BECOMING A LIBRARIAN WAS NOT A NATURAL CHOICE OR PROCESS FOR ME. Sure, I've always enjoyed reading—I'm a natural at diving into a good story and not hearing the world whirring around me. And books have always been important to me—as a tween, I spent most of my babysitting money on the book clubs I belonged to. It was easier to buy books through the mail than to find someone to drive ten miles to the county library—and my elementary school did not have a library until long after I'd grown up and away.

One of the choices for a minor studies concentration in my undergrad teacher preparation major was library science. So I plunged in and became hooked on reading and collecting children's stories. I finally had to limit myself to buying only the Newbery Award winners, a top prize for the writing of children's fiction. At one point, I owned all but three of these books. And, although I no longer keep most of the children's books beyond those my husband and I read aloud, I do still buy many.

I had to laugh while reading Inkheart, a 2003 fantasy by Cornelia Funke (NY: The Chicken House/Scholastic). One of the characters in the story is an avid book collector—books line every room of her house, including the attic. It sounds a lot like my home. In the story, Meggie's father Mo speaks about Elinor's collecting: "But she'll probably end up poor as a church mouse because she spends so much money on books. I think she'd sell her soul to the devil without thinking twice if he offered her the right book for it [32]." Now, I am not going to go that far, but I don't always curb the desire to buy books. I suppose I could borrow them from the library?
YOU’VE ASKED HOW MY CAREER AS A LIBRARIAN HAD AN EFFECT ON OR INSPIRED PEOPLE. This is a really tough question to answer. I do hope I have had a positive effect on the students with whom I work, and I also hope I’ve had some effect on the faculty with whom I liaise. I have helped to brainstorm ideas for topics to use in the research and writing course and in others. But I didn’t really feel "inspirational" until I attended a health resources workshop the other day. I was talking with a colleague who needed an Italian translator for one of her patrons. Then I was speaking with another colleague who mentioned that her daughter is fluent in Italian. I was able to put the two women together to help solve the translation question. And that colleague exclaimed, "You always do this! You’re always able to match up the right people to solve a problem." Another colleague overheard this and started reminiscing about how I’d helped her with another situation. Little ripples, not tsunami-sized effects. But those, I think, are dear.

IN THE PAST FEW YEARS, I’VE HAD A LETTER TO THE EDITOR PUBLISHED IN A LOCAL NEWSPAPER. It dealt with the issue of discontinuing the position of librarian in some of our local elementary and middle schools. Did it have an impact? Well, it did encourage others to write to the editor.

I HAVE DEVELOPED A NUMBER OF WEB PAGES THAT I HOPE ARE BEING USED TO ASSIST STUDENTS IN THE HEALTH SCIENCES AND IN THE ENGLISH DIVISIONS NAVIGATE THROUGH THE MANY POSSIBLE PATHS OF RESEARCH TO FIND ANSWERS TO THEIR QUERIES. Often we speak about search strategies when we discuss research; I prefer to speak about finding strategies. No one wants to spend hours searching for information. The skills one develops in this area should be honed for finding, being able to think critically about what one finds, being able to evaluate the information for its usefulness, relevance, and veracity, and then to create something new from all of these pieces. One of the pages I have developed is related to women’s studies. Currently this page is imbedded in the Literature Research & Web Guide. But it covers more than literature. I am working to move this to its own page.
In this world of libraries, we try to remove obstacles from the paths of our students and the wider community. We no longer keep what we know under lock and key. Rather, we offer to share the finding secrets. Within the larger library community, I work on committees in our region and statewide that are pointed toward this goal. And I’ve been very involved in developing conferences and workshops for librarians to continue to discover how to help our patrons.

A way that I try to connect with future librarians is through the job shadowing program that has been operating for the past half dozen years through our statewide organization. In this program, graduate students from Rutgers and Drexel can spend a day or two following a librarian through her typical day. Most of the students who have taken part in the program have been women. I have been lucky enough to have had about ten shadows—including our own Amy Clark.

I will continue to be involved in regional and academic library communities. This year I am completing my final year as Chair of the statewide academic User Education Committee. Throughout my leadership in this committee, and with the Region’s Information Literacy committee, we have been working to develop better communications between academic, high school, and middle school librarians. We are all working toward the same end: to better the finding skills of our students.

I am also running for the position of Vice-Chair of the ACRL-NJ College & University Section of the New Jersey Library Association. One of our goals for this unit is to strengthen the communications among academic librarians across the State.

Karen Topham