

Get to Know ...

Ben Aldred

Gwen Sinclair

Ben Aldred, GODORT's immediate past chair, has many personas: folklorist, Phillies fan, novelist, role-playing game enthusiast, musician, and, of course, government information librarian. "I am the quintessential accidental gov docs librarian," Ben, who uses they/them pronouns, explained. "I had gone back to library school because I'd gotten a PhD but there weren't a lot of job opportunities at the time in 2009." Needing one more class to graduate, they took the government information course. Luckily, a position as social sciences and government information librarian at Loyola University Chicago opened up when they graduated. "I started doing that and never looked back," they said. In 2017 they moved to the University of Illinois at Chicago, where they are an associate professor and reference librarian, the FDLP coordinator and maps librarian, and the liaison to the College of Urban Planning and Public Administration and the Jane Addams College of Social Work.

Ben feels that library school prepared them well for a career in government information, but not in the way you might think. Critical skills they learned include collaboration and the importance of knowledge-sharing among professionals. "Every single government information question is a scavenger hunt the first time you get it, and someone else can give you a hint along the way," they emphasized. They are a big proponent of getting involved in professional associations like GODORT in addition to state and regional associations. "The best way to learn gov info librarianship is from your colleagues, so take advantage of those opportunities," they said. In GODORT, they have been involved in projects that helped with skills, such as the Government Information Online virtual reference service and the Voting and Elections Toolkits project. They have also developed a better understanding of how ALA operates and how they can use its programs and services at their library. "And I've gotten to know people I'm very happy to see at conferences," they added.

Asked what they love about their job, Ben replied, "I really love it when I'm able to help someone get the information they've been looking for. The delight that they express keeps me going." They recalled a particularly memorable interaction they had with a printmaking student who was creating an artwork about air quality in Chicago and needed Ben's help to find a map showing rail lines. "At the end of the semester, she showed

up at my office with a copy of the print. It was meaningful in a cool way, helping a student do something that they otherwise wouldn't have been able to do." According to Ben, characteristics that make someone a good government information librarian include a "willingness to dig for information, a doggedness in pursuit of the right document, and spirit of inquiry." In addition, they noted that one needs an understanding of how bureaucracies work. "One of the things that is really useful is figuring out who is doing this. Who is tracking a particular piece of data? How are they supposed to report it?" Ben wants to learn more about the rulemaking process and how public comments can influence that process. They are especially eager to help social work students learn to navigate and shape the Illinois Code of Regulations as they move into professional roles.

In their free time, Ben is a fiction writer in the fantasy genre. Their book *Once Chosen* came out in 2021 and they are hard at work on another novel. They also love theater and are "a big Shakespeare nerd," having seen twenty-six of Shakespeare's plays. Much of their reading is in service of their work, so they are currently dissecting *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler with a student who is researching drag ban laws. They also enjoy listening to podcasts such as *The Constant: A History of Getting Things Wrong*, which discusses historical misconceptions.

Asked about their favorite government resources, they said, "It's hard to top the photos that are put out by NASA, in terms of sheer beauty and accessibility. All of these amazing public domain photos of space that are put out for the world to enjoy—that is wonderful!" They also appreciate the Census. "I love the ACS [American Community Survey] and the way that we try to measure the nation on a regular basis to get a sense of what matters to people." In the final analysis, it is plain to see that Ben is a hardcore government information librarian. To them, government information is "a really special and important part of the library world."

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