

Nancy E. Gwinn Distinguished Alumni

by Julianne Couch
Alumnews Editor

From her office in the National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian Institution, overlooking presidential motorcades on Constitution Avenue and marches on the U.S. Capitol Building, Nancy E. Gwinn (B.A., '67 English) is a long way from her Sheridan, Wyo., origins. But in spite of being surrounded by political power and national history, Gwinn knows her adopted city does not compete with Wyoming and the West when it comes to mountains.

"What passes for a mountain here is not worth mentioning in Wyoming. It is crowded and a very different experience. I have to come back West to regenerate my spirit."

Gwinn often travels to Sheridan to visit her mother, the former Elizabeth Waddle (B.A., '38, Spanish) and to visit old friends. She enjoys travel to other locales too, but is kept busy by her position as director of the Smithsonian Institution Libraries, a 20-branch system with facilities in Washington, D.C., Maryland, New York City and the Republic of Panama. She joined the Smithsonian in 1984 as assistant director for collections management, a position she held until being appointed director of Smithsonian Institution Libraries (SIL) in 1997.

Her accomplishments in this position include establishing an information systems division to work closely with the Smithsonian's office of technology. She selected and implemented a new integrated library system, and installed an imaging center so staff could learn about digitizing technology. In 2001 Gwinn launched a web site for the public called SIL's Galaxy of Knowledge, which now garners over 2 million hits per month, to contain Smithsonian Libraries-produced content, including digital versions of rare books and other collections, online exhibitions, resource guides and other materials. Further, she opened the Joseph F. Cullman 3rd Library of Natural History with a state-of-the-art preservation vault and reading room to house and make accessible the Libraries' multi-million dollar collection of rare natural history books.

Although Gwinn majored in English Literature and minored in music while at UW, she knew well



Nancy E. Gwinn (B.A., '67 English)

before that time that she wanted to be a librarian. She'd even done an 8th grade school project researching what it would take to enter that field.

"When I came across that notebook recently I was astonished at how much work I'd done on it, but it obviously stuck with me. My senior year [at UW] I started thinking about library school." But Gwinn had been named a Fulbright scholar and had the opportunity to study at Oxford for a year upon completing her bachelor's degree. She speculates that being from Wyoming helped her achieve that scholarship. "There is a certain amount of geographic dispersion in those awards, so being from a smaller school in a small state probably gave me a better chance." She also cites the support and recommendation given by her advisor in the English department as being an important part of it.

When Gwinn returned from Oxford she directed her studies to earning a master's degree in library science, which she accomplished in 1969. "Michigan gave me a nice scholarship and agreed to hold it for a year so I could go to Oxford. That's what made the difference for me to be able to go there."

Gwinn began working in jobs around the Washington D.C. area, including the Library of Congress and the Council on Library Resources, and then spent a few years in California at the Research Libraries Group. In 1984 she returned to Washington and went to work for the Smithsonian Institution but did not think her job there would be long term. She'd had an idea about a book project, and realized that a good way to pursue it would be to enter a Ph.D. program at

George Washington University, so she'd "do it right." Of course, the idea for the project changed completely once she started the program, but she met a major goal: to earn the Ph.D. before she turned 50 years of age. Although the actual degree didn't come until a few months later, she defended the dissertation during the month of her 50th birthday, "and that's really what counted."

She completed the Ph.D. in American Civilization in 1996, just around the time that her boss at the Smithsonian was leaving. She decided to apply for the position, even though the Smithsonian had never before hired for that position from within. Happily, they found Gwinn ready to go, complete with a Ph.D. and appropriate experience.

Now she works with one of the most respected institutions in the world, along with 6,300 others, 120 of whom are employed across the Smithsonian's 20 libraries and its central support offices. "We really have a finger in every body's else's pie. We have a broad scope of responsibility to support the Institution's research and educational programs, with concentration in science and technology, arts and American history."

With all she has accomplished in her distinguished career, it would be no wonder if her undergraduate days were a bit hazy to her memory. However, she recalls very well playing flute in the marching band, and traveling to the Sun Bowl in El Paso for a half time performance during the Cowboy's appearance there. "Charles Seltentrich, the band director, was really terrific and I enjoyed my band experience very much. I still remember my position in the loop of the script W-Y-O, which we did at every game. It was really exciting to be part of a nationally televised bowl game." Her flute performance also earned her a spot on the annual Wyo Days tour, playing at high schools all over the state.

Gwinn also recalls her days with Delta Delta Delta sorority, SPURS, Chimes, and Mortar Board. She was also president of what is today the Student Activities Council, which planned events taking place in the Union, such as Casino night. In 1966 she was selected to represent Wyoming and took sixth place in the annual College Queen contest, which was held in New York City. "It was my first trip east. One of the sponsors was General Motors, so among other things, we competed in a driving contest. Learning to drive so early in Wyoming most likely helped me place in that event. My advisor at the University of Michigan thought this

was the Miss America contest, and I never could persuade him that it wasn't!"

Although her flute playing has gone by the wayside, she still remembers much about her academic experiences. "I was in the first wave of people who went through the Honors program with a comprehensive exam that would determine the level of honors that you got. We had some experimental seminars, and it was exciting to be part of that."

Gwinn says her roots are still tied to Wyoming and she has always been glad of it. For example, it was during her recent visit to speak to the PEO Sisterhood in Sheridan that her friends raised the idea for the Distinguished Alumna award. She has many friends throughout the state whom she has known since high school and who went on to attend UW along with her. Many of them now live out of state, so Gwinn enjoys opportunities to reconnect with them, as she'll be able to do when she comes to UW to accept the award.

Like so many UW alums, Gwinn never regrets that she obtained her degree here rather than at a more nationally known school. She says she developed ample leadership skills at UW that she's used in her career. Her advice to incoming students? "Get involved in activities. That's where you really learn your people and leadership skills. Academics are important, but you need to get as much variety of experience as you can get. It's a very good time to do it when you are at the university."

Variety being Gwinn's watchword means that in addition to her career responsibilities, she's taken time to travel all over the world, and to work at her tennis game. "I love tennis. It's the only sport I ever got good at enough to enjoy."

She may not have time to play tennis when she visits UW this fall. Instead she'll be busy participating in all the Homecoming activities, and being among a group of other distinguished and accomplished individuals from Wyoming. "Wyoming breeds a lot of independent people who are successful," she acknowledges. "Let's say it's from the water."

Regardless of the cause of Gwinn's success, her friend Hoke MacMillan of Laramie (B.S., '67, J.D., '70) supported her award nomination with these words: "As I think back and reflect upon my life, I remember people I knew were going to make society a better place, and to me Nancy was one of those people. She was smart, a contributor, did things, got things done, and was reliable in every sense of the word." ❖

