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Days Past: Make haste to be kind —the life of Allen Rothlisberg

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1 of 4



Library Director Allen Rothlisberg of the previous Prescott Public Library on Gurley Street, receives honor from the Arizona S Association. April 10, 1967 (1100-2026-1001). (Sharlot Hall Museum/Courtesy)

He was Arizona Librarian of the Year, a deacon and a family man. He expanded two of the area's libraries and oversaw a youth center built in Chino Valley in 1995. He was universally acknowledged as a decent human being, fostering mentorships with various community organizations, including the Kiwanis, where he was a charter member. His name was Allen Rothlisberg, and he would have been 80 this year.

Energetic Rothlisberg was hired in 1963 after two previous library directors sounded the alarm that the Prescott Public Library, formally on Gurley Street, was running out of space. He had just graduated with his Master of Science Degree in Library Science from Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio, Texas. The first thing he tackled was space; when City Hall was built in December 1963, Rothlisberg worked to coordinate storing some library overflow in the basement of that building. He worked with the Prescott Sunrise Lions' Club to bring a mobile Talking Books Library, a product of the Arizona Regional Library, for the blind and physically handicapped. He also started the first local large print collection at the Prescott Public Library on Gurley Street.

In 1966 Rothlisberg was named Arizona Librarian of the Year. Rather than centering on his own accomplishments, he started a newspaper column called "Library Luminaries," celebrating the accomplishments of library volunteers.

In 1967 he added the card catalog system to the library and encouraged volunteers to start the Friends of the Prescott Public Library, an organization which raises money to support library programming. In 1968, Rothlisberg added the foreign language section to the children's library, books which until that time had only been accessible through the Arizona State Library Extension Service. In 1968, Rothlisberg procured a bookmobile for the libraries in Yavapai County (before the Yavapai Library Network), sharing circulating books between all libraries out of the Prescott Public Library building on Gurley street.

For years, former library director Alice Metzger said the library on Gurley Street was outgrowing its space, and that became a primary focus of Rothlisberg's tenure in Prescott. In 1964 he said the "average library lasts 45 years. We've been around 60." His contributions not only ensured that the Prescott Public Library is around today, it was under his leadership that the current Prescott Public Library was built on Goodwin Street.

Rothlisberg left his work with the Prescott Public Library on Goodwin Street in 1974 to become the director of learning resources and head librarian for Northland Pioneer College in Holbrook, Arizona, from 1975-1992. He then returned to this area to become the library director for the Chino Valley Library and recreation coordinator for that city. In 1999 he advocated for an auditorium to be built, so that Chino Valley residents could experience local music and theater. His work was unfinished.

On March 18, 1999, Rothlisberg's vehicle got a flat tire on Willow Lake Road shortly after 7 a.m. Pulling onto the shoulder to change the tire, he was struck by another car. Rothlisberg was thrown 40 feet, the driver didn't stop. An hour later, Rothlisberg died of his injuries at Yavapai Regional Medical Center. The other driver pled guilty to the class three felony charge of leaving the scene of a fatal accident, and was incarcerated for three years.

Rothlisberg was beloved by all who knew him. He made an impact on our community and endeavored to do much more. In Chino Valley, a plaque commemorates him with his best-known quote: "Life is short. We do not have much time for our journey together. So be swift to love, make haste to be kind, and go forth to love and serve the Lord."

"Days Past" is a collaborative project of the Sharlot Hall Museum and the Prescott Corral of Westerners International (www.prescottcorral.org). This and other Days Past articles are also available at www.archives.sharlothallmuseum.org/articles/days-past-articles/1. The public is encouraged to submit proposed articles and inquiries to dayspast@sharlothallmuseum.org Please contact SHM Research Center reference desk at 928-277-2003, or via email at archivesrequest@sharlothallmuseum.org for information or assistance with photo requests.

