

# AFSCME #88's Irwin turns the page on 46-year library career

Janet Irwin retired Oct. 31 after 46 years as a librarian for Multnomah County. At the same time, she also surrendered her seat on the Executive Board of the Northwest Oregon Labor Council, where she was the second most senior member.

Irwin has been a member of Multnomah County Employees AFSCME Local 88 for 26 years. Prior to that she was president and 20-year member of the independent Library Employees of Multnomah County. At that time, Portland-area libraries were privately operated by the Library Association of Portland, which received the bulk of its budget from public funds.

Irwin has been a librarian in the Rose City her entire working life. After earning a masters degree in library science from Western Michigan University she came out west in August 1970 to be closer to her parents in Seattle. But with no library jobs available there, she ventured down to Portland. In October 1970 the Library Association of Portland hired her as a temp to cover for a librarian on



Janet Irwin retired after a 46-year career at Multnomah County Library.

maternity leave at the Central Library downtown. She's been employed by the library system ever since.

In 1974, library employees voted to form an independent library staff association. Irwin, who was branch manager at the Belmont Library, was elected treasurer. In early 1978 she was promoted to head of circulation at Central Library. She remained in the union, but resigned as treasurer because of the added work responsibilities.

Irwin was at the bargaining table when the first union contract was ratified. Department and branch heads were no longer part of the union, but the contract had language allowing union members who had promoted to management to bump back into the union based on their union seniority. Irwin took that option.

The ensuing years were difficult for the union as it battled the Library Association and its directors over work and budget issues. It got so bad that employ-

ees struck for three days in 1980.

"I remember walking picket lines at both Central and Rockwood," Irwin said. "If I had remained a manager, I wouldn't have been able to strike."

Workplace strife settled down following the strike, but battles over funding continued.

In July 1990, Multnomah County took over the then 15-branch library system (there are now 22 branches), and the 350 employees were incorporated into Multnomah County Employees Local 88. [In November 2012, voters approved formation of the Multnomah County Library District to fund library services.]

"I worked very hard getting library workers involved in Local 88," said Irwin, who served as an elected vice president and secretary of Local 88, as well as a delegate to state and international AFSCME conventions. She once ran unsuccessfully for president.

In November 1995, Irwin was elected to the Executive Board of the Northwest Oregon Labor Council. As a Board member, she helped found the Council's

Labor History Committee.

Irwin completed her library career at Central Library as an Information Services Librarian, working with the Oregon collection, local history, and genealogy.

"I've always wanted to be a public librarian, and I've always loved going to work ... until recently," said Irwin, 69. "I was constantly tired. I was going to work in the dark, and coming home in the dark. Sometimes you just don't want to do it anymore," she said.

The oldest of nine children, Irwin was born in Vancouver, Wash., but spent the first few years of her life in a housing complex at McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary, where her father worked as a government employee. The Irwin family lived in several cities, including Milwaukie, Ore., before settling down in Port Huron, Mich. Irwin graduated from high school there, then moved 170 miles west to attend Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. By the time she graduated from college, her parents had been re-assigned to Seattle.



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