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THERESA CRISTOBAL GIVES NEW LIFE TO DAMAGED BOOKS GROSSMONT COLLEGE LIBRARY TECH CONTINUES TRADITION

El Cajon - Theresa Cristobal positioned the patient on the table and with a sharp blade made a quick, hissing, incision down the length of the spine. Deftly she flipped the three-pound patient over and repeated the incision down the spine's other side.

Without its support, the contents flopped feebly in Cristobal's one hand while with the other she withdrew the hard green cover from beneath and set it aside. So began the operation to restore "Masks, Mimes and Magic: Studies in the Popular Theatre" to shelf-strength condition.

Cristobal undertakes as many as 20 such operations a week, on books cradled in arms and brought to her by LRC techs who have found the books in various stages of wear, aging or outright injury at the hands of borrowers turned rip-out artists, who locate the pages they need and rip them out.

"I assess the problem and try to do my best fix," said Cristobal, who oversees an area that could easily pass for a brightly lit doctor's office, in the Technical Services area down a corridor from the Learning Resource Center's (LRC) circulation desk. She works at a long work surface overhung by a vent hood to suck away the sting of the powerful reagents and fixatives used in her work. Twelve wide, flat drawers slide out from underneath the work surface to give Cristobal

easy reach for blades, tapes, gauzes, and adhesives of varying lengths and widths, all neatly rolled and waiting.

In the bottom right drawer is a loose assortment of tools now obsolete in the book surgery world, some with a barbaric edge, like a drill, a tiny jigsaw, and a skein of gray antique twine once used to stitch books back together. “I can’t bear to throw any of it away,” Cristobal said, snugging in a loose end of the twine.

In a facility with 92,488 bound volumes, the work in Cristobal’s suite is steady, and it begins with triage. Can the book be repaired? What kind of repair? Is this a repair of a repair? What materials are needed? Cristobal orders materials from thick catalogues published by suppliers in Wisconsin and Syracuse, NY. If the book can’t be saved, it may be placed in a bin on the library floor for sale (going rate, said Cristobal, is 25 cents), or it may be recycled, or destroyed.

The most traumatic repair is the replacing of pages torn out by borrowers turned thieves. An identical book must be borrowed from another library, then the missing pages copied, then glued or fixed into place by a variety of techniques. Repaired books usually end up in a brace, like a flat press, that holds the book flat and rigid while its repairs dry.

All those expensive textbooks are the most frustrating to repair, “because they are all made so cheaply,” Cristobal said, showing a defunct spine made of flaky gray paper and a few drops of glue.

Cristobal said she learned her specialty from Ginger Azhocar, now retired, and LRC hourly tech Carole Sobke. “The library has a tradition of preserving our valuable resources by repairing well-used books or out of print materials,” says Kats Gustafson, Dean, Learning

Resources . “The art of repairing library materials has been handed down from generation to generation of library technicians, and now resides with Theresa.

“I also received a certificate in a Library Technology Program where classes were given on repair for all kinds of materials,” Cristobal said.

Cristobal’s greatest pleasure is in bringing care to the occasional, lovely old dowager book, whose beauty, carefully crafted in binderies long since closed, is faded and peeling. These, Cristobal said, she repairs with her fingertips. She turned one such volume in her hands, showing where a red and gold spine had been refurbished.

“It feels like skin to me,” she said, running a finger over it. “It’s like gluing skin back down.

According to Gustafson, ‘The skills of our technicians are developed over time as they become ‘artists’ restoring the materials to near or original condition. We are very fortunate that the library employs skilled and ‘artful’ technicians who help to carry on the tradition of preserving our important learning resources.’”

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