My journey into the archival profession has brought me back to my hometown and the community library I attended as a youth with my aunt and cousins. I currently work as an archival specialist for the Chicago Public Library’s Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection. I had a brief chance to brush shoulders with Beverly A. Cook, an archivist and librarian with over 30 years of experience, who was integral to the growth of the Harsh Research Collection (HRC).

I was able to absorb knowledge, witness challenging decision-making, and ask—many annoying and nagging—questions of someone with more years of institutional knowledge and experience than I have lived. Each day as it crept up to Ms. Cook’s retirement, I began to become more and more overwhelmed at the thought of our department losing such a valued member with a vast skill set and knowledge. Luckily, she took me under her wing for the last two months of her tenure with the HRC. Maybe this is just the person she is, caring and wanting those she knows to succeed and reach their full potential.

Ms. Cook wanted me to assist her in processing the papers of a gentlemen named Leland B. Elder Jr., whose career at Chicago Public Library (CPL) began in 1984 and lasted until 2016. Like any rookie employee seeking to impress their veteran coworkers, I jumped in head first. Through this experience, she encouraged me to communicate with her deliberately throughout the process by asking questions. As a young archivist, the time we spent deciding the arrangement and series titles and discussing how I could strengthen the historical note has proven to be invaluable. I am extremely fortunate to have had time with Beverly Cook.


Not needing a break, Elder enlisted in the United States Air Force, serving four years, 1977–1981. Upon his return from the air force, Elder enrolled at the University of Illinois Chicago, earning his master’s in mass communication. Shortly after finishing at UIC, Elder obtained a CPL internship, which turned into an offer for a position in the Office of Public Information in 1984, making him the second Black American named to the department at the time.

Early in Elder’s career, he was responsible for developing contacts with print, television, and radio news reporters, directors, and producers to further CPL ties with local and national level media coverage outlets. During that time, he would also accompany the library staff photographers on assignments to set up photo opportunities and write photo captions for media releases.

More duties emerged as Elder ascended through the CPL ranks. He began contributing to the CPL monthly staff newsletters. He edited and wrote for newsletters such as CPL Newsletter, CPL Matters, and CPL Insight. The latter of the newsletters publicized the selection process for library materials and spotlighted the overall construction of the new Harold Washington Library Center located in central downtown Chicago, which was dedicated to the first Black mayor of Chicago on October 4, 1991, and opened on October 7, 1991.

(Continued on page 34)
UP-AND-COMERS—Continued

Meredith Lowe, Assistant Editor

(Continued from page 33)
Down the line, Elder became a vital member of the library’s Celebrating Diversity (CD) committee. One of his duties on this committee was to oversee the marketing and advertising of CD events. That included writing and editing press releases and outreach materials for Celebrating Diversity programs such as pamphlets for Women’s History Month.

Elder wrote the press releases to give to local radio and news outlets as well as to community and citywide partners of the Chicago Public Library. Today, the Celebrating Diversity program has developed into one of CPL’s major annual celebrations lasting the majority of a given year. Throughout the year, CPL highlights a number of cultural, ethnic, and underrepresented people starting in African American History Month in February. The rest of the Celebrating Diversity honorees are as follows:

- March—Women’s History Month
- April—Poetry Month
- May—Asian Pacific Heritage Month
- June—Pride Month
- July—Diversability Pride Month
- September/October—LatinX Heritage Month
- October—Polish American Heritage Month
- November—Native American History Month

The A Raisin in the Sun resource guide was created to support reading annotations for the citywide discussion. Leland B. Elder, Jr. Papers [Box 17, Folder 15], Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago Public Library.

One of his extended duties was helping to create and implement the citywide book club advertising campaign One Book, One Chicago, which launched in fall 2001. One Book, One Chicago is an opportunity to engage and enlighten community members and to strengthen our sense of community through reading. In 2013, One Book, One Chicago launched an expansion to the program. The expansion entailed moving to two book selections annually with programming in spring and fall. Ultimately, the many well-managed tasks, responsibilities, and accomplishments were ongoing, as were the progressive challenges that Elder continued to meet until his well-earned retirement in July of 2016.

Chicago has a long history of being a segregated city; however, a variety of ideas has been implemented to combat that. The Chicago Public Library set programs in place to highlight our individuality while bringing Chicagoans together as one. With the 150th anniversary of the Chicago Public Library coming up next year, it seemed fitting to highlight this collection. Leland Elder Jr. played a key role in the creation and dissemination of outreach materials for the One Book, One Chicago program, which aimed at bringing community members closer to each other through literature.

(Continued on page 36)
Today, housed at the Carter G. Woodson Regional Library in Washington Heights, the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection is the largest African American history and literature collection in the Midwest and continues to document the Black experience in Chicago. The Harsh Research Collection was founded in 1932 as the “Special Negro Collection.” Vivian Harsh was the Chicago Public Library’s first Black branch head and the originator of an acclaimed collection of African American history and literature that contains everything from manuscripts by Langston Hughes and Richard Wright to the Path Press Archives (https://www.chipublib.org/fa-path-press-archives) and the personal papers of prominent figures such as Robert Sengstacke Abbott, founder of the Chicago Defender in 1905 (https://www.chipublib.org/fa-abbott-sengstacke-family-papers-2).