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Remembering Library Director Elizabeth Eaton, Ph.D., 1943-2009

Elizabeth Eaton, Ph.D., 66, who served as executive director of the Houston Academy of Medicine-Texas Medical Center Library and director of the National Network of Libraries of Medicine-South Central Region, died Feb. 3.

IN HER ELEMENT—The late Elizabeth Eaton, Ph.D., in a familiar setting, at the Houston Academy of Medicine-Texas Medical Center Library. (Photo by Kathleen Smith)

Originally from the East Coast, Eaton received her bachelor's degree in chemistry, math and astronomy from Hood College in Frederick, Md.

After graduation, she moved to Boston to accept a position at Massachusetts General Hospital, where she worked in a research lab conducting scientific experiments.

A couple of years later, she fulfilled her dream of traveling abroad by accepting a job at St. Bartholomew's Medical College in London as a research assistant in the gastrointestinal lab.

After several years, she returned to the states to take yet another research assistant position at the University of California at Los Angeles, and while there, decided to pursue a master's degree in library science, since UCLA is home to one of the country's top-rated library schools.

"My mother was a librarian, and I could think of no finer role model on which to pattern my career," Eaton said in a 2002 interview with Texas Medical Center News.

Always interested in science, she specialized in biomedical library science at UCLA, then went on to earn a Ph.D. in biomedical sciences from The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, where she became associate director of public services at the university's Moody Medical Library from 1974 to 1982.

In 1982 she accepted a position as director of Tufts University Health Sciences Library in Boston. While at Tufts, she was instrumental in the redesign and modernization of the university's new library building which opened in 1986. At that time, the print collection was transferred into an electronic format, and the library became the centerpiece of an integrated, university-wide system.

At Tufts, she also served as a faculty facilitator in the Tufts University School of Medicine Problem-Based Learning Program and was the course director for new technologies in the Tufts/Emerson Health Communications Program.

In 2001, Eaton returned to Texas to become executive director of the Houston Academy of Medicine-Texas Medical Center Library. Tropical Storm Allison had just visited, and one of Eaton's first duties was to recover more than 800 boxes of wet historical document and photos from the library's McGovern Historical Collections and Research Center. Under her direction, the library leased a 12,000 square foot warehouse facility on El Rio Street near the Holcombe Boulevard, Almeda Street intersection, which to this day remains the home of the library's archives and fine arts collection.

On March 26, 2002, Eaton officially reopened the library's street level, which underwent extensive repairs after being flooded by Tropical Storm Allison. It was at this reception that she outlined her goals for the library's future.

Among her initiatives was a student outreach program, where she made rounds at all the Texas Medical Center colleges and universities, teaching students how to conduct literature searches and use the library to meet their educational and research needs.

"New students attend orientation and learn where to park on campus and where to go for recreation. I can't think of anything more important for medical, nursing or allied health students to know than how to use the library," Eaton said at the Allison recovery reception.

At the TMC Library, Eaton transitioned print-based materials to a Web-based library, allowing computer access to virtually ever academic health journal. Wireless Internet access was implemented throughout the library, and even Hurricane Ike couldn't interrupt access to the library's electronic resources.

Memorial arrangements are pending and when finalized, will be posted at www.library.tmc.edu. Visitors to the Web site may also leave messages of condolence.

Ronda Wendler

rwendler@texasmedicalcenter.org

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Texas Medical Center, 2450 Holcombe Blvd., Suite 1, Houston, TX 77021, Phone: (713) 791-6161