

## Colleen Vietzen, 1940–2025

Colleen Vietzen, former university librarian on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of Natal (UNP), died on 20 January 2025 at the age of 84. As she was fond of reminding people, she was born on the first day of the London blitz, 7 September 1940.

Colleen's family of four was a close one and she had special affection for her father. He was a magistrate so they moved fairly frequently and Colleen developed fluency in Zulu. At university she had a particular attachment to the Afrikaans Department later spending a year in Holland; and she also studied German under the legendary Frau Dr Schmidt-Ihms. Her linguistic ability covered five languages. Her first job was in the library of Girls High School (GHS) in Pietermaritzburg before a move to the university library where she worked on the issue desk. A colleague was struck by 'her practical intelligence: when she had a problem to solve, she always looked for the simplest and most sensible way of doing so.' She applied this intelligence to fields well beyond the library; in her creative work for instance. And she was a practitioner of lifelong education, learning maths and to play the piano for example.

She bought her own house at a time when single young women rarely did so. In time its outbuilding would house several fugitives during the states of emergency in the late-1980s. This house was inhabited by a succession of animals: most notably her Siamese cats, Henk and Tienieke, then Matilda the corgi. Tilda was an astonishingly obedient dog who accompanied Colleen to work and slept under her desk, although there were doubts in some quarters about whether this was within university rules. Finally, Iolanthe, her one-eyed calico cat, made the move to Woodgrove.

Colleen had a strong ethical compass and her Christian faith propelled her towards goodness. She was

theologically well-read and always striving for better understanding. She put her faith into practice as a devout member of the Anglican Church, in particular as a lay minister at the Cathedral of the Holy Nativity; but also performed other roles in the diocese of Natal.

She became university librarian on the Pietermaritzburg campus in 1978. She was the first to acknowledge her great good luck to inherit a post occupied by Ron Brown who engineered the library split with Durban and who was a highly professional and scholarly librarian of the old school; and then Don Schauder a pioneer of



*Colleen Vietzen (third from left middle row) as deputy university librarian in 1974. Don Schauder is next to her*

everything electronic in libraries. Don had huge respect and affection for Colleen and felt privileged to be her colleague, well aware of her capable management skills.

Her great strength was a clear understanding that the success of the library, and thus the value of her own career, lay in other people. She was unthreatened by the abilities of others and recognised, recruited and harnessed them to the benefit of the department. This is basic common sense, but it's not that common. By South African standards, let alone world, the UNP library was quite small but what it lacked in size it made up for in ingenuity.

Colleen had a catch phrase: she 'would consider

every bandwagon that came rolling past our front door'. Quick preliminary assessments were made before jumping on any wagon that seemed to have potential for the department, its users and staff. And there was significance in the front door: as head of department Colleen's office was the first passed by every user of the main library. One of her achievements was to recruit young professional librarians straight out of their higher diploma courses. They did not necessarily stay long and moved on, but Colleen's Jesuitical approach had been fulfilled: train them young and instil good practice.

A senior colleague remembers that Colleen 'allowed you to soar ... UNP was the only university library where I ever worked that was not only not a mess, but had excellent standards and was ahead of the game ... where true librarianship was practised ... professional, erudite and focused. I learnt more at UNP library than all the rest put together, and that was partly because Colleen allowed you to fly. She was very generous about other people's strengths, was never jealous, and let them flourish.' Another recalled her 'as a graceful presence ... she was good at recognising staff members' strengths and gave them the freedom and encouragement to express these qualities at work. There were a lot of positives in her time as head of the library.'

Colleen was fiercely effective in defending her colleagues. Like all large institutions the University of Natal displayed plenty of injustices and she was never afraid and always courageous in confronting powerful people – mainly men of course in those days – when necessary. This explains why so many of her col-



*Colleen in her Woodgrove years (courtesy Mary Bizley)*

leagues were so loyal. University departmental heads were influential and respected people in those days and Colleen had exactly the right temperament and personality to make effective use of the position.

She took early retirement in May 1996 and in one farewell she was thanked for years of mutual support: 'above all you have sustained an ethos which has made possible the exercise of creativity, imagination and the unorthodox and from which we have all benefited.' Colleen's working life touched the careers of many colleagues in profound and positive ways that reached far beyond the relatively small organisation she ran in Pietermaritzburg.

The way she enabled the careers of so many librarians sums up her own great success.

Colleen lived at Woodgrove for the last 23 years of her life, not far from her older sister, Sylvia, former head of GHS, who died in August 2023. Colleen played an important role in that community taking on responsibility for the weekly diary, running the film club and, above all, walking dogs and looking after cats. She had also played a leading role in developing the wonderful community library. Just as she had been so supportive of her library colleagues, so she was loyal to Woodgrove and its ethos and was accordingly loved and respected; not least for her quirky sense of humour.

- This obituary is based on information and memories contributed by Mary Bizley, Carol Brammage, Christine Forbes Merrett, Mark Laing, Christopher Merrett, Dot Proctor, Cherryl Schauder and Elizabeth van Heyningen.