

# Jeffrey Lee Baskin



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JOHN SYKES JR.

“I forget how old I am half the time. A lot of times I think I’m 35. The problem is, when I do something I did at 35, I hurt.”

## Library director helps Laman Library grow to meet the needs of its patrons

ERIC FRANCIS

SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

The Vietnam War almost broke Jeff Baskin; a mother’s love and a job at a library restored him.

A native New Yorker who has been in Arkansas since 1976, Baskin has been director of North Little Rock’s William F. Laman Library System since 1986. Before his life-changing experiences in the war, he was just another kid kicking around the Big Apple who loved to sail and fish and had a dream of one day becoming a forester.

Yes, a forester. Libraries were nowhere in the picture.

His parents, Bernie and Muriel Baskin, lived in Manhattan, where his father was a goldsmith and his mother worked at various jobs, including one that didn’t sit well with young Jeffrey.

“When I was young, I didn’t like my mother very much,” he said. “All of my school friends had fat old mothers. My mother was a Clairol model — she’d come home every day with a different color hair, different kind of gown. I wanted a fat old mother just like everyone else.”

She never accommodated that wish. Baskin recalls going to Florida to clear out her apartment after she died and

finding a couple of gowns in the back of her closet.

“I couldn’t get my arm through the gown, she was that tiny,” said Baskin, 66, who is slender himself.

He graduated from George Washington High School in New York in 1964 and enrolled in Long Island University, but in 1968 his college education was cut short when he was drafted into the U.S. Army and sent to fight in Vietnam. It is an experience Baskin politely, but flatly, refuses to discuss in detail. Discussing even the aftermath brings a hard look to a normally gentle, expressive face.

“I got out of the service at the very end of 1969 and I was crazy and nobody would hire me,” Baskin said frankly. “I really, seriously needed a job and a place to live. Also, I was drafted out of college and when I got back, the college wouldn’t accept me back to school.”

Drawing upon that childhood desire, he applied to the forestry school at Moravian College in Pennsylvania, only to be rejected by them as well.

“Nobody wanted a Vietnam veteran,” Baskin recalled. “Even the banks didn’t want me, they turned me down. I couldn’t find a job.”

Soon he was “sort of griftless and getting myself into trouble” on the streets

of New York, in dire need of a job and a place to stay.

“So my mother got ahold of the administration of C.W. Post College [part of Long Island University], the dean and the president, and whatever she said was effective because they let me back in school,” Baskin said. “They gave me a job in the library, and I lived in a little apartment in the library.”

“That was home,” he said. “I made sure the library was shut up and locked at night.”

When he finished his bachelor’s degree and started thinking about pursuing graduate studies in psychology, the dean of the library school — one of the largest in the country at the time — took him aside.

“He said, ‘What are you taking a master’s in psychology for? Why don’t you stay and get a master’s in library science?’” Baskin said. “I had never thought about that. He said, ‘You could be a graduate assistant, we’ll pay your way through library school. You can still stay here in your little closet, still have a job in the library.’ I said, ‘That sounds good to me, let’s do it.’”

And with that, the directionless Vietnam veteran who not long before couldn’t even find a job found a career path that

would challenge, reward and complete him.

### ‘THERE WAS A YOUNG LADY’

That path led to Arkansas as a result of his first job after graduate school, working for a human resources school on Long Island, where one of his duties was to give an annual training on how to design libraries that were accessible for disabled children. In the mid-1970s, the assistant director of the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences library attended the training and afterward asked Baskin to come down and consult on their plans, which he did. It led to an offer for a full-time job.

“I decided to come work for a year or so, and then go back to New York,” Baskin said. “But my wife and I loved Arkansas so much, we stayed.”

That was 1976, the same year he married Susan Weinstein. The two met while he was living in a small town on Long Island Sound called Port Washington. He owned a little sailboat and every summer afternoon would take it out on the sound.

“One day, I’m sitting on the beach, a beautiful Sunday morning, waiting for the wind to come up, and there was a young lady in a blue bikini sitting in the sand in

See **BASKIN**, Page 5D

## Fitness buffs’ bracelets help keep track of goals

What with all the gadgets and doodads they’ve invented to help us out with workouts and weight-loss efforts, it was inevitable that someone would come up with some a fashion jewelry piece that does so.

Count Me Healthy bracelets by designer Chelsea Charles are one-of-a-kind patented journal bracelets featuring movable beads that allow women to track their daily health goals by sliding said beads from one side of the bracelet to another. Count Me Healthy Bracelets — whose celebrity fans include Underwood, Selena Gomez, Fergie, Cameron Diaz and Taylor Swift — come in two collections:

■ The mixed metal bracelets,

which are the fashion pieces. They’re available in more than 35 styles of sterling silver, rose gold and gold. Featured on *The Doctors* as well as *The Dr. Oz Show*, they may be used to count such things as daily glasses of water, fruit and vegetable servings, pounds lost, caffeinated beverages, or workouts.

■ The new Color Collection, designed to help count high-intensity interval exercise sets. The sterling silver, 14-karat gold-dipped and 18-karat rose gold-dipped beads slide easily, but stay in place no matter how hard the wearer works out. The colored chroma cord is sweat resistant.

The bracelets are designed to See **DRESSING**, Page 8D

### DRESSING ROOM



HELAINE WILLIAMS

## Pair give Supper & Soul the works



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STATON BREIDENTHAL

Sherra and Eddie Armstrong are co-chairmen of Arkansas Baptist College’s Supper & Soul fundraiser, and although their role is certainly honorable, there’s been nothing “honorary” about it. “Most of this we didn’t realize was [previously] handled by the staff here at Arkansas Baptist,” Eddie says. “And when we got our marching orders, it was like, ‘OK there’s some real work that needs to go into this.’”

HELAINE WILLIAMS  
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

In October 2010, Arkansas Baptist College hosted a major fundraiser whose inaugural title was Gala for Hope. The featured entertainer was the Rev. Al Green. The honorary chairmen were Susan and Dr. Alonzo Williams.

When the Williamses’ daughter Sherra and her husband, state Rep. Eddie Armstrong of North Little Rock, became co-chairmen of this year’s edition of what’s now known as Supper & Soul, their role was more than honorary.

The couple were told that “usually ... people who chair these events don’t do this much work,” Sherra says. “We had no idea, because they asked and we did it. We’re happy to help in any way we can. We’re expected to work hard.”

That’s exactly what they did. Now the couple are putting the finishing touches on the 2014 edition of this fundraiser, that bene-

See **SOUL**, Page 8D

# Baskin

● Continued from Page 1D

front of me," he recalled. "When the wind started picking up, she got up to leave and that bikini called to me. I invited her sailing; she looked at me like I was nuts and said yes."

It turns out the young lady was a motorcycle-riding veterinarian, and the sight of her in the blue bikini wearing a motorcycle helmet is still "one of the funniest things I'd ever seen," Baskin said. For her part, she called his sailboat, which was his pride and joy, "an oversized surfboard." They've been together ever since. The couple still own that Honda she was riding, complete with the parking sticker from her days at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, though these days Weinstein's two-wheeling is done on a scooter. She works for the Arkansas Department of Health as the state public health veterinarian.

The couple have three children: son Bernie lives in Singapore and is a publisher of travel books; daughter Meredith is a nurse in Little Rock; and son Danny, an artist who recently returned to Arkansas after living in New Orleans and Thailand, plans to pursue a master of fine arts degree at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville this fall.

Baskin is a natty dresser with a penchant for bow ties and telling corny jokes. To wit: "A pirate is invited to a Halloween party and is told to come in costume. On the night of the party he shows up at the door with his girlfriend tied to his back. The host tells him, 'I said you had to wear a costume.' The pirate says, 'Arrrr! I am in costume. I'm a crab, and that's Michelle.'"

Baskin and Weinstein live in the same house in west Little Rock's Spring Valley that they bought when they came to the state. They are music lovers, especially jazz and the music of the '60s. He's not a music maker, though, having tried several instruments and failed at them all. They enjoy the theater and the arts, and Baskin likes to go fishing.

## 'RAISE YOUR MILLAGE' AND RUN

"My favorite fishing is deep-sea fishing but in Arkansas that's hard to do. I can't cast that far," he deadpans. "I like bass fishing. We have a lake near our house and I do it there. When I'm fishing I like to smoke a cigar and have a can of beer and I don't care if I catch anything or not."

For decades his main hobby has been bookbinding, spurred by a class on printing and rare books during graduate school. He didn't take it up until he moved to Arkansas and found a bookbinder willing to let him apprentice and learn the craft. Through a neighbor, he learned of a retired bookbinder in El Dorado who had a full shop of vintage equipment he didn't use.

"There was nothing younger in there than 1910," Baskin said. "It included all the gold leaf, the marbled papers. It was fascinating."

After a long afternoon of casual conversation, during which Baskin had to prove his chops by stitching up a damaged book, he was finally able to buy the lot for \$2,000. He moved it all into a shop outside his house.

"I've slowed down on binding because I've developed arthritis in my fingers," Baskin said. "You have to have strong hands to bind. I'm doing a lot more repair work



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JOHN SYKES JR.

"Jeff and I, I guess, are almost the senior library directors in the state," said Bobby Roberts, director of the Central Arkansas Library System. "He, I believe, was the first in the state to run a millage raise back in 1993. ... He won, and we did one right after that. He set an example for the rest of us to get out there, raise your millage, and improve your system."

than I am straight binding." After 10 years at UAMS, the Laman Library position came open in 1986 and Baskin was picked for the job. What he found in North Little Rock, he said, was a library "stuck in a time warp."

"It was dark, small, its collection was old, and it seemed like 50 percent of the collection was indiscriminate donations," he remembered. "The teen collection was dismal — literature from the '40s and '50s. The children's collection was worn out. I decided, 'This is great! I can actually do something worthwhile here. I can try to bring it up.'"

In his first few years he got to know the community and the elected officials, sought and won a millage increase under a newly approved constitutional provision, and started building the collection and computerizing the card catalog. During his career the main library building at 2801 Orange St. has been expanded three times, including a major 2003 project that doubled its size to 50,000 square feet. He has also consistently invested in new technology and expanded services.

That has earned him a lot of respect among fellow library directors — among them Bobby Roberts, head of the Central Arkansas Library System, a regional doughnut in which Laman Library is the independent hole.

"Jeff and I, I guess, are almost the senior library directors in the state," said Roberts, who started his job in 1989. "Our systems have grown up together and we've known each other for years."

And over those years, Baskin has offered an example for other libraries to follow, he said.

"He, I believe, was the first in the state to run a millage raise back in 1993, when the constitutional amendment was changed," Roberts said. "He won, and we did one

right after that. He set an example for the rest of us to get out there, raise your millage, and improve your system."

Roberts also praised Baskin for being an early adopter of new technology. In fact, he admitted, CALS "always looks and sees what they're doing and if it's working before we venture into it."

Furthermore, he said, Baskin recognized that libraries needed to change to meet the needs of patrons, to become gathering places, hosting concerts and lectures, and to provide services like Laman's passport application office. As it happens, Roberts and his wife got their passports at Laman Library a few years ago.

"I think having their gallery where they can bring in quality programs is great, and converting the post office in downtown North Little Rock, that's the kind of thing forward-looking libraries are doing," he said. "He's really good at seeing ways to integrate the library into the community."

## 'EVERYTHING FOR KNOWLEDGE'

In 2006, Baskin opened Laman's first branch library in historic Argenta. This month that facility is being moved into the old U.S. Post Office at Fifth and Main streets, a 1932 building that has been renovated and, with 15,000 square feet, will provide triple the space of the old branch. In addition to far more room for programming, computers and the collection, the new branch will also incorporate a pocket park on the south side of the building, and the rear loading dock will be repurposed as a patio and outdoor stage.

"It's been an interesting, aggravating time," Baskin said of the project during a tour of the building in late January, while contractors were hustling to complete all the upgrades and restoration.

## SELF PORTRAIT

### Jeff Baskin

■ **DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH:** Aug. 2, 1947, Jewish Memorial Hospital in uptown Manhattan. It's not there anymore.

■ **FAVORITE BOOK?** I don't have a favorite book. I read two or three books at a time. My favorite genre is horror — what they call dark fantasy or macabre. My least favorite is Stephen King; I like more subtle horror.

■ **FAVORITE BEDTIME STORIES?** I generally have a book of short stories next to the bed. One of my favorite ghost stories is "The Woman in Black" by Susan Hill.

■ **MY FIRST CAR** cost me \$500, a Volkswagen Karmann Ghia. The car [my wife] Susan drove was a Karmann Ghia, also.

■ **A SMELL THAT MAKES ME NOSTALGIC:** The creosote in railroad ties. When I was young, living in Manhattan, every

summer for years my parents would send me to summer camp, four weeks up in the Catskills. To get there we would go down to Grand Central Station and take the railroad. We would get off the trains and the first thing you would smell was the overwhelming smell of creosoted railroad ties.

■ **I USE MY LIBRARY CARD** just about once a week. Being library director, I can get the books that are just published and be the first one to read them.

■ **IF I WEREN'T A LIBRARIAN I'D** travel.

■ **... BUT, FOR A LIVING, I WOULD** travel.

■ **MY LAST MEAL WOULD INCLUDE** pizza. It has to be New York style thin-crust pizza, double cheese, and I want a Rheingold or Knickerbocker beer.

■ **ONE WORD TO SUM ME UP:** Joyous.

He tries to open doors for all people."

For 24 years of Baskin's career the mayor he worked with was Patrick Henry Hays, who left office last year. Hays praised what he called an "A+" relationship between the city and the library system during his time at City Hall.

"You find me hard-pressed to find something I thought was neglected in Jeff Baskin's leadership in the library and partnership with the city," Hays said. "Jeff's footprints are very large in North Little Rock and will continue to be appreciated for years to come."

With nearly 30 years at the helm and a monumental project like the new Argenta branch under his belt, it may seem like a good time for Baskin to start thinking of retirement. After all, the post office renovation would make quite the swan song. He says it's not that simple.

"No. I don't know. Maybe. I don't know," he said of the possibility. "The decision to retire is a very scary decision because I love what I do. I'm not tired of it. But at some point you have to decide that, in order to keep growing, it needs new blood. At some point you have to make a conscious decision to step aside and allow younger generations to fulfill their dreams."

"I haven't made that decision yet," Baskin said. "Though this is the last major project I will undertake. Probably."

Even this far into his third decade on the job, Baskin certainly doesn't lack for enthusiasm and energy. He sparkles when he talks about what libraries have become and what role they can and will play in the future. But he is also aware that nothing is quite as easy as it was when he was a 30-something newcomer to his adopted home state.

"I forget how old I am half the time," Baskin said. "A lot of times I think I'm 35. The problem is, when I do something I did at 35, I hurt."



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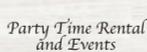
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