

# Guild

## BUILDERS

1976 - 2016

*In honor of our fortieth anniversary, this is the next installment in an ongoing email series from the Guild, AFSCME Local 2910, that explores the history of our Library of Congress workplace from the unique perspective of its professional employees. Artifacts, anecdotes, personalities and events have all helped to shape our collective past.*

### The Chief Steward: Nan Thompson Ernst

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When we started *Guild Builders* earlier this year, we planned to provide interesting background stories about the work of the Guild as part of our 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration. Little did we know that one of the most long-serving and influential officers of our union—a true “builder” of our organization—would soon announce her retirement.

Chief Steward and First Vice President Nan Thompson Ernst, a tireless advocate for Library of Congress employees, retires on June 30, 2016.

“I must admit that it is very difficult to walk away,” wrote Nan in a recent email to Guild members,

because I have been privileged to work with such fabulous colleagues in the Manuscript Division especially, but also throughout the Library, and because it has been the greatest honor of my life to serve as Chief Steward of the Guild since 2007. Going forward, my plans include making pottery, travelling, and spending as much time as possible with my beloved grandchildren who are growing up way too fast.

Nan has also assured us she won’t entirely disappear since she plans to volunteer for the Guild, in part in her capacity as an archivist.

Tributes in reaction to Nan’s news came fast and furious.

Carl Goldman, Executive Director of AFSCME Council 26, which represents eighteen unions in the National Capital Region, said of Nan:

The Library of Congress Professional Guild has played an important role in Council 26, and Nan Ernst, as the longest serving Chief Steward of the Guild, has for the last decade worked tirelessly to create a better environment for workers at the Library and in the Federal government. Her attitude, drive, and sincere commitment to public service has greatly advanced the cause of Federal employees.

Said Guild President Saul Schniderman:

Nan has been a leader, a union representative, a negotiator, an advocate for the disabled community of the Library. If there was a health and safety hazard in the workplace, she would file a grievance and, if necessary, go all the way to arbitration to see that it was resolved. She provided hope for many an employee in distress. She is the greatest listener I



Nan Ernst

have ever met. One of our members has dubbed Nan “The Patron Saint of Lost Causes.” She became a shoulder to lean on and a shoulder to cry on for many of us in the Guild. She refused to accommodate herself to injustice at the Library of Congress, the institution which she loves dearly.

A self-described “army brat,” Nan was born in Fort Huachuca, Arizona and grew up in Hardy, Arkansas, which she considers her hometown. She studied Geography at Arkansas State University and worked as an archivist in the Manuscript Department of the library of the University of Arkansas. With her husband, Steve Ernst, and her daughter Lee she moved to the Washington area in 1985, and entered the American Studies Department of the George Washington University. She came to the Library in 1991, initially in a temporary position to organize the papers of Clare Boothe Luce, and was afterwards hired as an archivist in the Preparation Section of the Manuscript Division where she has worked for more than twenty-five years.

Through a coworker and Guild member, Donna Ellis, Nan got involved in the Health and Safety Committee of the Guild, became a steward, and worked to improve the Library’s emergency preparedness program. “I have to say that it wasn’t until I became active in the Guild that I was really happy to be at the Library,” said Nan. “The institution is so bureaucratic, big, cold and impersonal, and that is not how I like to work. I became Chief Steward in 2007 and I’m most proud of advancing health and safety and disability rights, and in keeping our sights on the human scale in this giant library.”

As a testament to her influence on workplace safety issues, Nan was appointed to the Federal Advisory Council on Occupational Safety and Health (FACOSH) in 2015.

In any union, a chief steward coordinates the work of the shop stewards throughout the workplace. As an expert in the contract, she brings in-depth knowledge and know-how to negotiations with management, coordinating grievances, ensures contract enforcement, and provides leadership across the board. In this role Nan has been exceptional. After more than nine years, Nan has also been the longest-serving Chief Steward in the Guild’s history.

Jackie Coleburn, Executive Board Member-at-Large for Membership, recently summed it up for many of us in the Guild:

Several years ago a lawyer said to me, “Jackie, your problem is you want justice in the workplace. It will never happen.” Well, that lawyer never met Nan Ernst! Nan has been working for justice, fairness, and goodwill in this workplace for many years. Needless to say, the Library has benefitted greatly from her efforts. Nan’s devotion to the Library and its staff has never flagged. She loves the Library, its collections and the people who work here. Even with all of the workplace problems she has tackled as a representative of the Guild, Nan never grew cynical. She has managed to stay positive and help many stressed-out staff members keep their eyes on finding good resolutions to problems, and to make the Library a better place to work.

Nan Ernst’s legacy as a Guild officer and steward includes many problems solved, some difficult battles won, and, especially, a strong ethic of advocacy, compassion, and striving for workplace justice that will continue to guide and inspire her colleagues and successors for years to come.

## **Guild Builders: The First Forty Years**

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The United States’ bicentennial year saw the birth of the Guild, on June 1, 1976. Through the subsequent decades and via the power of workplace democracy—polls, referendums, elections, and representation—the Guild has created a meaningful internal dialogue among professional staff and managers at the Library, and has become a force for change.

The Guild is no more nor less than its members. Together we share a strong sense of professionalism along with pride of public service, all while working at the nation’s oldest federal cultural institution, the Library of Congress.

If you have any interesting LC workplace memories that you’d like to share, please send them our way!  
email: [guild@loc.gov](mailto:guild@loc.gov) | phone: 202-707-6493 | office: LM-G41 | **Join the Guild!**: [www.guild2910.org/membership.html](http://www.guild2910.org/membership.html)

*From the Guild Builders Editorial Committee, whose members believe that history is a bond of fidelity with the past.*