Profile: Tessa Nettleton
Director, Okotoks Public Library

How long have you been working in libraries?

I have been working in libraries since 1978! First as a library clerk in Cape Town, South Africa while I studied part time for my MLIS, and finally here in Canada in Okotoks as the Director of this extremely busy public library in one of the fastest growing rural communities in Canada.

What was your first job?

My first job WAS a library position and I was the Children's Librarian in a small inner city library in Cape Town. It was called Woodstock Public Library and was a branch of the Cape Town City Libraries at that time.

Describe your first library job.

This little public library served an impoverished multicultural population. It was not particularly busy and had a fairly poor selection of material of which the core was outdated and old. I spent a lot of my time mending and cleaning books in an effort to keep the collection usable. Our weekly new materials from Head Office numbered possibly 5-10 books for the whole library and there was just no money for anymore than that.

On occasion one of the elementary schools in the area would bring a class or two to the library for a tour and a short reading program. But for the most part it was not a busy library and did not really cater to the population it served. This happens a lot in big library systems where there is an hierarchical structure and the librarians have little say in either the collection, funding needs or the way the library is managed.
If you weren't a librarian/library worker, what would you be and why?

I would be a wildlife orphanage manager! There is a wildlife orphanage that my children and I would pop in to see every time (and that was every year for 4 years!) we spent weeks on road trip holidays in Southern Africa. The orphanage is just outside Bulawayo in Zimbabwe. I would love to work with animals in this capacity and as I get older (and less tolerant!) I probably should rather be doing something like that rather than dealing with the public! Just kidding!

What do you like best about your current job?

I love being the manager here and mentoring staff so that I know that they will go onto other positions in other libraries with the best possible grounding they could have in libraries. I have had lots of experience in mid to senior management levels....and I think that makes me the participatory style of manager that I am. I have seen what can happen and how frustrating it can be to work under a micro-manager type of boss or a boss that does not support and work alongside her/his staff. I like being able to make decisions that I know are beneficial, and being able to provide a welcoming and dynamic environment for both staff and public.

Describe your favorite conference experience.

I really enjoyed the camaraderie of the last PNLA conference in Missoula (2009) because it was a small conference and not particularly well attended and that meant that the networking opportunities were wonderful. The "corks and cans" social gathering that the PNLA committee hosted was wonderful and we met a lot of librarians from different backgrounds (academic, urban, government and rural) so the conversations were eclectic and interesting. The setting and the sessions were great too! Its lovely being able to travel to conferences - to see a bit of the continent while working is wonderful!

What do you do for fun?

I am an outdoor, active person so most of my "fun" things are outside activities like walking my dog everyday for a few kilometers, playing tennis and squash, road trips and travelling to anywhere, and cycling. I have just started doing cross country skiing so hopefully that will become my winter activity. I read a lot too- how unusual for librarians!

Name one person you admire, and explain why you admire them.

John Woods. I read his "Leaving Microsoft to change the world" long before it became THE book to read. He has built such a wonderful company based on so many simple philanthropic ideals - one can only revere folks who put themselves and their lifestyle on the line for others less fortunate then themselves. It is who you know (and obviously he has great financially viable connections) but it is also
the will that one has to want to make changes that benefit so many that makes his story and his path so admirable.

If you could say one thing to someone who is interested in a career in libraries, what would it be?

Libraries and librarians tend to under appreciated at all sorts of levels. The profession is not largely seen as one on a par with accountants, lawyers etc even though the period for study is similar. Bear with this ignorance and know that as a librarian you are probably the most knowledgeable and professional person anyone will ever meet. The multitasking and research ability that any librarian must be capable of - is mammoth. You are not JUST a librarian but a social worker, confidant, counsellor, friend, advisor, teacher, mother and archival worker to name but a few of the roles you will be playing! Not to mention being an organizational and administrative whizz kid! It is a wonderfully full and satisfying field to work within. Who else gets to go to work everyday and learn so many different things all the time, and enjoy it!

If you were stranded at the airport, what would you want to have with you to read, and why?

A murder/mystery novel from any of the milliard of writers that write in this genre, or a great travelogue from an author such as Bill Bryson or Paul Theroux!