in 1969] when I finished at the University of Washington with my master's in librarianship. Before I got my master's, I majored in history because I love history. My master's was in librarianship with a specialty in children's. And I took puppetry and storytelling and creative dramatics and a lot of things that I knew would tie right in with what I wanted to do here.

[Knew what I wanted to do] when I was in junior high school. A teacher gave us an assignment that we had to go and interview somebody in a job that we thought we might want to do someday. And one of the nicest people that I knew besides my own parents was the librarian at the local public library. And I went and interviewed her and I wrote down all the details about how she got her degree and the kinds of things she did as a librarian. And it was about that time that I decided yes, I wanted to be a librarian.

That was at a little tiny community library in Mammoth Hot Springs in Yellowstone National Park. I grew up in national parks. My dad was a naturalist, and I grew up in national parks. Seattle is where both my parents had finished college. They were out here, and most of our relatives lived in Seattle. My parents really wanted me to come to the University of Washington.

[How kids react.] Let's say they really, really, really like puppets. It depends on the circumstance. Sometimes kids will sit still for stories, and some kids have either so much energy or they've never had parents reading to them that they can't sit very well for stories. When I go to parks and have done things at Seattle Center and some of those places, sometimes the kids are so restless they won't sit for stories. But almost every kid and even adults are drawn to puppets. Stories are wonderful, but there are some kids that just don't, that isn't their thing. But puppets, almost everybody is drawn to puppets.

I've had a lot of parents over the years come and tell me that they were inspired to read to their kids because they used to come to my Story Times when I would read stories to them. And they decided they had to give that same thing to their own children. And so they were inspired to read to their children even from when they were babies. And then as soon as they could, they brought their children to Story Times. That makes me feel good.

I'm not intending to retire right away. I'll actually have 30 years with the city in 1999. But I doubt that I'm going to want to retire by then. I like it very much. This is a job that I went into because I loved it, and I still love it. It speaks well for the job when you can love it that many years.

At this branch, we have family Story Times on Tuesday nights at 7 o'clock. And preschool Story Times have been Thursday nights at 7 o'clock. I'm not sure after the first of the year. We don't do Story Times in December because people get so busy at Christmastime. So we take one month off and start again in January.

We tried afternoon once, but so many parents work in the afternoon here, and we didn't get very good luck in the afternoon. Evening ones work better because that's when working parents can come.

Favorite things that have happened over the years? Well, some of the favorite things were learning how to do puppets. I was working with a children's librarian who was very, very, very good with puppets. And she taught me most of what I know about puppets. Her name is Carol Dagg, and she works for Everett now. She was just a wonderful puppeteer, and she taught me most of what I learned about it. It was terrific learning that kind of thing. She was at Lake City with me. So she was my direct boss and she taught me an awful lot.

I remember once doing a Story Time where I used a very sad story, which I don't tend to use now. It was called "Once There Were No Pandas," about a little girl who sacrifices her life to save a baby panda. And the whole place was crying, every kid and everybody was crying. I was thinking, this is such a beautiful story, but it's so sad to see all the kids crying. Yet they liked the story. Even though they were crying about the little girl, they still liked the story.

I remember I used to love sad books when I was a kid. My mom used to read me stories about dogs that died and things, and yet I loved them. I'd sit there and cry, but I loved the stories. I usually do more happy ones than that, but that was kind of a memorable day.

[In a usual Story Time, I start off with] puppets, I do that little get up and stretch finger play type thing. I usually do a film with it. When I came back to Lake City after I had been gone, the librarian who had been here was doing movies a lot with the kids, and they liked it so much that I decided I better learn how to do movies, too.

The day I went to learn how to use the projector, the film got stuck, and it started burning, and there was smoke coming out of the projector. They kept telling me, that can't happen, it can't get stuck like that. That was a memorable time.

Excerpts of Clay Eals interview with Laura Meyer, Jan. 14, 2025

I started when I was 22, and I thought that was kind of young to retire. My husband was an engineer, and he never went back to Boeing after that big layoff. He worked for small companies, generally, who make huge amounts of money. But he had a self-directed retirement type thing, and he was very good about putting money into that. And I was dumping money into whatever I could. They had something called deferred compensation, which I was able to take advantage of at Seattle Public Library. That was a good thing, but you had to stay with it. Library hopping, that wasn't a good plan either.

[Out of 35 years, I was at Lake City] probably at least 25 other years, I suppose, if you tried to add them together. [Other libraries were] Capitol Hill, Green Lake. And when we went to a Sunday system, for years they didn't have Sunday openings, except Downtown Library finally started it. And on the Sunday system, we really got shipped around between branches.

[At one time worked five branches at once.] That was really the no-go. But at one time they decided that just shipping us around to libraries within our region wasn't enough to make us well-rounded librarians. So, I ended up for quite a period of time being split between Lake City and Rainier Beach Branch Library. Just driving between one to the other was really bad. There were days, literally, when I would have Lake City in the morning and Rainier Beach in the afternoon. You know Seattle traffic.

Some of the big bosses did not believe in continuity. It's hard on the staff. It's hard on the community. It's even hard on the kids.

[At 22], I got my master's at that time, in librarianship. I had majored in history. When I was looking at majors, my parents really wanted me to go to the University of Washington even though at that time my dad was assistant regional director for the National Park Service in Omaha. And, I didn't want to go to school in Omaha. As my mom said, if you start in Nebraska, you'll probably end up marrying a farmer and staying in Nebraska, which was probably oversimplifying completely. But in a way, she was right because I'd been moved enough as a child. I didn't want to keep moving. I wanted to go someplace and stay.

So I looked at majors and I thought, well, my dad, being a National Park Service naturalist, he loved science. My mom had been a math teacher and a math major at Boeing. You've seen the movie "Hidden Figures." She was one of their Hidden Figures people at Boeing in World War II.

They didn't talk about it in those days. They weren't allowed to. Anyway, she lived in the wind tunnel during World War II in top-secret stuff. Both of them had graduated from the University of Washington, and they really wanted me to go there.

I was thinking it would be exciting to go back to California because I loved Yosemite. By that time, I'd lived there my first three years and then six more years later. And, my brother had graduated from the University of California at Berkeley. I thought that would be really great. But most of the family was in the Seattle area, so they said, okay, go ahead and apply there if you want. And, I did. I applied there and I applied to UW. I was looking at majors and I thought, most librarians at that time seemed to be English majors. It just kind of came with the territory.

I thought, I don't want to be an English major. I mean, I love reading. But sitting there analyzing books and having to say, oh, this character is important because of these deep psychological things, was not my cup of tea, really. So I thought, I love history. Every time we moved to a new park, my dad would immediately immerse himself in the history of the park, and he encouraged me to read all of that, too. I read a lot when I was a kid. So, I thought, okay, I'm going to be a history major.

And, I applied to UCAL Berkeley and to the University of Washington. Got this lovely letter from UCAL saying, "We have already filled our quota of out-of-state students for this year. But, you have great qualifications," and I had told them I wanted to be a librarian and I needed a place with a library school. [They said] we're submitting your application to UCLA. And, I thought, I've been to LA and I did not want to be in LA. So, I wrote back and I said, that's very nice of you, but thank you anyway.

I was glad I went to the University of Washington when I got up there. I was only 17 and desperately lonely when I first got there. Having relatives around to be kind of support was really helpful.

When I was first deciding to become a librarian, I was living in Yellowstone. Well, I read all the time in Yosemite too. There was a little teeny library there in Yosemite. It was a situation where they only allowed children to check out five books at a time. And, it was only open Wednesday nights and Saturday afternoons. So, I would go in Wednesday night and check out five books I'd have read by Thursday. And, I'd go in on Saturday and I'd have read by Sunday. Finally the librarian took pity on me and started letting me check out more books than that. I'd read the whole children's section there in that library by the time I was fourth grade.

So I was reading Agatha Christie and Zane Grey. My dad loved Zane Grey. So when we went to Yellowstone, I was so delighted. It was still a tiny little library there in Yellowstone. But, it was a different library with different books. I had never really gotten introduced to Dr. Seuss because they didn't really have a lot of Dr. Seuss books in Yosemite Library. And here they had this collection of Dr. Seuss books in the one in Yellowstone. Plus, I was reading things like "Les Misérables" and things like that. I was a very eclectic reader.

But, we had an assignment in a class I was in, General Business. The teacher told us to go and interview somebody in an occupation that we thought we might want to go into. One of the nicest people I knew was my librarian there in the little library there in the hot springs. So I went with this long questionnaire about what do you have to take in school, how much do you get paid, all that kind of thing. And, I went through that with her, and I decided that's for me. I'm going to become a librarian. That was ninth grade.

[I knew I wanted to be a children's librarian because] I was babysitting a lot. My mom used to be one of the ones in charge of the summer Bible school at our church. And, she taught Sunday school and that kind of thing. She got me involved in being one of the helpers, and I learned a lot about storytelling from her. She was really, really a wonderful storyteller.

So I knew I wanted to be a children's librarian. And, at the University of Washington, I took dramatics. I took creative dramatics. Those are two different things, really. But, I took children's literature classes. Those were mainly graduate ones, but I took all that I could of those. I took puppetry. I had Aurora Valentinetti. She was very famous from the University of Washington as a puppeteer. I took one class from her. To go on in puppetry, you had to be involved in going to be a professional puppeteer. I was not really intending at that point to become a professional puppeteer. I really wanted to become a librarian. So I didn't take anything except that one class. I didn't take any more from her.

At that time, puppetry was very approved of as far as something to do all over the United States. It was really becoming a big thing in librarianship. So it was a wonderful time for me to get involved in it. When I went to Lake City, there was a wonderful lady, Carol Dagg, who went on to work for Everett Public Library and who loved puppets. Absolutely loved puppets. She and I started doing these big, extravagant puppet shows at Lake City and attracting quite an audience. She was very experienced at puppetry already. So I as a newbie came in and learned so much from her. It was just a terrific time.

Then she got pregnant, and, they had a prejudice against pregnant women working in the library. Literally, they would get forced out of the library. That's one of the reasons we ended up unionizing in the library. It was the way that women were treated. Not just in that, but there were other things, too, going on.

[Librarians were primarily women.] That's true. But, the administrators were predominantly men, old-school men. Just like in the old days, when teachers got pregnant, they were discriminated against, well, librarians had some of the same thing going on.

I didn't [have kids]. But, literally, in my first interview, my interviewer, who happened to be a woman but an older woman, asked me was I intending to get pregnant, because several of the children's librarians recently had gotten pregnant and had to quit Seattle Public Library. I said, well, from what I've been reading in the field, you have to at least get five years under your belt if you're going to be leaving to have children and come back. So, she said, well, what are you doing to keep from having kids now? They never ask that kind of a thing now.

That was an interesting time. We had talked about waiting to have children. My husband, at that time, was under the whole Boeing layoff situation, had gone back to school to get another degree. It just was not a good financial time. And we were trying to buy a home. We didn't lose our home. A lot of people did, in the Boeing layoff thing. But, he'd been making twice as much as I was making as a beginning librarian. Believe it or not, my beginning salary at Seattle Public Library was \$6,800 a year. And, that was with a master's required. And, my husband was making twice that with just a bachelor's.

[Kids at the library] They were my kids, and it kind of fulfilled my motherly instincts, that kind of thing. We eventually talked about it when things got better and my husband was working again and that kind of thing. But we finally decided, no, we were just going to go without kids. So, we never really went for it. And, there are other children's librarians who did the same thing, that decided not to have their own kids.

[Problems with library kids?] Sometimes the discipline problems were a challenge. Those were the days still of being quiet in the library. They laugh about it with Nancy Pearl, you know, her action figure and shushing. But that was definitely the days when you were supposed to be very quiet. That was hard for me because kids are kids, and sometimes they make noise. I can remember one of my fellow librarians who was not a children's person, who came over to me one day because there was a mother who had several children, and her baby in her arms was fussing a bit. Not screaming, but fussing. And, she came over and she says, you've got to ask them to leave. And, I said, I'm not going to do that. It was kind of tense there. That was hard for me.

[Interaction is important.] Right. I had been a book lover all my life. My mom read to me. My big brother read to me. My dad read to me. And, so I was a huge proponent of reading and of books. And I think because I knew books so well, so many books, I could find a book for almost every kid. I really, really had a passion for turning them on to books and reading. Since I had grown up loving books and loving reading, I think that really helped.

I was very shy when I was a kid, and my mom was determined that I was not going to remain shy. She was a good organizer and a good communicator, that kind of thing. My dad was, too. So they offered this speech class in Montana, right outside Yellowstone Park. She said, you're going to take that class. I didn't want to, but she got me into that class anyway. And, it was a terrific thing. I mean, I was in there with the stars of the school basketball team, you know, and so on. People that I normally didn't associate with. I found out they were terrified to get up in front of a group, and I was terrified to get up in front of a group.

By the end of that year of taking speech, it was so different, getting to know other people in a way that I had not before that. I found out that we all had fears of this kind of thing. I guess that's one of the most common fears of a lot of people is getting up in front of other people.

When I finally learned more about that, like when I went to the University of Washington, I ran for their residence hall council and became an officer in that. And I really learned much about communication and about getting up in front of people and being confident to get up in front of people. And that really helped then as a children's librarian.

What made me nervous was adults sometimes, because to get up and do my finger plays and activities in front of adults is much harder for me than to do it with kids. With kids, it was just a natural thing. If they'd get restless, I'd just start into some of these activity things. It's a whole different vibe when you're sitting there looking at a room full of adults.

They used to send me out to talk to adult groups, too. One time I was with a group, parents of mentally challenged children. They weren't all mentally retarded. I think some were probably autistic, that kind of thing. But they wanted me to go and talk to this group, and there were a few children there. Not all of them had brought their children. But, they were sitting there, kind of skeptical that this children's librarian is going to come talk to them. And, so I did some storytelling with them. And I talked to them about my experiences. Then they started smiling and warming up. And then I had them. But, it's harder with adults. It really is.

So many children want to be talked to as equals, I guess you'd say, with respect to finding out what they need, what they want, rather than giving them what's good for them. Which was, for so many years, kind of the mainstay in children's. You find out all the grand books in library school, and to get the kids to read those, that is your goal. I'm too lowbrow for that.

At one point, I was asked, if you have a fourth grader come in and he won't read, what would you do? I said, well, I'd see if he likes Captain Underpants. And they were scandalized.

I was doing things like reading "Sylvester and the Magic Pebbles." That one has been censored a lot. Because, Stieg, who was a political cartoonist before he did children's books, he chose to put the policemen in the book as pigs, so there was huge controversy. But I love that book, so I used that book in storytelling. I wasn't following always the conservative path.

I loved "Where the Wild Things Are." That was controversial, believe it or not. Oh, yeah. I love Dr. Seuss. Some people found him controversial. I didn't actually use Bernstein Bears when I was doing my Story Times. But a lot of people said, oh, those are grocery-store books. They're only good for selling in the grocery store. But, they were so helpful for a lot of children. Because the Bernstein Bears books dealt with all kinds of different problems of childhood.

I tended to go for things that I thought really spoke to children. One book that I really like was called "I Didn't Want to Be Nice." I don't think it was ever censored for anything. But it was about a squirrel that goes to a fellow squirrel's birthday party. She wants to grab her gift back when she gives the gift to the other squirrel child, because it's a nice gift, and she doesn't want to give it away. The other squirrel tears the ribbon off, and she thinks, oh, this is terrible. She wants to take the ribbon home. To me, that's so much what a child is.

That's the kind of books that I was often using. I had another one where a little nasty prince that puts four spiders in the chicken noodle soup at one point in the story gets turned into a dragon by a witch because he throws a snowball at her, and she turns into a dragon. "Prince Bertram the Bad" by Arnold Lobell. That kind of thing I really liked.

I remember I did "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day." I had a dad come up to me, and he says, there are enough bad things in this world. You shouldn't read a book like that to children. But it's so real. The emotions in that book are so, so universal and so real.

Oftentimes, I'd be looking for books that spoke to me in a way that I thought, okay, this is something that's real and universal.

There were a lot of very satisfying parts to [my career], especially interacting with children and with adults, too. I also ended up doing a lot of reference work. As our staff shrank because of budget cuts over the years, they had us doing more and more just reference work with people.

When we lived in Yellowstone, I'd run out of books from the little library there. My dad had bought me World Book Encyclopedia, and, I'd go and read the encyclopedia for fun. I got a lot of good information out of it. And it really helped when you come to college entrance exams and stuff like that.

But I loved doing reference work, too. It gives it curiosity and a satisfaction when you find something that somebody needs. When kids were looking for stuff for school, I knew about school assignments and how hard they'd be, so I really identified with kids and finding stuff for them.

We moved down here [to Vancouver] in 2007. I do go up [to Seattle] about one weekend a month. Once in a while, I run into people down here that knew me in Seattle. But if I went to the store up there, I'd hear from across the store, That's my librarian! My husband used to laugh. When we visited in Mexico on the plane, on the way back from Mexico City, some people came up and they said, You're our librarian. And in the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., You're our librarian.

A lot of them would talk about puppets and loving my puppet shows. And, why? There's a special magic connection between the puppeteer and the children watching a puppet show. You can't hardly duplicate it. I mean, in storytelling, yes, you have a connection, a direct emotional connection with the children. But, puppets just have a special, special time.

My husband liked puppets, and he used to carry the [newspaper clipping] about "Laura's Day" around with him. Any excuse, he'd drag it out and say, Look at this, look at this. I can remember him making friends with a little child that lived in our community who was very, very shy. My husband took one of my puppets and went and talked to this little boy with a puppet on his hand, and, the little boy would just chatter away to the puppet. He was very shy with adults. But the puppet wasn't an adult. The puppet, to him, was a person. And, when my husband had this teddy bear puppet on his hand, this little boy would just blossom. There's something very special about puppets.

I don't know all the reasons that children relate that well to puppets, but they do. It's just a little magical thing. And I found it very satisfying to take a story and create it into a puppet show. I'm not a huge crafty person as far as being able to sew well and some of that. But I would write puppet shows, usually with folktales. And, I would take a folktale, and I'd try to imagine, okay, from what point of view do I want this to be? How do I present the emotions in the story? It was very satisfying, that aspect. And a lot of people appreciated the whole puppet aspect.

I remember when Sesame Street first came out and thinking they are communicating so well with the puppetry on there. And, Sesame Street is still around. It's not the same, but it's still around. And, Mr. Rogers used puppets to great effect.

When I was first dating my husband, he was working his way through the University of Washington. When he was in the Air Force, his dad had gotten cancer. Had a long, long battle with cancer and wiped out the family finances. And he'd been sending home his pay from the Air Force to help with that. And he was determined to get through the University of Washington. And he just had no money, that kind of thing. So he was working hard, and he was trying to date me. A big date was McDonald's. You know, going to McDonald's hamburgers because he just didn't have any money.

There were two flower shops on The Ave. He used to go down there and see that they always had this little bowl of flowers at both shops. If they broke a flower when they were making an arrangement, they would put the flower in that bowl. And then they would sell them for like a dime. So he started buying flowers for me and bringing them, and I'd wear them in my hair.

I was working at the University of Washington Library at the time in government documents, and he'd come in with a flower for me, which was so sweet. It kind of became my trademark. If I'd try to go someplace and forget my flower, he'd say, you're going out naked. Even after we got married, and times were hard when he was laid off, and I was making so little, he'd still get flowers for me. If we lived in a place where we could, we'd buy flowers. We'd grow flowers, too. We grew roses. We grew daisies. Whatever kind of a flower. And the kids would come in and they'd say, where's the lady with the flower?