

Voices of SLA

Jim Matarazzo (JM)

Interviewed by

Toby Pearlstein (TP)

April 2009

TP: Good morning. Today is Monday, April 20th, 2009. My name is Toby Pearlstein, and it is my pleasure today to be interviewing James Matarazzo. Because of his long history of involvement with SLA, and the profession as a whole, Jim has been chosen as one of the first five SLA members to be interviewed as part of SLA's oral history project -- "Voices of SLA: an International Oral History." The project is an initiative of the Fellows of SLA in partnership with the SLA Centennial Commission. Jim and I are talking today in his living room in Winthrop, Massachusetts. Today Jim continues his affiliation with the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College in Boston. He has been a member of the faculty for 41 years -- 14 of those as Assistant Dean, and 9 as Dean. Even though he officially retired in 2002, he is currently Dean Emeritus and Professor, and continues to teach a class on the organization and management of corporate libraries -- one of his career-long passions. He

is the author of a multitude of books and articles on the value of corporate libraries in the US and around the world, and remains a sought-after consultant to companies and corporations on the creation of corporate libraries and information centers and knowledge management. Jim has been a member of SLA since 1964, and has held a variety of positions in the Association, both at the national and local level -- including being a member of the Board of Directors as Chapter Cabinet Chair, a member of the Research Committee and the Strategic Planning Committee, and Chair of the first SLA Presidential Task Force on the Value of the Information Professional. He was also President of the Boston Chapter for two consecutive terms. Jim is a Fellow of the Association, and received the SLA Professional Award twice -- first in 1983, and again in 1988 -- and the SLA President's Award in 1991, acknowledging his contributions to the profession. I am especially pleased to have been asked to conduct this interview, since I've known Jim for more than 25 years as a teacher, a colleague, and a friend.

TP: Jim, let me start off by asking you what advice you would give to someone just joining the profession.

JM: Oh, absolutely join Special Libraries Association -- it's -
- no question about it at all -- you will meet fabulous

people from all over the world and really become known to them so that when you have an issue, you can pick up the phone and call someone, as opposed to trying to solve all the problems on your own. You have opportunities to be involved locally, with your chapter, opportunities to be involved nationally with your division, and if you can go to conference, then an opportunity to meet people that you've been e-mailing, and telephoning, and corresponding with, which I think is an absolutely incredible opportunity. It's -- no question -- to become involved, in my view. Especially, I think, now, when many of the senior people have retired, or will retire. We've had incredible volunteers to work with the Association on a myriad of really important projects.

TP: Now let's talk a little bit more about SLA. Would you tell me about some of the individuals in the profession who were important in shaping your professional beliefs and your career? Who were your mentors, for example?

JM: When I was in college, F. Clifford McElroy was the science librarian at Boston College, and I worked for him. He was involved in Special Libraries Association, went to meetings, actually brought me to a few meetings, not only of Special Libraries Association, but other associations that he attended. It was his vision for me, anyway, since

I seemed to like what I was doing, that I in fact would become a librarian. When I left Boston College, after I finished my Master's degree at Simmons, I went to work at MIT, and Joe Dagnese was the Science Librarian at MIT. He brought me to my first Special Libraries Association meeting as his guest, and volunteered me to write for the chapter bulletin -- something about the most recent biology books, since I was collecting in the area. It wasn't a particularly horrendous task. I got to enjoy doing things like that. But it was Joe who brought me in, Joe who sat me at the table with the Science Librarian at Brandeis University, the Translations Librarian at MIT's Lincoln Laboratory, and basically his circle of friends. I, then, took that seat each time I attended an SLA Boston Chapter meeting. That was my first contact with Special Libraries Association. Those were the people that were important to me. And I joined while I was a student at Simmons, as, now, a special introductory rate for when you're a student. That, I think, is important -- it was my wish when I was on the Board of Directors that we could extend the time period that you could be a student member. I think after you graduate, you ought to be allowed to be a student member for three years, because as your salary increases, your student membership should increase, to eventually, where

it's full membership -- so you would become a full member of Special Libraries Association. Not a student member, but a full member, in your fourth year. That would be a more gradual approach to increases and dues from the student rate to the full member rate. That was one of the things I tried to accomplish, and didn't. I understand the need for revenue, but I also understand the need for new members, and if the dues increase could be gradual from a student to a full member over a three-year period, I think we would hold onto more of our student members and replace the important people that are retiring -- hopefully for long periods of time, so there's continuity in the Association.

TP: So you've been involved with SLA for a very long time, and in a variety of capacities. Has your involvement met your expectations for what you would've hoped for in a professional association?

JM: Absolutely. I know everybody can't attend the annual conference -- it's expensive. Especially in the current times, although it seems to me the current times merely mirror every decade since I've been a member of Special Libraries Association. There's always been some economic setback every ten years. Sometimes more than once in every ten year period, and travel budgets suffer. But travel

budgets to local chapter meetings is really not a particular issue. And your involvement in your division is not an issue. You can still stay involved even if you can't attend an annual conference. That's the key. To stay involved. The rest will come, over time.

TP: What do you think are some of the major issues for SLA -- looking back when you were in a leadership role. You've already mentioned a little bit about keeping students, retaining their membership -- both at the local and national level. What do you think are some of the other major issues?

JM: The issues have remained the same. It's important to retain the membership. I think that to lose a member, after you have a member, is an incredible waste. The Association has to stay important to people, so they'll continue their membership. It needs to stay important to people by covering the events that are important to them. Right now, lots of our members seem to me to be in situations where they're reduced in salary, where they're reduced to the point of being laid off. I think the Association should take the lead in all of these things. There's one great example for the Association. When the copyright law was under revision, Special Libraries Association took a leadership role. That took a lot of

courage in my opinion, because of the various interests of the members. But they did take a leadership role, they kept the membership completely informed, represented the majority of the members in the revision of the copyright law. I'd like to see more leadership. In this particular environment, where everyone's subject to reductions in staff, reductions in salary, reductions in travel budgets - - I'd like to see the Association take a leadership role immediately. Not after the issue is over -- immediately. That, I think, is one of the key issues. To stay relevant to the membership -- both at the local level, and at the national level. Especially at the national level, where people need leadership. That's the key.

TP: What do you think is the most important thing SLA has done in terms of changes that they might have made at the Association level during your membership?

JM: I think you have to be realistic about the Special Libraries Association. It differs from many of the other associations in that -- this is my opinion, now -- the Association is led by the Association staff. Most of SLA members are too busy to actually run the Association. They really depend upon staff. The staff has never been huge, in terms of numbers, but it's the staff that leads, and the Association that follows. That's a very big difference

with Special Libraries Association as opposed to other large professional associations. Other large professional associations, the membership leads, and the staff assists. I've never seen that to be true in Special Libraries Association. The second biggest issue, in my judgment, is that every two years, the board changes, and with the changes in the board come changes in direction. What's important to one board is not necessarily important to the successor board. So somehow we need, in my opinion, to solve the problem of continuity in terms of leadership. Longer terms, if that's possible, would be one way to solve the problem of continuity and leadership -- so we don't have one board, flying off in one direction. New election, another board flies off in another direction -- so it doesn't look like there's a direction in which the Association is headed. But it needs to have a direction that it's headed. It also needs more members. All associations need to retain, or grow, their membership, if they're going to survive. And they probably also need additional income, you know, to do both.

TP: Do you think there's something that SLA could've done, throughout your membership career, or even recently, that they haven't perhaps seized the opportunity for?

JM: Throughout my career, the one time that I was proudest of

Special Libraries Association was when they -- during the copyright revision -- the Association actually led. It didn't avoid the issue, it led. There are many other issues facing the Association. It needs to lead, not ignore and continue on its path, but actually lead. The leadership part is really important. Leadership is important for the Association, to set an example for the information professionals that now work in various organizations. They need to lead. They need to be the leaders in information, and their Association needs to be the leader above that group.

TP: Are there particular issues, or causes, that you would like to see SLA take more of a leadership role in, in addition to copyright?

JM: A long time ago, under Frank Spalding's presidency, there was a move to demonstrate the value of the information professional. It would seem to me that needs to be a recurring theme. The biggest issue for most company librarians is proving value. I don't see the Association leading in the area of proving value. The second biggest issue is they are many very, very competent librarians. They really do have, in most organizations, a management role. Not just a role as librarian, but library manager, and the role even above the role of library manager is

leading in information management. The Association ought to have programs -- not continuing education programs -- but programs at each of the conferences that help very competent librarians become competent library managers. And very competent library managers become leaders in information in their organization.

TP: Are you thinking of something like the one-time Executive Leadership Institute, or Executive Management Institute, that the Association ran?

JM: Those were very, very good ideas, but they need to be repeated regularly. Instead of bringing in speakers -- the vice president of this, or the president of that -- they really ought to focus on our business. Our business is not necessarily political leaders, our business is not necessarily business leaders. Our business is leading in the management of information and knowledge. That's our business, so the keynote speakers ought to bring direction to where the Association's headed.

TP: Generally speaking, who do you think were some of the thought leaders in the past of SLA? Some of the people that you thought really pushed the Association forward in significant ways?

JM: Frank Spalding, clearly. Outstanding leadership. Mimi Drake. Through her writings and during the time that she

was President, had the Association running in the right direction, in my opinion. Those two -- Mimi Drake and Frank Spalding -- I think, brought the Association more in the direction that I would like to see it go. Outstanding Executive Directors. David Bender was an outstanding Executive Director. The Association had wonderful membership, the Association -- because of its conferences, and because of its publications, also had enough revenue to be a wonderful association. And Dr. Bender led the way.

TP: What do you think are some of the biggest threats to the Association today?

JM: Threats... The biggest threat to the Association is it's not going to stay relevant to the practicing special librarian. It must stay relevant. It must not cater to the people who can afford to go to Conference, or the people who have the time to go to Conference. But it has to stay relevant to all of its members, even the ones that don't have the time off, and the money, to attend Conference to hear what other people think. There needs to be a way, in my judgment, to keep everybody current and headed in the right direction.

TP: Do you think some of the offerings in a vehicle like Click University is a step in that direction?

JM: Some of the programs in Click University have been just

outstanding. I'm not sure Click University has made the impact that we all wanted it to. I think it was a very good idea, and it got off to a great start, and now, I think, it's sort of faded into the back. It's sort of become routine. Either Click University's really important, and is going to be a strategic initiative of the Association, and everybody needs to climb on board, or Click University ought to go away.

TP: Interesting. How do you think participating in a professional association like SLA has influenced your career?

JM: I think if you attend, you'll generally get a sense of what's on everyone's mind. The issues that they face everyday. The problems they face everyday. The budget problems, the personnel problems. I know members of Special Libraries Association who've never been in anyone else's special library -- and I think that's really a tragedy. We really should become more broadly based. The fundamentals of what we do can probably be done in any industry. So we simply have to learn the industry, which, I think is really crucial to truly understand the industry that you serve. But you ought to be able to move from one organization to another organization -- to be the library manager, to be the leader in information and knowledge

management.

TP: Let's talk a little bit about the future of the profession. In your opinion, where do you think the profession is heading?

JM: Excellent question. We're too busy battling between the people who want to deliver service personally, to the people who never want to see their customers, and want to deliver the whole thing electronically. That's going to impact the profession. Those of us who got in the business to personally impact, touch, see -- I think they're going to be disappointed in the increasing use of electronic mail, increasing use of the phone, increasing use of instant messaging, where they actually never get to see the people that they help. And I think that's going to impact the profession tremendously. It's a service profession, to be sure. And it would seem to me that you would deliver the service that your organization wants based on the way they want it delivered. You certainly can point the way to the future, but I think it's customized -- very, very customized. And we need to be, in my judgment, paying closer attention to the customers. I think it would be really helpful to have customers discuss information centers. So what are our customers' expectations? What are the general expectations of the people who fund these

company libraries? We could hear from some very talented corporate, and university, and civic leaders on what they expect from the libraries that our members staff. What do they expect? What are they willing to pay for? How much are they willing to pay? Those are the key issues that face the profession. The Association could help. They could bring those really smart people to the conferences, and people could then listen to what the expectations were.

TP: Interesting. Given that, obviously, lots of different challenges, what do you think are the most important skills and competencies that librarians will need?

JM: I think -- I don't think we have a problem with the knowledge of library and information science among graduates of our degree programs, and if we're members of Special Libraries Association. So it's not an issue of knowledge of the profession. A bigger issue is going to be knowledge of the industry that you're in, and willingness to learn the industry, and really learn the industry so that when one of your customers approaches you, you would at least understand the question. The second big issue is to actually take responsibility for the information that you provide. It's not -- "Here is some information on the topic you want," but "Here is the best information on the topic you want." So you would actually have to know your

industry. Seriously know your industry. So, I would expect, for example, those of our members that are in the business of financial services -- especially in the mutual fund industry -- I would expect our members to have spectacular portfolios, because they understand the business. I would expect the people who staff our very important management consulting firms to be the best managers, the best leaders in information. And I don't see that enough, in my judgment. I hope you see what I mean, anyway.

TP: Sounds good. So change is upon us in a variety of different ways.

JM: It is.

TP: Can you say something about how you personally prepare yourself to change with changing times?

JM: Well, it always surprises me that people are surprised when their company has a financial problem. I'm going to miss the columns of one of the regular contributors to *Information Outlook* because I think he's retiring. I love the columns that John Latham writes, and I think I love the columns because John was actually in business before he became a staff member at Special Libraries Association, so his vision of what we should be doing is from the point of view of a person in the business, as opposed to the point

of view of the person in the library business, which is very much a business. John's columns on understanding your company were absolutely excellent columns -- and understanding the financial condition of your company -- are absolutely excellent columns. They, in fact, direct you in a leadership way, so that you can understand how well the firm is doing. And also understand the messages that the firm is sending out. If it's a period of time where everybody has to be quietly competent and economical, then you'll be quietly competent and economical. If it's a period of time when you have to show enthusiasm for the product, whatever the product is, then you'll show enthusiasm for the product. In other words, you'll climb on board with the business, and work in the strategic direction that the business is going. So that you're not just a service. You're not the cafeteria. You're not the human resources office. You're actually right behind the leadership as they chart a new course for the firm, and there are lots -- in this current economy, and again -- at least once every ten years -- sometimes twice every ten years, because you can go back in the literature and see the various economic crises that hit in the 70's, the 80's, the 90's. And the 2000s aren't going to be any different. This happens on a regular cycle -- we all seem to forget.

My point being that people in the field, if they wish to succeed, are going to have to succeed as active members of their firm. Pulling in the direction that the firm wants the firm to go.

TP: So, given that, to bring it a little closer to home, can you give an example from your own work experience at Simmons, or in Association work, or wherever -- how you aligned yourself that way, with something that was happening.

JM: Well, for example -- it seems to me in pharmaceutical firms now, the key is new drug applications. It would seem to me, that if you were in the pharmaceutical firm, you would be helping the group with those new drug applications, because new drugs, additional drugs in the pipeline, are the key, as opposed to all the other things that you do. If you're in another business, there must be some key unit in that business that is going to be marked the success of the firm. Find out what that key unit is, or those key units are, and provide specialized services. Can I give you a practical example? Once I had to go to the local supermarket -- huge thing -- I'm not a regular at the supermarket. I'm in the cookie and cracker aisle. God, I had no idea there were this many cookies and crackers. But I'm on a mission, I have to get this cracker. I cannot

find the cracker. I see someone at the end of the row, and I say, "God, I'm going to be rescued. There's a man down there stacking cookies." So I whoosh down to the end of the aisle, and I said, "Listen, can you help me? I'm looking for this cracker." He said, "I don't work here." And I said, "Are you crazy? You mean you just hang around this supermarket and you stack cookies?" He says, "No. I work for this company. This is my section. The big supermarkets -- the four big supermarkets in this town -- are half my business. I'm here twice a day, and I arrange things so it looks attractive, and restock everything." You know, there's a lot librarians could learn from the man who stacks the cookies for this one company. He's there twice a day, he doesn't wait for them to come to him. He goes there, stacks the cookies, makes sure the display is very attractive. We could learn a lot from the man who stacks the cookies.

TP: (laughs) OK. So let's be a little bit philosophical as well, and look back over your career, and I'll ask you -- would you join the profession again, if you were starting all over?

JM: I have absolutely no regrets. I would do this all over again. I would attend Boston College as an undergraduate, I would work in the Boston College science library, I would

attend Simmons again, continue to work in Boston College science library. I would definitely work for MIT for four years before joining the faculty at Simmons, and I would've stayed on the faculty at Simmons. I have no regrets whatsoever. I don't wish I was a brain surgeon, or an astronaut. This is what I really wanted to do. I've loved it. Being of assistance to students, being of assistance to people in the profession. Getting four or five grants from Special Libraries Association to conduct research. The grants were never sufficient to pay for the research, but they were seed money, and seed money is really important. One of the big issues facing the Association is how much it can invest in research, and the second part of that is to get the people in the field to not only consume the research, but use those pieces of the research in their daily activities. Which means, in my opinion, that whatever research is done, has to be published in a research-based periodical -- a refereed periodical. And then has to be translated to be useful in the daily lives of the people who manage and work in our company libraries, in our academic libraries, in our public libraries, in our non-profit libraries. It needs to be driven down so that it's useful, and not lofty, and not a demonstration of spectacular research methods -- although, the research

method should be spectacular. Let's assume there's quiet competence in the research method, after you explain what you did to make sure this research was valid. But then, what do you do with the information? You need to make the information practical. Now, if the association can't sponsor the research that it needs, then it needs somebody, or a group of people in the association, to take the research that's being done in various fields, and then make it practical for the people who are in the field. It's not enough to array 50,000 new articles a year that the membership might want to read. That's a problem. That's not information leadership. There are lots of things written everyday. Which things, as members of Special Libraries Association, should we pay attention to? Instead of having an army planning the next Conference, have that army read all the information, digest the information, and since they know the membership, and they know the field, to array two or three things in various categories that we can't miss. Make it useful. Or, fund the research, and make the researcher make it useful.

TP: We're coming pretty much to the end of the questions that I have. Are there any questions that you wish I had asked you?

JM: Yeah, I think one of the things I wish you asked me is --

how do we get more members? I think getting more members is absolutely crucial for the Association, so they can carry out all the tasks that I want them to. And that means, in my judgment, anyway, having the members be really happy with the field, be really happy to be members of Special Libraries Association -- be proud of being members of Special Libraries Association. I'm very fond of an SLA publication -- "The First 50 Years of Special Libraries Association" -- the members felt like they were pioneers. They were bringing information management to a whole new area -- areas that weren't served by public libraries or school libraries, or academic libraries. They believed -- and they published outside the field on their beliefs. Not just in the library literature -- outside the library literature. So that the executives who read those periodicals would get some sense of the importance -- the practical application of information to business and industry. I think, that's the key. I think we need people who are driven to believe in the mission of Special Libraries Association. That are willing to reach out to someone like me, and say, "Gee, you really seem to like what you're doing. You really ought to come into the field, and you really ought to join Special Libraries Association." I mean, I was making two dollars an hour at

Boston College, which was enough to pay my tuition at Simmons, but not enough to provide many luxuries. So even though there were student dues, it was still a leap. I had to pay my student dues. And I would've enjoyed being a student member for a little while longer, until my salary at MIT rose during that four year period -- so I could have not only stayed a member, but be happy to be a member and be encouraging of people to join. That's what I do now as the co-faculty advisor to the Simmons SLA student group. We're at every orientation that Simmons has -- that's three times a year. We pass out the very attractive brochures that Special Libraries Association has. We have the membership applications inside, and invite those people to join. In the past, I've received pens, and a few other things to give out to students so they remember the Association. A lot of information is passed out, so how are they going to remember you? They've got this very attractive folder, and they have these very attractive pens that I only give to students -- other people want them, but I don't give them to them. They're to attract student members. Student members are our future, in my judgment. And we need to remain -- everybody needs to remain positive about the field. Cliff McElroy, Joe Dagnese, the first people I bumped into in this field were enthusiastic about

what they were doing. And they were well compensated. That's another thing the Association could do -- really work on compensation. Not just the SLA salary survey, but if it's going to be just the SLA salary survey, then we really have to figure out a way to get more people responding, not only to the salary survey but the various components so it's useful. To have less than half of the Association responding to the salary survey indicates there's something wrong with the salary survey. And then within the various subdivisions of the salary, to just have 12 or 13 managers of engineering and consulting firms respond -- not very useful, given the number of firms that there are, and pharmaceutical firms. We have very few people that are indicating what their real salary is. If that's going to be the key publication, other than *Information Outlook* then we need more people responding so that the salary survey means more than just another publication that the Association will sell.

TP: So I'll ask you one final question -- are you hopeful for the profession?

JM: I am. For those people who are willing to be involved in their organization and who are really happy and excited about what they can do, because no other professional is rewarded the way company librarians, academic librarians,

public librarians, are rewarded. It's in no one else's interest to do what they do. This is their career. I recognize that provides challenges too, because you're probably the only person at the firm that doesn't want to become president. And that will be difficult for everyone to understand. But -- that said -- you are the only one whose future is tied to the management of information. That's a great skill that needs to be exploited -- where you need to be the leader.

TP: Jim, thanks very much. I appreciate your time.

JM: Toby, it's a pleasure to be here with you.

End - Jim Matarazzo