

## **Beverly Murphy: A Pioneer in Medical Librarianship**

### **Introduction**

The stories and contributions that African Americans have made to health sciences librarianship have largely been omitted from the historical record of the profession. This post features Beverly Murphy, health sciences librarian and the first Black President in the Medical Library Association's (MLA) 123-year history. The overall aim of this post is to shine a light on these professionals, beginning with documenting Murphy's journey in health sciences librarianship. Murphy has made many contributions to health sciences librarianship and achieved many firsts throughout her career, culminating in being elected MLA President. Murphy is one of five African American MLA fellows and is a distinguished member of the Academy of Health Information Professionals (AHIP). She has served in a variety of capacities, including serving as the Board Liaison for the MLA Diversity and Inclusion Task Force (now Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee), Chair of the MLA Professional Recruitment and Retention Committee, and as the first and only African American editor for the *MLA News* (now *MLA Focus*) publication. In addition to her MLA activities, Murphy is an active member of the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of MLA, where she served as the first African American Chair of the chapter in 2003-2004.

### **Who is Beverly Murphy? Let's start at the beginning.**

Murphy was born in Manhattan, New York, at Harlem Hospital on March 24, 1957. Her brother Mark was born three years later. Murphy went back and forth to North Carolina from Manhattan until she started kindergarten. Then she lived with her godparents and guardians, Helen Rowe Holt and Robert Lee Holt, in Four Oaks, North Carolina. Helen was a school librarian who received her undergraduate degree in Education from Elizabeth City State

University and her Library degree from Columbia University. She also completed coursework at Shaw University and North Carolina Central University. Robert Holt was a school principal at Forest Hills High School, which served students in grades one through twelve. Murphy was an excellent student who skipped a grade (based on an aptitude test) and took accelerated courses in high school. Starting in second grade, Murphy enjoyed cheerleading, for which she won Ms. East Coast Cheerleader and Best Cheerleader at the East Coast Cheerleading camp at Methodist College in 1973. More than 450 cheerleaders attended from Maine to Florida, and she won the individual competition among forty-three contestants. After returning from the camp and taking the lead on reinforcing and teaching the routines, Murphy was told to perform on the back row with another African American cheerleader during a school performance. She decided not to perform, and her godparents supported this decision. She was invited to return the following year to be an assistant counselor at the camp but declined the invitation. This action spoke to Murphy's ability to advocate for herself even at a young age.

In 1974, Murphy began attending North Carolina Central University (NCCU) in Durham, North Carolina, majoring in biology with a minor in chemistry. Her dream was to work in the crime lab for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), but that changed when she discovered that she had to become an FBI agent first. This information led Murphy to pivot her career aspiration towards becoming a researcher. She received a scholarship from the National Science Foundation (NSF) to complete her graduate studies in biology. Murphy was also interested in dentistry but decided against it after attending a summer program for minorities at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Murphy graduated Magna Cum Laude from NCCU in 1978. One of her accomplishments at NCCU was making the Dean's list all four years as an undergraduate. She

received the National PanHellenic Council Grade Point Average Award. Murphy was admitted to Alpha Kappa Mu Honor Society and Beta Kappa Chi National Scientific Honorary Society.

Murphy met librarian Octavia Cabey, who worked at Dow Chemical Company, during a career fair at NCCU. Meeting Cabey, who had a similar background as Murphy, led Murphy to consider pursuing a degree in librarianship. As a result, she was awarded a full-tuition scholarship by Dow Chemical Company to complete the Masters in Library Science (MLS). In 1979, she spent the summer in Michigan completing an internship at Dow Chemical Company. After the internship, Murphy returned to NCCU to complete her graduate studies, where she earned an American Library Association (ALA) accredited MLS in 1981.

### **Librarianship**

When asked why she chose librarianship, Murphy stated, “the draw came as a result of a need at the time.”<sup>1</sup> She was not drawn to librarianship even though her godmother was a librarian; this made Murphy “anti-library.”<sup>2</sup> Even though Murphy did not intentionally want to be a librarian, it turns out that librarianship needed her.

In January 1981, Murphy was recruited for her first librarian role at the Science/Technology Information Center, University of Virginia (UVA), leading the Technical Services group. At the time, UVA employed Murphy and one other Black librarian. Murphy was proud that she could expand on her Master’s thesis paper, for which she won a research award. In 1981, she was awarded a Special Libraries Paper Award for a Masters research paper, "*Using Instructional Materials to Educate Patients in the Doctor's Office: An Examination of Six Programs in Charlottesville, Virginia.*" The research study investigated the use of audio-visual materials in the doctor's office.

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<sup>1</sup> Beverly Murphy, interview, May 21, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Beverly Murphy, interview, May 21, 2021.

In July 1983, Murphy moved back to Durham, North Carolina, and was offered a job at the *Herald Sun Newspaper* library as a part-time library assistant. She was responsible for marking and booking the evening edition of the paper. One of her colleagues at the *Herald Sun Newspaper* told her of a position at Duke University. In August 1983, Murphy was hired at Duke Medical Center Library and Archives to work while a librarian was on maternity leave. She worked both jobs until she was hired full-time at Duke when the librarian decided not to return.

Murphy began her career at Duke Medical Center Library & Archives in the role of Reference Librarian and then became User Education Coordinator from 1988 to 1992. In this role, Murphy's primary responsibilities included coordination at all levels of activities designed to educate individuals or groups of library clientele via user orientation as well as formalized education programs for specific subjects or disciplines. These activities included teaching classes, performing tours, and preparing and distributing various types of user education documentation. This also included instruction in online end-user products, particularly the self-service CD PLUS MEDLINE System provided by the Medical Center Library. Additional responsibilities included providing general medical reference services, including coverage of the Information Desk, and online searching of MEDLINE and other CD PLUS, NLM, BRS, and DIALOG databases. In addition, Murphy assisted the Local Area Network (LAN) supervisor and served as a backup when necessary. Other responsibilities were selecting for the reference collection, calculating monthly online searching expenses, and processing monthly bills and interdepartmental request invoices. Lastly, she assisted the Director as needed in the administration of specific activities associated with the efficient operation of the Reference Department and Online Services.

Then she was promoted to Head of Reference Services, where she oversaw user education, interlibrary loan, and online services, including mediated and self-service computerized searching from 1992 to 1996. In this role, she supervised and directed the reference activities of six librarians and one library assistant and the Interlibrary Loan (ILL) activities of one senior library assistant, two library assistants, one library clerk, and several student assistants.

In 1996, she was promoted to her current role as the Assistant Director of Communications and Web Content Management. In this role, she coordinates, edits, and creates content for the library's newsletter and other communication methods. Murphy is responsible for the overall design, content, and digital presence of the library's website. She assists in implementing survey and assessment tools. She was involved in planning the library communications strategy for the Duke Health community, including marketing materials and special promotional events. In addition, she works as a primary partner in setting and achieving the goals of the Medical Center Library and Archives, serving as a member of the Library's planning and management groups. In 2013, she also became the DUHS Hospital Nursing Liaison and Watts College of Nursing Liaison, supporting faculty, staff, and students. She is responsible for teaching and assisting nurses with their research needs for publication, quality improvement, performance evaluation, and graduate residency. Also, she promotes evidence-based practice for nurses and nursing students through instruction, research consultation, literature searching, web-based guides and tutorials, poster/paper presentations, collection development, and user assistance in locating accurate and timely information for education, research, and patient care.

One of the critical components of medical librarianship is creating scholarship and lifelong learning through professional development. Through collaboration with her colleagues,

she has demonstrated her value in medical librarianship through her scholarship. A list of Murphy's scholarly output is available on the Duke University Medical Center Library and Archives website.<sup>3</sup>

When asked about the role of mentorship in her life, Murphy is grateful for the many individuals who supported and influenced her, particularly those who helped her advance her career in librarianship, especially in the early years. Individuals like Didi Pancake and Octavia Cabey were some of the people that motivated Murphy to continue in special librarianship. Listed below are additional people who made a difference in Murphy's career.<sup>4</sup>

- Warren Bird, former director of Duke University Medical Center Library, welcomed her, piqued her interest in information technology, and taught her what he knew.
- Susie Corbett Speer was the first person that asked her to be on a committee for the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of the Medical Library Association (MAC-MLA).
- Diane McKenzie had a mothering spirit and was always supportive of her.
- Jane Trumbull was most supportive of her as a fellow librarian and coworker. Jane was trying to be inclusive in an environment that was not.
- Patricia Hammond helped her transition to become treasurer of MAC-MLA.
- Jonathan Lord was editor of the MAC [\*Messages Newsletter \(now a Blog\)\*](#) and was always supportive of Murphy beyond her transition to MAC Messages editor.
- Jean Demas was the *MLA News* Editor before Beverly took over the role. She was a diversity champion and encouraged Murphy to take the role.

Murphy is still in contact with many of these earlier supporters to this day.

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<sup>3</sup> Duke University Medical Center Library and Archives, n.d.

<sup>4</sup> Beverly Murphy, interview, May 21, 2021.

Murphy began her career in medical librarianship when there were few Black librarians in the field, so very few of her mentors looked like her. The lack of Black librarian mentors during her early years in the profession motivated her passion for mentorship. She has been an outstanding mentor, role model, sponsor, and champion for countless health sciences librarians, especially Black librarians. She sees mentorship as a two-way street, noting that she learns just as much from those she has mentored.

Murphy is a Black Librarian in a profession that is predominantly white.<sup>5</sup> Capturing her experience is key to this blog post. Murphy was micro-aggressed and marginalized by a previous director. Despite this experience, she thrived during that time. For years, she has been the only librarian of color or one of few librarians of color in the library where she has worked for 38 years, which has been challenging, difficult, hurtful, and painful. At times she has felt alone due to the lack of support. Murphy has felt like an alien in her own country and within the library where she works due to being a person of color. When she first came to the library, one painful memory that Murphy had was when someone moved to the side of the hall to avoid touching her. Murphy continues to deal with microaggressions in the workplace.

On the other side of being a Black librarian, seeing positivity and success amongst Black librarians brings her joy. Despite many challenges, she was the first Black librarian in the reference department. She noted that being the first in any area is challenging but can be positive in terms of progress. Murphy thinks that there is a misconception that a person must be in an official leadership role in librarianship to make things happen for Black librarians. Like turning lemons into lemonade, there are always good moments to be celebrated.

## **Accomplishments**

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<sup>5</sup> JJ Pionke, "Medical Library Association Diversity and Inclusion Task Force 2019 Survey Report," *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 108, no. 3 (July 2020): 504, <https://doi.org/10.5195/jmla.2020.948>.

Murphy is a trailblazer in health sciences librarianship. Several firsts typify her career. She was the first African American to serve as Medical Library Association (MLA) President, MLA News Editor, and Mid-Atlantic Chapter (MAC/MLA) Chair. Her journey as a health sciences librarian has laid the foundation for Black librarians coming behind her and those walking beside her. Her influence has been felt at the local, regional, and national levels through membership in the Medical Library Association (MLA), the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of MLA, and the Association of North Carolina Health and Sciences Libraries (ANCHASL).

As a MAC member, she was the first African American recipient of two chapter awards: including the Marguerite Abel Service Recognition Award in 1998 and the MAC Librarian of the Year (now the Award for Professional Excellence by a Health Sciences Librarian) in 2005. In addition, Murphy began a three-year term as the chapter's first African American Chair-Elect in October 2002 and served as Chair (2003-2004) and Past Chair (2004-2005).

Murphy has also made her mark nationally as a long-time member of MLA. With her MLA colleagues, she co-founded the African American Medical Librarians Alliance (AAMLA) in 1992 at the Association's meeting in Vancouver, Canada, with the aim of ensuring that the interests, perspectives, and experiences of MLA African American members were seen, heard, and included. As a founding member of AAMLA, she helped pave the way for African American librarians during a time when MLA was not working towards inclusive excellence and when leadership opportunities for African American librarians were limited. One of AAMLA's key drivers is to develop a strategy for helping African American librarians to assume leadership roles within MLA. A fruit of this labor was Murphy's appointment to the position of *MLA News* editor in 2000, becoming the first and only African American to hold this role to date. Under her

leadership, the *MLA News* introduced several new columns. As an editor, she was instrumental in launching the online edition of the newsletter.

Of all her service to MLA, the most prestigious role was being elected the Association's first African American president in 2016. She began a three-year term as President-Elect (2017-2018), President (2018-2019), and Past President (2019-2020). As president-elect, she appointed the first African American co-chairs of MLA'S National Program Committee. Finally, in 2021 she was awarded MLA's highest professional distinction, the Marcia C. Noyes Award. The Noyes award recognizes "a career that has resulted in lasting, outstanding contributions to medical librarianship. The award considers sustained and notable achievement in at least one area of activity cited in the Medical Library Association (MLA) mission and distinguished service and leadership in health sciences librarianship." Again, she is the first African American awardee. As a long-term member of both MAC and MLA, Murphy works diligently to make the experience of participating in both groups better for all members.

### **Looking ahead**

When asked about the future of librarianship, Murphy excitedly shared a multifaceted vision focused on people. As an advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion, Murphy is passionate about cultivating spaces that support belonging. Her hope for librarianship is that our future state resembles that of a rainbow bursting with color. In particular, she hopes that the profession will become so diverse that we no longer must strive for diversity because we will be just that. She envisions a room full of butterflies at different stages on the metamorphosis continuum, evolving to become beautiful beings. She enjoys watching the members who are walking beside her fly. Always a mentor, she offers the following words of wisdom:

1. Keep an open heart (remaining open to each other and celebrating our diversity) and an open mind (being receptive to ongoing changes in our profession and in ourselves. Learn all you can, beyond what you are hired to do, and do your homework. If you take a CE course, go back to your institution and put what you learned into action. Make the best of your learning opportunities.
2. Always give back. The best way to receive is to give.
3. Use the network around you. Ask for help when you need it.
4. Work to become a better leader every day.
5. Learn everything you can about leadership principles and apply them when given the right circumstances.
6. Practice humility.
7. Do not be afraid to take risks but listen and learn from every angle and expect the unexpected.
8. You do not have to be at the top of the food chain to be an effective leader, but you should be at the top of your game to effect change.
9. Be an example people want to follow
10. Engage those around you and help them shine.
11. Be accountable, honest, and transparent.<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion, Murphy likes seeing people succeed, like when they finish a project or learn a lesson from a challenging opportunity. Murphy stated, “there is always room for learning.”<sup>7</sup> Success for everyone is different, so she suggests that people look at their own benchmarks and not use what others are doing to measure their success. Things of the heart

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<sup>6</sup> Beverly Murphy, interview, May 21, 2021.

<sup>7</sup>Beverly Murphy, interview, May 21, 2021.

motivate her. Murphy stated, “we are working towards being in positions where we can push things forward.”<sup>8</sup> Murphy’s story is one of resiliency, strength, determination, and consistency. She is a trailblazer who is willing to bring people along with her to be at their best. Health sciences librarianship is better because of Beverly Murphy.

#### Endnotes

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<sup>8</sup> Beverly Murphy, interview, May 21, 2021.

#### References

Duke University Medical Center Library and Archives. n.d. “Beverly Murphy.” Accessed June 30, 2021. <https://scholars.mclibrary.duke.edu/permurph005>.

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