Margaret Beckman

In 1942 Margaret Beckman edged her way into a "boys only" physics class. Years later, when she tried to get a public library job she was turned down because employing married women was prohibited.

Then, pregnant with her first child, she "hid" in the basement of a university library in the early 1950s, cataloguing books because employees who became pregnant were supposed to be fired.

It was a humble beginning for the woman who would go on to become the chief librarian of the University of Guelph's McLaughlin Library in 1971. As the only woman heading up a university library in Ontario at the time, Beckman was a pioneer.

But the long-time Waterloo resident didn't rest on her considerable achievements. She went on to become an internationally renowned expert in library management, library automation and library building design.

Beckman was hired by the University of Guelph in 1966 as a documentation librarian. The university was building a new library at the time and they wanted it to be automated, so Beckman was asked to work with the architect.

"She firmly believed that a university library was for students, at a time when most librarians felt it was for librarians and students were a nuisance," said architect Stephen Langmead.

Remarkably, Beckman's push for automation was controversial at the time. Beckman, who was known for her determination, pursued her vision despite the critics who believed library automation was nothing more than an "expensive toy."

A newspaper article in 1975 points out that Beckman believed in the future of "network systems . . . when students seeking information in any library will query computer files and have instant printouts or screen display."

During her career she spoke and published widely, acting as a consultant in the design of libraries around the world. Beckman also acted as an official delegate to several UNESCO Library Building Conferences.

However, Beckman's roots in Waterloo are strong. She has lived in Uptown Waterloo for many years and as a young woman graduated from Waterloo College, a precursor to Wilfrid Laurier University, with a Bachelor of Arts in 1946.

After completing a Bachelor of Library Science from the University of Toronto, Beckman and her husband Art returned to Waterloo where they raised their three children. In the late 1950s, Beckman began cataloguing books for Waterloo College and

then the University of Waterloo when it was established. "I had just had my third baby. I had no thought of working, but they made it very attractive. So I worked from 7 to 11 at night in the basement of Williston Hall." She later worked in UW's Chemistry building and then became head of technical services.

She left University of Waterloo in 1966 and was hired by the University of Guelph where she thrived. After retiring from her academic position, Beckman continued her work as a library consultant with her company. In 1986 Beckman, who was born in Connecticut, became the first Canadian to win the coveted American Librarian of the Year.

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