

CORONAVIRUS

Donna Johnson, who led Allina Health's library for decades, dies of COVID-19 at 82

By Kelly Smith | JULY 30, 2020 – 5:00PM

Donna Johnson became a nationally renowned medical library leader while overseeing Allina Health's library during an era of dramatic change — from the start of mini computers with CD-ROM drives to videoconferencing.

While patients probably didn't realize it, Johnson's behind-the-scenes innovations helped doctors access up-to-date research — in Minneapolis and across rural Minnesota.

"She was constantly trying to figure out what's the next thing we should be taking on to further our mission," said Jim Bulger, Allina's manager of library services. "She was constantly kind of pushing the envelope."

Johnson, who spent most of her life in Hopkins, died of COVID-19 on June 14. She was 82.

Born Donna Mae Peterson in 1937, Johnson grew up in Faribault and was hired as the chief librarian in 1970 at the newly merged Abbott and Northwestern Hospital. The single mom of two began a 32-year career leading the health care system's library and media services.

But her work stretched beyond the hospital. She helped start the library at Children's Minnesota and an outreach program for rural health care providers to access Abbott Northwestern's library. The Friends of the National Library of Medicine later gave her the Michael E. DeBakey Library Services Outreach Award for serving rural communities.

In 1995, the library started a videoconferencing network. Although it was created for meetings, librarian Pam Barnard said Johnson foresaw the growing need for telehealth.

"She always encouraged us to embrace change because even back then health care was changing so much," she said.

Johnson retired in 2002 but her love of libraries continued. She volunteered with the Friends of the Hopkins Library for years and later rearranged the library at her assisted-living home in Minneapolis.

"Libraries were in her blood," said her daughter Pamela Jo Johnson of Fargo, N.D.

Pamela called her mother an influencer in her career in epidemiology and like a second parent to her son, Trudell Dunkley-Johnson, listening to rap music with him or cheering him on at football games.

Johnson also was a loyal Vikings fan, sporting a jersey and purple nails or a purple streak through her blond hair. She loved singing, researching her genealogy (back to the 1500s in Norway) and traveling the U.S. on bus tours.

Services won't be held due to COVID-19. Johnson is survived by her daughter, grandson, son Greg Johnson of Eden Prairie and sister Lynn Tieman of Madison, Wis.



Donna Johnson