

JACQUELYN H. THOMAS '45, '62, '69 (Hon.); P'78, P'79, P'81  
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Jacquelyn Thomas — During your 35-year leadership tenure as Academy librarian, you transformed the Class of 1945 Library into an intellectual and cultural epicenter at the heart of campus life. Your visionary initiatives to bring Harkness teaching — as well as the diverse voices of visiting poets, artists and musicians — into the library proper promoted inclusivity and academic rigor. You elevated the status of the library not only within the Exeter community but internationally as well. As one colleague says, “It is the librarian who makes the library something more than four walls.”

You arrived at Exeter in 1957 with your husband, David, a classics instructor. Moving into the fourth floor of Wheelwright Hall, you found your world opened up. You met people with upbringings and outlooks much different than those you knew in the rural town of Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, where you grew up. You spent the next 19 years living in school dormitories, raising your daughters, and caring for “the dorm boys” with game nights and Saturday hot dog dinners.

When your youngest daughter turned 5, you decided to pursue a master’s degree in library science at the University of New Hampshire. An internship at the Davis Library provided you with a lens on every aspect of library operation. When a full-time position opened up, you boldly told then-librarian Rodney Armstrong that you could do the job in half the time. He took you at your word and hired you as a part-time staff member in 1971, the same year the first books were transferred to the new Class of 1945 Library. At the time, faculty spouses did not hold full-time jobs, so this part-time position was how you “entered through the back door,” as you say. You worked hard making yourself indispensable and, in 1977, were appointed Academy librarian and a full faculty member. You were the first woman to hold this post and the first faculty spouse to become a faculty member.

It was in the early years of Exeter’s transition to coeducation, and these firsts did not go unnoticed or unchallenged. But you were determined: As a founding member of the Committee to Enhance the Status of Women, you championed gender equality on campus. On the Child Care Governing Board, you spearheaded the creation of the first childcare center for faculty. Those who worked with you appreciated your forthright manner and strength of conviction, saying you “never backed away from a knotty problem and always brought creativity, thoughtful inquiry, and a strong sense of right and wrong to every issue.”

Inside the library you promoted change as well. You invited all faculty colleagues, for example, to teach in the library and installed a Harkness table in the building’s central atrium. You pushed for the library to be recognized

as a sophisticated learning tool and the librarians as professional partners. In 1989, you were honored with the Rupert Radford '15 Faculty Fellowship and a year later were named the first James H. Ottaway Jr. '55 Chair. After 25 years, the Academy recognized you as “a teacher of teachers.”

To enact your ideas, you raised funds and spurred generous gifts — like the 1632 folio of Shakespeare — that added to the Special Collection’s national prestige. You furthered the library’s reach through brochures, pamphlets and publications, and in 1994 you oversaw the digitization of the library catalog. “Omnipresent and omnidirectional,” you also coached girls tennis and served on more than 20 committees, including the Curriculum Committee.

Not surprisingly, some of your most memorable achievements happened inside the library, where you curated a safe haven for scholars and a vibrant venue for community engagement. With inspired imagination, you invited 10 Tibetan monks to build a sand mandala in the center of the library’s Rockefeller Hall. You pioneered the Lamont Poetry Series to bring poets like Jorge Luis Borges, Allen Ginsberg and Gwendolyn Brooks to campus to speak their truth. You organized a summer concert series and rotating art exhibitions. You gave students a voice as library proctors and as creators of bookmarks to share their reading lists.

You say you were fortunate no one gave you a job description when you were named the Academy librarian because you were able to do what you thought should be done. As one former student says: “She furthered two major aspects of campus life — the library and the status of women — to such an extent that the Exeter campus owes no small part of what it is today to her. She is an Exeter institution.”

In commemoration of the lasting and transformative impact you have had on the library, this Academy and generations of students, it is our great pleasure and privilege to present to you the 2021 Founders’ Day Award.