



## Best Job in the World

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In August 2014, I was in Duluth, Minnesota - my home town. On one particular morning I was seated in a family lounge at St Mary's Hospital. I had just spent a long night at my father's bedside and both of my brothers and my sister had arrived to bring breakfast to me and to spend time with dad themselves.

One of dad's nurses came in to tell us we were free to return to his room if we liked. She began to make small talk and soon was asking questions:

"Had we grown up in Duluth?"

"Where did we live now?"

I left that conversation to them, content to sit off to the side with my own thoughts, my coffee, and the glazed cranberry-orange scone they had brought for me.

Before long though, the sound of my name pulled my attention from that scone as I heard my brother say, "Kitty's the one with the best job."

Then my sister followed up immediately with "Yeah. She's got *my* dream job!"

Both brothers nodded and looked at me.

The nurse looked at me.

Then my other brother threw in that it's his wife's dream job too.

I had just been awake for the entire night and this was a little much for me to take in. I narrowed my eyes a bit and continued to chew until someone said, "Well, tell her what you do Kitty".

They were all very enthusiastic and I may have rolled my eyes as I pulled them from that scone because I could see in the nurse's eyes that she was imagining the possibilities. She was looking at me and thinking, "What job could possibly be so cool that this quiet scone-obsessed person could even do?"

Her expectations were high and I didn't know exactly how to frame a response to honor such a build-up. So I swallowed and simply came out with it: "I'm a bookmobile librarian in Fairbanks, Alaska."

I could tell by her silence and *her* now-narrowed eyes that she was trying hard to find the cool in that. She looked from me to my siblings. They tried to help by informing her that my department had acquired a shiny new Extreme Arctic Bookmobile just the month before. It had HEAT!

She asked a few questions, nodded, said "oh" and returned to her own important work and the reason we were gathered in that lounge.

I know that understanding the cool of my job takes time; it can't be summed up in one sentence, a job description, or a quick look at its surface. But I'll give you a glimpse at the surface anyway so maybe you will understand.

Bookmobile and Homebound services are combined into one department at our library in Fairbanks. My co-worker Karen and I do it all using that Bookmobile. Our office is lined with shelves that are labelled with the names of each Homebound patron or each Saturday run and they are stacked with a variety of materials we've chosen and checked out for each.

The office is adjacent to the garage for easy access to the vehicle. My daughter has described us as superhero librarians along the lines of Batman. She imagines that we hear of a book-need out in the community, look at each other dramatically and say, "To the Bookmobile!" before jumping into our tricked-out arctic wheels to fill the pressing need vanquishing boredom and listlessness everywhere.

We work Tuesday through Saturday. On some weekdays, we load carts onto the vehicle with bags of books and other treasure to make individual door-to-door deliveries to Homebound people. On other days we set up mini-libraries in two State Housing Apartment buildings or visit our Pioneer Home, which is a State-run nursing home. We make door-to-door delivery there and also bring a bagful to the Activities Staff so they have something fresh to share with residents who can't use and acquire their own materials because of Alzheimer's or Dementia.

Between the weekday runs, we are often out pulling items from Noel Wien's full collection to deliver to patrons, stock those mini-libraries, and stock the Bookmobile itself for Saturdays when we drive it to outlying areas of our Borough.

To me, the preparations for those Saturday runs are like getting ready for a party. We clean and organize our space, fill it with things our guests will like, drive, park, and then sit back and wait for them to arrive looking for all the world like we have not lifted a finger to make it happen. We're glad to welcome them and they're always happy they came to our party.

One Saturday in Two Rivers, a patron stopped before leaving and observed, "your job must be a little like being a kindergarden teacher. I bet everyone loves you and is just excited to have you around."

We nodded, "Yup, that's a little bit how this is."

My co-worker at the time, Jeanie, considered and said, "Yeah, everybody loves us."

And I said, "Sometimes they bake for us!"

"And the older people call us *girls*," added Jeanie.

And sometimes when you're fifty—or older—it's nice to be a girl.

While the three of us still basked in the warm fuzziness of those thoughts, the door opened wide. A patron stood outside with a gift bag and a smile.

She held the gift out and said, "I'm so glad you're here. I don't know what I would do without library. I would have baked for you but my oven is broken. So have some candy instead." She then turned to the departing patron to say, "I just love these girls."

And that patron turned to us with a knowing wink before departing.

We've got a regular schedule for those Saturday runs. First Saturdays it's north on the Eliot Highway to Haystack Mountain. On the second, we drive northwest up to Becker Ridge before later moving down the hill to the Ester Post Office. Third Saturdays take us southeast past North Pole and Eielson Air Force Base to Salcha and then on the fourth it's east to Two Rivers or alternatively, Pleasant Valley, depending upon who you're talking to there.

Sometimes as we drive along on those Saturdays, I'll say to Karen, "Can you believe we get to do this?" because we see our part of Alaska in what I can only describe as a sort of time-lapsed photographic panorama. Each month, the lighting, the fully-leafed or fully-bared branches, the sky, the views of the distant mountains, the greens of leaves and grasses, the oranges and yellows as they change, and the whites and blues of snow are just a little different. We watch the seasons change over the same terrain month after month driving our regular routes.

On December 21, sunrise in Fairbanks is at 10:57 am. Sunset is 2:39pm. Our trip to Salcha is always very close to or even on that shortest day. The sun doesn't actually rise or set, it just slowly appears hovering along the horizon and coloring the sky with its glow and creating long shadows before disappearing again. We drive toward an ever-changing sky as the low-lying sun illuminates the Alaska Range that is sometimes visible in the southern distance. That time of year, tree branches are almost always frosted icy white and the sky displays various shades of periwinkle, blue, and violet. Shadows shift constantly. We stay for the two-hour stop and then drive back with the effects of the hovering sunset leading the way.

In Salcha, we currently park in the lot of a general store with convenient indoor plumbing. But when I first began on the Bookmobile, when we had the one without heat, we parked further down the road on a pull-out just off the highway. There was an outhouse there for our use. Oddly, I now miss that more remote spot.

One Saturday in summer we were parked there and a couple of German bike-riders who had just spent days riding the three hundred and twenty-five miles from Valdez were stunned to see our little library truck parked in what to them was the middle of absolutely nowhere. They browsed our shelves asking questions and saying over and over how unusual and wonderful it was to find such a library in the Alaska woods. Though I know there are mobile libraries in Europe, those two had never seen one and I'm sure they still talk about us today. I wonder if they ever think that I talk about them.

Each Saturday stop has its own character and Karen and I get to know the niche interests so that in addition to keeping a wide variety on the Bookmobile, we put items on that will appeal to those interests. Do-it yourself is very popular among our patrons; they want everything from raising poultry and pigs to building sheds and homes. For some stops, we are always on the watch for new crochet books. For others, knitting and sewing, aviation, the American Civil War, fashion, aliens, or art are the things that fly off the shelves. Gardening books are univer-sally popular as are those that speak of the harvest and food preservation at summer's end. And cookbooks. There are always cookbooks and we make sure there are books with recipes for any bakers who might be inspired by them to make something to share.

Maybe it's clear then that there are a quite few reasons on the surface why my siblings would have told that nurse that mine is the best and coolest job. Some are directly related to the fact I do it in what is literally the coolest state.

But for me, the bottom-line of why this is a fabulous job relates back to the reason we were gathered that morning in the hospital's lounge. It was a lounge on St. Mary's Palliative care floor and my dad was in the next room, and he was dying.

I had been traveling from Alaska to Duluth about four times each year for the previous three years to visit and help care for my aging parents. As they became more and more homebound, I drove for them to get them out of the house and I always brought books along to share.

One day after a home health aid had come, clipped dad's toenails, massaged his legs and gone, dad said a simple thing to me.

"It's nice if they look you in the eye." This one had not.

His plaintive comment stays with me and infuses meaning into the very simple things I'm privileged to do everyday. I don't just deliver books and library materials to people; I look them in the eye and have found that when I do, an old cliché rings true: I receive more than I can give.

I receive inspiration. The reality here is that I'm only twenty or thirty years behind some of the homebound folks I visit. The older I get, the faster it seems those twenty or thirty years will go. Some people simply inspire me with how they handle aging and the loss of their abilities with grace.

When I first began doing this five years ago, we delivered to a woman I recognized as a former library volunteer. She had been a presence in the library for years and I had seen her there as I walked through the building on my way to my job in the children's room. She always had a smile for me and I had one for her but we never spoke.

I was surprised to see her face in our round of deliveries. Her cabin was the final stop on the third Wednesday run. That first time, she smiled her hello from the hospital bed she now inhabited almost full time. It was the main piece of furniture in her living room and sat next to a large wood stove that welcomed us in winter. Two comfortable chairs were near it. We sat in them and I learned her name was Norma.

Norma had broad interests and we brought two full bags for her with books, audiobooks and DVDs from both fiction and non-fiction—science, travel, animals, mysteries, humor. There was a routine to this visit.

We would sit at her bedside chatting about the previous month's items, learning what she had liked and what memories had been triggered before the monthly unpacking-of-the-book-bags ritual began.

She liked us to unpack things one by one and would look at each item, delighting in it. Then she would set it down next to or even on top of herself and take the next item from our hands. When everything was unpacked, she was covered with what we had brought and always declined our offer to put things away.

She would spend the remaining afternoon looking it all over at her leisure and putting each item away at her own pace on the tables and shelves she kept near her bed.

Though her abilities were diminishing, Norma did what she could with what she had and though I know there were difficult days, she continued to smile and to reach out. She sewed when she could, making blankets to donate to a charity, and she read and sought to stay connected. She inspired me. I am seemingly far from that part of my life's road but I may get there someday and I'd like to be able to navigate it with such grace if I do.

I also receive moments of unexpected delight. I delivered books at our Pioneer Home to a man who turned 100 while I knew him. He passed away last year at 102—and a half. He was sharp and funny and appreciative. He liked ancient Greek and Roman history as well as Alaska history though he claimed he already knew most of that. His father had come to Alaska during the Klondike Gold Rush and he himself had been a rugged gold miner when he was a young man.

One day I went to his room and saw he had a very new, very large flat screen TV mounted on the wall. He and his young friend who was probably only like, 89, were sitting side by side in chairs in front of it. He got up to talk to me about his books and we began the monthly hunt around the room for his returns. When we finished, he sat back down next to his friend and I noticed that the two of them were playing a Wii game! They picked up their controllers and looked to me like two little six-year-old boys just playing their games. I decided not to worry about them rotting their minds with those games and quietly left thinking that when those guys were six-year-olds, they could not have even conceived of a Wii.

Once, I received an F-. Had it been written at the top of a paper it would have been a large slashing red letter. An elfish woman with a gravelly smoker's voice who had never been a coffee and cookies kind of a gal but had always been friendly and happy enough with our picks, opened her door to us one day, thrust the return bag into the hall and said, "Which one of you girls is pickin' these books?" Karen and I stood silent. We were almost completely inexperienced at responding to hostility. I thought about just pointing at Karen but then, thought better of it; it had been both of us and we would stand together and take it. What we figured out was that there had simply been an unfortunate misunderstanding about the fact that she had liked a particular Sandra Dallas book. Once we got it through our thick heads that she didn't want any more of them "EFF-IN women's books" all was right again and we steadily received better grades with only one or two D+'s showing up on future reports.

Some more welcome things I receive are expressions of gratitude. Lots of them. A visitor to the Ester Bookmobile says she feels like a rich woman as she leaves each month, her bags filled with new treasure. She calls on the phone to tell us again. Others tell us it's like Christmas every time we bring a bag to them and they unpack it. A Two Rivers family of four say that they go home from Bookmobile each month and sit for a couple of hours pouring over their books, deciding what to read or do first. One homebound man says he doesn't know what he could have possibly done to deserve this service and asks how he can make a donation to our library.

A homebound person's world can become so very small and we have the privilege of connecting them back to the larger one and sometimes even to the person they used to be.

One woman made a point of serving tea to us each month. She used her best teapot and arranged cookies on a beautiful plate. She no longer had much to dress for on any day but until the day she couldn't be, she was dressed and ready for us to take our places at her table so we could chat briefly about the books and about her very interesting history and about ourselves. It was obvious she valued not only the books but the opportunity to serve visitors in her tiny apartment home, to give back, doing what she could with what she had.

We visit a woman who is 86 and has lost her eyesight. She inspires me with her will to stay connected and with her courage. She brings moments of delight with the stories of her very interesting life of traveling, teaching, and raising a family. And she expresses her gratitude simply and directly saying that we have saved her life. She says it just about every month after we visit, pet her dog Sophie, and read the descriptions on the audio books we have chosen for her. Once as we were leaving, she ramped that sentiment up several notches by saying instead, "You keep me alive, you know."

Her husband stood by her side, nodding.

I was stunned but I laughed and told them that now when people ask what I do for a living, I'll just say "Oh me? I keep people alive."

It is a hyperbolic statement for sure. I do understand my limits and know that I cannot keep anyone alive. What I can do though and what I do, is help to keep them in life while they still live it. I do what I can with what I have.

One of the more difficult parts of this job is the fact that particularly our elderly patrons can, do and will die at a higher and more predictable rate than you will see in other departments.

One day they may lie in Palliative care. My hope is that they will have a nurse as skilled and loving as ours was when she cared for my father in his dying days. Her job was to usher him out with love and peace and to hold our family up as we gathered around him. But my job, arguably the best job, is to come in much earlier bearing library treasure.

We offer a necessary connection to life even when a world has been made small. We give a smile and a touch and establish important eye contact, a kind that can connect even with a person who is blind. It is contact that says, "Your heart still beats. Your mind still hungers, and we're here to fill that need."

**Kitty Berner** has worked at the Noel Wien Public Library in Fairbanks, Alaska for 17 years. Eleven were spent in Youth Services; the past six have been in Outreach with the Bookmobile. In the fall, 2016, she began work for her Master of Information Degree through Rutgers University, concentrating in Library and Information Science.