

Altoona Area Public Library
Book Walk Oral History Project
Debra Appleby – September 6th, 2017

Josh – Okay, today is September 6th 2017, my name is Josh McConnell and I am interviewing Debra Appleby for an oral history about the 90th anniversary of the – opening of the library – actually the 90th anniversary of the library, but uh we’re talking about some of the history of the library. Do you want to say your name and age and tell us a little bit about your life today?

Debra –Yes, my name is Debbie Appleby. I’m 63 years old – retired in January from the VA hospital here in Altoona. Right now I volunteer at the Catholic School – St. Mike’s in Hollidaysburg three days a week, helping with the library there – the students’ library – and traveling, enjoying retirement.

Josh – Okay, so you do work at a library now.

Debra – Yeah – volunteer, yeah but I do.

Josh – That’s interesting. Okay, so on May 23rd 1969 about 500 9th grade students participated in the book walk that brought a large part of the library collection from the old Roosevelt building location to the new building on 5th Avenue and 17th Street. So you were one of those students. When did you first hear that you would be participating in this?

Debra – It was very last minute that I remember. I think it was a couple days prior. I remember being real excited, it was the end of the school year, work was winding down, and I was really excited about it.

Josh – Okay, so what were the attitudes of your fellow class members about being recruited for this? Were they excited to participate—or?

Debra – Yes, all of us were looking forward to it. For one thing you get a day out of school. (Laughs) That’s always a plus when you’re that age, but we had a lot of fun – a lot of fun.

Josh – I’ve read that each of you wore numbered arm bands, can you tell me a little bit about how things were organized?

Debra – You know that’s interesting, until that question came up I didn’t remember the numbered arm bands that I did, it’s like – you know – it gave me that recollection. It was, I think it was pretty well organized from a 9th grader’s view. When we came into the building – we walked across the building they had – I think there was no traffic on the road that day, they had it blocked off, because we were just marching back and forth and I don’t remember there being any cars.

Josh – Okay.

Debra – So, we just came across from Roosevelt and there were people at all the points in the building where we had to come in the door, where we went up the stairs, when we got to the top, where we went to. You know it was pretty well organized with library staff.

Josh – So, the library staff were positioned at each one of the entrances, like along the way to keep directing you?

Debra – Yeah, now that I'm an adult I assume they were keeping track of what number kid was coming in. Just so they kept track of the kids – you know – so we didn't just roam all over.

Josh – Were you all in like a long line?

Debra – Yes, we were in a line.

Josh – Okay.

Debra – And it – um – It was interesting, because now that I look back, even though it was really exciting to be doing it, if you loved reading it was really exciting, but we weren't socializing, which you would think you'd put a bunch of 9th graders together, they wouldn't be paying attention, but everyone was real serious about what we were doing. I think we understood that this was a big deal.

Josh – So it felt like it was a very important task that you were asked to do?

Debra – Very much, yes. I was real proud of it.

Josh – How many trips did you make?

Debra – You know, I don't remember, but I remember being really tired. (Laughs)

Josh – Yeah. (Laughs)

Debra – And my – I don't know how everyone else was directed, but my path was to come in and come up the stairs. So I came up those stairs which are over here.

Josh – So you were assigned a path.

Debra – Yes, that was – because I had to come in and come out and I had the nonfictions that go in the back, back here. That's what I was carrying. And there wasn't as many shelving set-ups –systems as there are now. And then there was a library person back there, there was multiple ones, but they took from—took them from you, and put them where they needed to be on shelf. But that was my path, I remember at the end of the day being tired.

Josh – So it was multiple trips, it wasn't like you just brought your books over and then you were done.

Debra – No.

Josh – You had to keep going back and forth.

Debra – I know I made multiple trips, yeah.

Josh – Okay. My next question is how long did the book walk take and you said it was a whole a day?

Debra – Yeah it was almost the whole day.

Josh – Wow.

Debra – Yeah it was almost the whole day.

Josh – So like, a whole school day, from the morning till—and you stopped for lunch?

Debra – They brought us lunch in line. We ate it out in the street in line. (Laughs)

Josh – Oh really? (Laughs)

Debra – Yeah, they brought us a bag lunch, I think it was from Winkey's, like the Winkey's –you're too young. There was a hamburger place—remember there were no McDonalds then or any of those kinds of places, so there was a hamburger place down—I don't know if it was 6th or 7th Avenue. It was—they were \$.10 hamburgers you went and got a Winkey burger, so they brought us a bag it was Winkey hamburger, french fries, and a drink. And I –that was a big deal in those days. I know this is hard to believe, because back then you didn't go out to eat. It wasn't like kids grew up eating take-out pizza, it was homemade momma made it, and maybe once a month you might go out to eat.

Josh – So it was like, a special thing?

Debra – Um hm, yeah and they came –it was a bag lunch they brought us. Yep. But we ate them outside—standing out by wherever that... (Laughs) (Gestures towards the street outside)

Josh – So what was the weather like that day?

Debra – You know I was trying to think about that, I know it wasn't hot, because I would remember that—you know if it was uncomfortable. Seems to me at one point it was dreary, but I don't remember the whole day.

Josh – But it didn't rain?

Debra – Not that I remember, I don't remember it being hot or a rain storm. That I think I would remember.

Josh – I think that would be—kind of ruin the whole thing, if it was raining while you were trying to get those books across.

Debra – Exactly. And maybe that's why they picked that day, because the weather was going to be decent.

Josh – So what were your first impressions of the new library?

Debra – Aw—it was huge and it smelled new. Again, this is hard for people now to understand but back then people didn't build homes. You bought preowned—you never were in new things in my world, nobody was in a new home or anything like that. You bought somebody else's home. It was just like everything was brand-spanking-new. Now this is going to sound weird, scents are big to me. I remember the smell of the building was new. Everywhere you went in building was new and fresh and bright—really big and bright. When I came up those stairs, those back stairs, the ones that I was assigned to—they had this great smell in them of new, I don't know what it is. In those stairs there is still one section where that still smells—for a brief – I can still smell them. When I go down I can tell you exactly where it is and I just came up them and it's still there, and I always take my grandkids—my kids when they were growing up—it's like, you know I used to walk books up here. Of course they don't care about the smell, but it just brings it back. There's just one section—there's like, I don't know what it is—like the

rubberized floor—the rubberized stairs—something in there is still the same, just in a short distance. It used to be overpowering. I think it was the rubber dye smell, but now it's just a tiny bit of it.

Josh – So you're talking about the stairwell on the side facing the mountain lion—facing the high school auditorium.

Debra – Correct. And of course none of that was there. The mountain lion wasn't there and it was the old high school, it was the Brownstone High School.

Josh – So, like from the outside what did you think of the library? It has a very unique architectural style.

Debra – It was real modern and unusual for this area.

Josh – Yeah.

Debra – It was really modern and unusual for this area. I don't remember thinking one way or the other about it.

Josh – I know you talked about the lunch that you were given as kind of a reward, but were there any other forms of rewards that you or your classmates were offered for the help?

Debra – I don't think so and you know what, I don't even think our parents knew we were chosen for it.

Josh – So it wasn't the entire 9th grade, it was just 500 chosen students?

Debra – Yeah. Yeah, I mean I don't know, it definitely wasn't everybody, but um—and it was at the end of the school year so maybe it was the classes that they had wound down. But, I don't remember any other rewards. I remember the lunch and getting out of school, those were rewards enough.

Josh – Yeah, do you remember which section of books you were responsible for?

Debra – Yes, I carried the nonfiction that go back here where you –you know all the way in the back. That's what I was carrying.

Josh – So was there any confusion, did anyone get out of place, not follow directions?

Debra – No, I think it was—I remember it being really organized and smooth and feeling like you weren't doing enough, because really all you were doing was carrying this little stack of books they gave you and then you went in and then you just went back and you wanted—you feel like you didn't do enough. I think everybody was just – probably when we did that we got out of order, we didn't stay in order, because depending on where you were taking the books out in the library.

Josh – But, it still seemed to work out okay at least from your perspective?

Debra – Yep, from a 9th grader's viewpoint it was very smooth.

Josh – You mentioned earlier that you saw the library staff standing at different checkpoints. Did you get to meet any of the library staff, besides just kind of standing around, did you see them doing any other tasks to help?

Debra – Yeah, I was trying to remember that. I think they were all really focused on this. The ones that were back here seemed much more serious about what was going on—which books you had, looking at

them carefully. And for all I know the checkpoint people were volunteers. I don't know if they were really library staff, you know? They would just say—like they would hold the door open for you, that kind of stuff. Make sure you were going where you were supposed to be going.

Josh – Probably back here you're talking behind us now would be the nonfiction section.

Debra – Yes, because I was assigned to take my books there and there were people back there that would take the books and make sure they put in based on their numbers. You know, where they belong.

Josh – So what do you remember about the Roosevelt location of the library?

Debra – Aw that was a nice library. I think it was on the third floor. Was it on the third? I think it was. I had never gone to Roosevelt until 9th grade because I went to Keith, but I loved to read. I shouldn't say this on tape, but my parents are dead. My parents never read to me, so it's—and it's an odd thing they say if your parents read to you, your kids will be readers. Well I was the one kid in my family that loved to read, but nobody ever read to me. Not that I recollect. So in school, in school I loved to read and then somebody somewhere told me there was a library and I was in probably in fourth grade until I found out there was a library in town. And it was open during the day—my mother worked during the day, so I would just stay home by myself with my sister during the day. Both parents worked.

Josh – You mean during the summer?

Debra – Yeah, during the summer. But they were open one evening a week, I think it was Thursday, I want to say it was Tuesday or Thursday. So I talked my mother into, so every week on that day she would take me there, now she parked right outside on 6th Avenue, you could park there then, there was parking on both sides. She would pull up on 6th Avenue and I would go into the library and she would just wait and you were allowed to get 10 books out at the time—that was the limit, so I would get my 10 out every week. (Laughs)

Josh – Wow.

Debra – And it was fun and the librarians there were great, and there were so many things—I'm going to start to get emotional. (Begins to cry) But there's so many things, I don't even know who they are—those librarians were, probably not around anymore. But, they introduced me to tons of stuff that I didn't know about, because I didn't have anybody in the family that did that. And I have since introduced to my kids and my grandkids and now to the kids at St. Michael's in Hollidaysburg. Yesterday we read *Mrs. Pigglewiggles*, that's what I read to them, which was a book that she introduced to me—she being whoever that librarian was—to the *Mrs. Pigglewiggles* books and years later I was able to find and buy them, so I have them at home, so I took them in yesterday and the kids love *Mrs. Pigglewiggles* and they want me to read another one of her next week when I come into that class, second grade that I do library with them.

Josh – That's quite a big effect—generational effect—it sounds like on your family.

Debra – More than that, one time I was—I would always just get fiction and she led me to good fiction and lots of it and it was fiction that is still classic today so she obviously was—she led me to this one book and it was a great book and it's still out there today and they remade tons of ones—not by the same author of course, it's the *Boxcar Children*.

Josh – Oh, okay.

Debra – But, I had read the original back then and then years later a school in the area was closing and they were selling these books and I got—so I have an original *Boxcar Children* book and I've read that to all my kids and grandkids. And it's interesting, the other thing she did was, she convinced me one time to – sort of guided me over to the autobiographies that they had for like young kids to read and there was Thomas Edison, I loved that one. And I found one that was on Louis Pasteur and it was fantastic. I probably got that out 10 times that summer. I read it all the time. I loved that one. And I loved that he was a scientist and he did all – well that's what I majored in college. Because of him or because of that book, because of that book, science just opened up to me and then I started looking into it and that's what I ended up going into. Then I was a director of a medical laboratory that did all the stuff that Louis Pasteur did. (Laughs)

Josh – Wow.

Debra – So, I can't say enough—I try to tell my kids and grandkids and they kind of get tired of hearing it, you have no idea where a book can lead you. (Begins to cry)

Josh – Yeah, and it's really hard to measure that effect.

Debra – Yep.

Josh – But libraries definitely do have that effect on people.

Debra – But, that librarian—or whoever those people were that worked the evening shift. Because you know, my mother just waited in the car. There was (Laughs)—nothing against her, that just wasn't her thing. Sorry. (Laughs)

Josh – So, the new library building was supposed to be state of the art for the time. Can you speak to any of the modern amenities that it offered?

Debra – Oh, wow. It was just so big and bright and airy. The other one was dark, wood work, and very dark, and small—it was cramped. This one was so bright and airy and – of course we still had the card catalog then, but – you know, do we still have the card catalog here? Is it still somewhere?

Josh – We have the boxes. They're more of like --

Debra – Just a historic thing.

Josh – Yeah.

Debra – Well, back in the day you would look them up and stuff. I'm trying to think about what it had. It had—the checkout was neat because it was just so big. And remember, even after we brought those measly number of books in, it was so huge—you could have had ballroom dancing in here there was so much extra room left. None of the second level had any books on it and I don't even think they had very many shelves up there—empty ones. I think that was just for future—and I remember actually thinking, they'll never get enough books to even fill what's on this floor's shelves, let alone up there. While now you guys have added so many shelves, so many sections.

Josh – Yeah, and we've actually cut back a significant amount that we used to have, because they were just old books they were not used—falling apart.

Debra – Yeah it was fun to watch it grow.

Josh – So how has the library changed since then? You kind of explained how the collection grew.

Debra – And computers of course. Also, being more of a community events place. Which I think is pretty typical of most libraries now. You have all the audio visuals that you didn't used to have. Expanded the periodicals from what they had back in the day—huge expansion on that. You know –fish – all the things that you want to come to the library—it exposes people and children to things that they wouldn't be exposed to.

Josh – How do you think the community has changed since the book walk?

Debra – Well, right around here there used to be houses everywhere. You know all of these big empty fields and grassy areas—there were houses. So it was much more of neighborhood. Probably then, definitely. Some of those kids in the book walk lived, I mean, you went to school with kids that lived right around that street. They lived on 6th Avenue and 7th Avenue streets. I think the population has shifted, maybe, there aren't a lot of people that are younger, so much. And then you know suburban sprawl, it's changed everywhere. You used to walk over town, everyone walked over the 12th Street Bridge and went over town to McCrory's after school.

Josh – Was that on 11th Street?

Debra – 11th Avenue. Then there was a little store. What was the name of it? I wasn't allowed to go there. Must have had something my mother didn't want me to go there. I don't know what it was, but there was a little store where the old Altoona High was and it was right across the street on the corner. It was like, I know some of the kids would go there and buy cigarettes, that's probably why she didn't want me there, because they sold cigarettes to kids, but you know it was like a candy store, but I wasn't even allowed to go buy candy. There was no Sheetz—there was one way over by –the original one and that was it. Just different.

Josh – Are you still a regular user of the library?

Debra – Yes, yes absolutely. We live in Duncansville so I use the Hollidaysburg—the new one is nice, but I still come out here periodically—you know, I don't mean this against Hollidaysburg Library, but you guys just have more of a selection. You know, you have a lot more things to offer. I'm still reading biographies. I was reading some biographies recently and you have them here. It's nice to be able to look up and see which site they're at, so I can go to where it's at. I met an author recently, I've been reading his books. I don't know if you know Scott Eyman, he wrote the John Wayne book and Louis B. Maher and he's written about fifteen books. I met him in Palm Beach and so I came and got some more of his books to read.

Josh – Okay.

Debra – Everywhere we moved, everywhere we've lived we have a library card. We took the kids to the library.

Josh – So what we'll end up doing with this oral history is, hopefully transcribing it and we're going to be placing it into a time capsule. And in 10 years on the 100th anniversary of the library we'll open it up.

Debra – Nice.

Josh – So, what do you think 10 years from now will be like?

Debra – Aw so scary. I think – you mean as a community? I think we might have auto cars—we might have that.

Josh – Self driving cars you mean?

Debra – Self driving cars, and I think that colleges are going to change and they're going to be even less brick and mortar classes than they are now. I think that is going to keep expanding. It always worries me because I know, I know you can read everything on a Kindle, but I like to hold a book. So how is that going to change, I think it's already changing with the young kids. Other than that, human beings are the same, you'll have the same problems and things, just in different eras.

Josh – Yeah.

Debra – I like to think that nothing else bad will happen. You know. I did win—I won a contest because of this book store. Back in '98 or '99 I worked at the Altoona Hospital night shift. I was driving home and there was this show on the radio I was listening to and it was on the Wally stations. And they said first caller that can call in and tell us what year the library opened in Altoona. So, I called in and told them the year and the month and they said, "How did you know that." And I said I was on the book walk and they didn't know anything about it and I told them on air a little bit about it and I got \$50. (Laughs)

Josh – That's your reward for helping. (Laughs)

Debra – That was a delayed reward. (Laughs) The other thing that's interesting, because I loved the library and I loved books and the librarian was patient with a kid that didn't know too much about —she showed me how to use the card catalog. She showed me everything, how the numbering system worked. My job when I was at Penn State, I worked for Pattee Library.

Josh – Okay.

Debra – So that was just sort of like—you know.

Josh – It had quite an effect throughout your life.

Debra – And if you think about how Pattee is. Have you ever been down?

Josh – Uh huh.

Debra – Think how big Pattee Library is. It was all in card catalog. Imagine. And it was huge when you walk into the—when you come up the steps and you come in that way, well I call it the front entrance. I don't know if that's the official front entrance, and you go in there—the big room on the right, there was nothing in there but card catalogs. Thousands and thousands of drawers and my job was to —I worked the undergrad library which was in one portion of the library. And then I had to, at the end of my shift, take all of the cards and file them back again.

Josh – Wow.

Debra – So when I think of that librarian at Roosevelt that taught me—they didn't have to train me very much at Pattee. They did a real quick half day and they said I was fine. (Laughs)

Josh – Do you have anything else you'd like to add about the book walk?

Debra – No, no it was fun. I always felt that because of it that the library was a little bit mine. A little bit because I was involved. I wish I remembered anybody else that did it. But I do remember that there weren't any of my close friends weren't doing it. You know, when you're in 9th grade you probably don't pay too much attention to people who weren't your close friends.

Josh – Yeah. Well, if you don't have anything else we'll just conclude the interview then.

Debra – Okay, thank you.

Josh – Thank you.