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Gill Library at 75: Looking Back While Looking Forward

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GILL LIBRARY AT 75: LOOKING BACK WHILE LOOKING FORWARD

BY ANA FONTOURA & MARTHA COUNIHAN, OSU

When Mother Irene Gill first arrived at Leland Castle in the winter of 1897, the first room she undoubtedly viewed was its library. The dark walnut gothic-style decoration with arched glassed book cases, Tudor arched windows, and stained glass windows would have made a fine first impression to the Ursuline nun who would found The College of New Rochelle in 1904. The Blue Library became the new college's first library.

By 1909, when the College was five years old, the growing book collection of 1,400 volumes (and an enrollment of 100 students) necessitated moving book collections into the south parlor. When the new Holy Family Chapel was completed in 1923, the College library was relocated to its former site in the north wing of the Castle.

While the move gave tenuous relief to the space needs of the rapidly growing college and its collections, the architecture of the former chapel was not conducive for quiet; the lighting was poor, and accessibility to the book collections could only be reached via a narrow staircase.

Finally, in 1937, as the Depression was ending, approval was given by the Board of Trustees to erect a library. Careful planning, visits to other college libraries, and evaluation of present and future needs went into the planning of the new library, to be named in honor of the College's founder, Mother Irene Gill, who had died in 1935. The new building, designed by Voorhees, Walker, Foley & Smith of New York City with a price tag of \$300,000, was the first "modern" looking campus building complete with a grand vestibule, monumental staircase, and two genuine Della Robbia plaques.

The loyal alumnae swung into action, initiating a Library Fund Drive at Founders' Day. In addition to supporting the construction, donations from alumnae funded a memorial window in the Main Reading Room depicting Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Ursula, St. Angela, a college girl, and a young girl symbolizing the future, to showcase the transmission of knowledge and wisdom through the centuries. A leading

woman sculptress, Jaunt de Coux, was commissioned to carve a high relief sculpture of Ursuline foundress St. Angela Merici over the main entrance.

On the ground floor, six large classrooms provided needed space for instruction as well as an exhibit room and auditorium (now for library use), while the second floor, the library's main floor, housed book, reference, and periodical collections, the reference desk, card catalog, and administrative/cataloging and processing areas. As the description read, "a completely automatic Otis elevator" and book lift gave access to the upper floors. The College Archives, offices, and some book collections were housed on the third floor while the top floor had lounges for men and women faculty. Only faculty had keys to the elevator.

The ensuing decades saw expansion of readers' services: reserve books and articles, "book talks," and noon hour concerts from the growing record collection led by music faculty. In the 1950s, informal faculty-led discussions on contemporary issues, "Talks without Chalk," engaged students and faculty.

Clearly, the library was not a simple storage area for books or a sanctum of silence. It was a busy space for students doing research, reading reserve books and articles, and studying. Physical changes within the library were few. The building had been well planned with an eye for expansion. In 1955 a double level stack area gave additional space for books as well as individual study carrels, and in 1965 the Library of Congress system was adopted.

However, by the 1970s challenges emerged. Increasingly, more periodicals were used by the new Graduate School students and those collections grew quickly, filling shelf space. New microfilm and

The Blue Library in Leland Castle





The library moved to the north wing of the Castle in 1923.



The new Gill Library was built in 1937.



Gill Library Alumnae/i Room

microfiche reader printers gave students new formats in which to do research. Suddenly, copy machines became very important to rushed students. The new School of New Resources and its various campuses made the College reconsider the services of what was now being called Gill Library. Each new campus had a small reference collection with professional librarians, and inter-campus loans of books and periodical articles were established.

During the 1980s, the familiar card catalogs disappeared along with bulky periodical indexes, as both gave way to online versions. As new technologies emerged, so too did the need to educate students on how to use the library and the technologies. “Library Instruction” classes enabled students to learn how to conduct good research—now often from a home computer or device.

By the late 1990s, the growing collection, along with the dramatically altered and expanded systems for delivering library services at the Main Campus and to the branch campuses, made it imperative that Gill Library undergo a major renovation to meet contemporary needs of students. The renovation, completed in 2002, brought with it a soaring two-story atrium with colonnade glass panels and dramatic archways as well as myriad cozy study spaces. The new library was also equipped with the most contemporary technology—hundreds of data ports to provide access to extensive online databases, dozens of computer work stations

throughout the library, and a computerized Library Instruction Room to enhance students’ research ability.

—Martha Counihan, OSU, Archivist



THE FUTURE OF GILL LIBRARY

Though Gill Library has endured its share of transformation over the years, it is not unusual for libraries in general. Libraries have survived the evolution of access to information, what seems to be a never ending technology boom, and the overall perception that libraries must be quiet, print book-centered repositories. Charles Darwin said, “It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change.” This is certainly true of libraries. For academic libraries, this paradigm shift aligns well with the student-centered, active learning pedagogies which are also transforming higher education.

There is no doubt that libraries have experienced more changes in the last 20 years than in the past two centuries. The evolution of technology and its impact on society has been the main driver of that change, along with the rising cost of resources and services. Add to that the societal impact that technology has had on all of us, and it is not surprising that many have predicted that libraries would become obsolete. Contrary to those predictions, however, is the very notion that the overabundance of information is

exactly the reason why we need libraries—and students need academic libraries now more than ever before. Here are just a few reasons why:

1 Check the Internet? Check again...

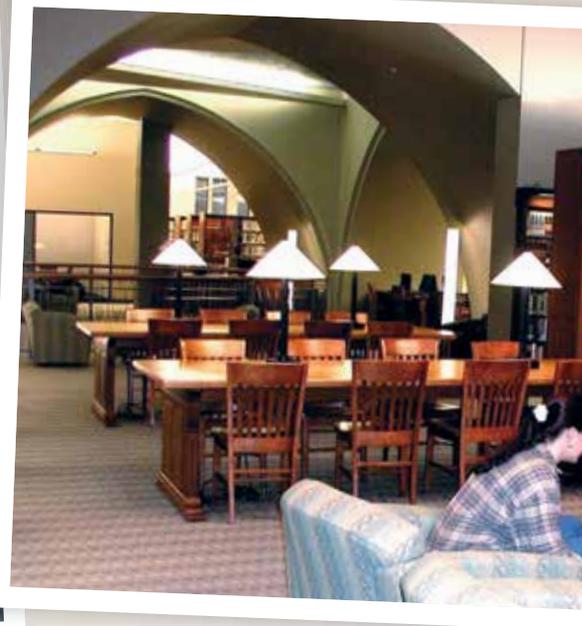
Despite the wealth of information that is readily accessible to everyone with the click or tap of the finger, it is impossible to have the extent of human knowledge available on the Internet. The drive to digitize books and make them available online is wonderful, but that is a formidable task that even Google is struggling with. Publishers and contemporary authors are certainly not willing to make their material freely available to all, and the “wisdom of crowds” is certainly not a trustworthy source for information. The Internet complements libraries but doesn’t replace them. The academic library invests in the information that is not freely available, making it accessible to its students. Need the latest research on a particular topic? We likely have the full text of the resource you need, and if not, we can get it for you from someone who does.

2 Library visits aren’t declining—they’re just virtual!

Yes, the rise of electronic resources, remote access, and services like virtual reference is perhaps a factor leading to the decline in overall circulation statistics and even library attendance figures. After all, having these resources and services means



The newly renovated Gill Library opened in 2002.



students do not have to physically be in the library to do research. Search engines have shaped users' search and discovery expectations which means they no longer automatically run to the library to get the information they need. On the outside, these innovations take the user away from the library, but libraries have adapted by implementing unified search solutions and discovery layers on existing resources, giving the user a seamless experience much like Google. Users may not be in the library, but they are accessing the library's resources virtually.

3 Professor Plum in the Library with a lead pipe?

Retention efforts are measurable, but proving that a student stayed in school due to one particular intervention is nearly impossible. Institutions are called to invest in their students' success by applying a full array of academic support interventions that foster academic excellence. Libraries and librarians are in the unique position of helping students gain confidence in research abilities that are vital for success, assisting students' academic performance through better research and refining critical thinking skills, and offering an additional layer of men-

toring for the student to support academic success. Skills are reinforced, ideas are tested, and research comes alive. The increased emphasis on competency-based learning provides new opportunities for libraries and librarians to play a vital role in retaining our students through embedding information, digital and research literacy, into every program throughout the institution.

4 Technology & Research—a marriage made in heaven.

Can the student who operates a smartphone or a computer well enough to play a game, send an email, or surf the web be considered computer literate? Being computer literate is more than just knowing how to operate computers; it also involves using technology as a tool for organizing, communicating, researching, and problem solving. Basic knowledge of word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, online security/privacy, networking, hardware connections, browser basics, searching, and evaluating and using information go hand in hand in an academic setting. The integration of information and computer/digital literacy skills, therefore, is a perfect marriage to be celebrated in the library. Libraries have worked hard particularly within the past 20 years

to find innovative approaches to research, teaching, and learning using technology. When libraries provide the right level of support in reinforcing these skills while students are researching and collaborating, it brings information to life in ways that would ordinarily not be pursued or supported.

5 Collaboration—The Library Learning Commons

Institutions must nurture a culture of change based on an understanding of their users' learning styles and needs. Creating an academic environment that brings together knowledge discovery, self-directed learning, and support systems is vital to properly serve our students. Many of today's learners favor active, participatory, experiential learning—the learning style that many “digital natives” exhibit in their personal lives. Students are highly social and find great value in being with other people—they want their college experience to promote those connections as well. Student attention is often pulled in multiple directions, so it is important to provide learning spaces that bring students and faculty together to ensure that the environment promotes (rather than constrains) teaching and learning. It's all about



The Main Reading Room

adopting a new service philosophy. There is great value in hands-on, traditional, face-to-face interactive style spaces that offer a place for discussion and reflection, just as there is value in providing more technology-rich, comfortable service spaces where students can work individually or collaboratively in a group, all while integrating multiple activities (researching, writing, and projects) and receiving the range of assistance they need to be successful (i.e., tutoring). This approach is designed to provide direct assistance to students and mirrors the “working with the whole student” approach to teaching and learning.

The Mother Irene Gill Memorial Library continues to be an amalgamation of its rich 75-year history (maintaining and nurturing traditional print collections) and the present (adopting current and novel information technologies and electronic resources), but always looking forward to the future to remain relevant and valuable to our students and the mission of the College.

As we move ahead, the goal is to make meaningful contributions that are seamless, transparent, and have a positive impact on our students and advance their learning experiences. This commitment was recently affirmed with the awarding of a \$10

million Title III grant from the Department of Education. Our compelling proposal includes initiatives to fortify our institution through innovative strategies that will strengthen our technological infrastructure, create student success communities for our students, expand opportunities in STEM courses/labs, provide professional development opportunities, and lastly, establish fully functioning learning commons both in New Rochelle and at the city campuses. The Gill Library Learning Commons will serve as a unique learning hub integrating technology, information, and expertise in order to strengthen teaching, research, and learning opportunities for CNR students, faculty, and staff. Receiving this endorsement from the government after going through a competitive process adds value to our efforts and asserts that we are following the right course of action.

Libraries are crucial in this age of abundant information and are called to be a leading voice in bringing new ways to find, evaluate, use, and manage information. It is imperative that we provide relevant support for those actively navigating the digital environment. The best way to address and nurture our students’ needs is to adapt while being faithful to our mission.

CNR will flourish if we push information out to students digitally and teach them the critical skills of finding and evaluating it for themselves. Students need to manage their information and materials using online tools and collaborative platforms. They deserve the opportunity to share learning with an authentic audience made up of peers, experts in the field, and a global audience. To remain competitive and vibrant it is critical to be enthusiastic of innovation and supportive of those who may feel overwhelmed. Treasuring and promoting curiosity and creativity in our students comes naturally to librarians. Bringing new tools to teachers as a way to provide alternate ways for students to find information, create meaning, and share their learning is a unique skill librarians can bring to their institutions. We are here to stay!

—Ana Fontoura, Dean



DESCENDANTS OF CNR FOUNDER MOTHER IRENE GILL VISIT ANCESTOR’S LEGACY

Australian descendants of Mother Irene Gill, the founder of The College of New Rochelle, recently visited the campus and marveled at the legacy of their ancestor.

Cathy Cartledge’s great-grandfather Joshua Gill was Mother Irene Gill’s older brother. When the Gill family left Ireland in the 1860s, Joshua and Kate, another sister, settled in Australia while the rest of the family came to New York.

Cartledge has been in touch with Sr. Martha Counihan, the College’s archivist, since CNR’s Centennial celebrations in 2004. Now Cartledge’s daughter, Erin, is working in New York City, and she jumped at the chance to visit the campus, Leland Castle, and, specifically, the Mother Irene Gill Library.

Mother Irene was born Lucy Gill on March 25, 1856, in Aughrim, County Galway, Ireland. She and her family immigrated to New York around 1868, and she entered the Ursuline community in the Bronx in 1876. Her founding of the College of St. Angela was the result of following the long Ursuline tradition of education. Mother Irene’s younger sister, Elizabeth, also known as Mother Augustine, also played a large role in the growth of the College, which would come to be known as The College of New Rochelle in 1910.