

David Bender

LM: This is Lyle Minter interviewing Dr. David Bender, former Executive Director of the Special Libraries Association on April 27, 2009, in my office at the Library of Congress. OK, David, I guess we'll begin with the first question, which is how, why, and when did you become involved with SLA?

DB: That's probably going to be the easiest question to answer of the day, Lyle, and it's great being here. I became involved with Special Libraries Association when I read that there was a vacancy in the executive director position in the *Library Journal*, and so this has always been a true testimonial for the *Library Journal* and the profession. After reading that in 1979 -- it possibly could have been '78 -- I made an application to the Association not really knowing or understanding a great deal of what library associations were about, but had been working in a special library in the Department of Education in Maryland, and so felt that I had some special library background through education and so on. I made application to the New York office and headquarters at that time, and lo and behold in April of 1999 received a telephone call and an appointment had been set up and I went through the interview process.

Elizabeth Usher was the Chair of the Selection Committee at that point, and after going through an extensive interview and session with Elizabeth and the rest of the committee, the next opportunity I had was to meet with AOOO. And after meeting with AOOO -- which now I guess no longer exists, so it's the Association Office Operations Committee for historical purposes -- and proceeded through that interview process. And in June just before conference, which was going to be in Honolulu that year, I received another phone call that I would be expected to be in Honolulu for another interview. That phone call was from Vivian Hewitt, who was then president, and proceeded with some negotiations of how I was going to get to Honolulu and what was going to take place there. I eventually met with the Board, was ratified by the Board, and the end of July, the first of August of 1979 I actually joined the staff of SLA.

LM: That's really an interesting story that I hadn't heard before.

DB: I can tell you one little interesting footnote to this. I was in Baltimore, Maryland at that point with the Department of Education of the State of Maryland. When I arrived in New York City, at Grand Central Station actually, because I had stayed the previous night with a

friend in Connecticut and came into the city, into Grand Central, got off the train, and the address was Park Avenue. So I got out of the train station, proceeded to go up Park Avenue as any good out-of-town person would do, and finally I got to 235 Park Avenue and I was amazed at this building that SLA would be in such a structure as this. I walked in and asked the door person where SLA's headquarters were, and the guy looked at me like I had lost my mind because it really was some office building and it did not have individual offices in it; it was a full corporate building. He looked at my sheet and it was 235 Park Avenue South instead of 235 Park Avenue, and so he proceeded to tell me that I really belonged down around 14th Street rather than across from the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. The further I went down Park Avenue, I became more and more amazed of how anybody would work in this section of New York City. And so by the time I got to the office at 235 Park Avenue South, I was overwhelmed by saying, "Oh, I'm not sure I really want this job, should it come my way." When we ended up going to Washington, it was a good change overall. It was a fun moment of shock and bewilderment, but New York City has changed quite a bit and back in that, that area as well.

LM: Just an aside that we hadn't talked about before, but could

you talk a little about how large the staff was at that time.

DB: The staff -- at that point, the office was located in a building that had been previously occupied by a publishing company, a small publishing company. We had one floor. There were, as best I remember, just under 30 staff members, probably closer to 20 actually. The arrangement of the office was that if you walked from the front part of the office where the executive offices were of the executive director and the assistant executive director and the administrative assistant, and if you had to go to the restroom you saw every staff member as you proceeded through the office. It was a true bowling alley impact with all of the offices scattered around the perimeter of the building. And the computer operation, which was an old card-punch system, sat in the middle of the operation along with the mail services and a couple of the data entry input clerks as well. The library also was in the center of the building, as I recall it, and that was probably about the size of your office, and that included the space for the librarian to work from and a conference table that sat in the middle so that when the AOOO or anybody met at headquarters, that was the space that was used as well. So it was quite small and it was quite crowded, and it became

very obvious very quickly that we were going to be overwhelmed if the Association was going to change at all.

LM: Our second question was one that we had edited particularly to focus on your work with SLA, and it follows on the question we were just talking about, which is what was the association like in 1979 when you accepted the executive director's position?

DB: That was one of the interesting parts of the interview process, and my background fitting into the match with SLA. SLA at that point, what everything that I could discover, was just on the verge of being ready to grow and to change and to look for some new direction and some new procedures. The Information Age was really becoming an important role within America and corporate America especially. And I think that looking at the Association and what it had done in New York, there were a lot of issues that were being placed before the membership and the membership was reacting favorably to these. But the Association still hadn't started to change a great deal yet. It still was predominantly a book-oriented profession. We were predominantly still more insulated into our own parameters of the Association and not looking externally for how we could team or tie up with other associations or other groups. We were still basically an association with a

budget of under \$1 million, and we had a membership at that point of about 8,000 to 9,000, I believe. The cobbler's children are the last ones to ever have shoes -- and the Association was of the same match in the information world. We were, as I said earlier, still working from an old card-punch computer system that had all of the membership records on it. In order to do anything with that or to pull up any information was a very labor-intensive process, and luckily at that point there was one staff member who was responsible for that and without her, keeping that in operation, we would have been even more behind the eight ball. I think I came in at just the perfect time because the Association was ready to grow, and I think that was what we were able to look at, we were able to address the issues. The membership was very supportive of some of them, sharing their ideas of what they saw as growing directions and so forth.

LM: You mentioned that growth was a major issue for SLA when you were first appointed executive director. What other major issues came up during the remainder of your tenure, I guess maybe about 20 years?

DB: 22 years.

LM: 22 years.

DB: 22 fast years, right. You can almost take the word growth

and tie it to every dimension that developed over that 22-year period, because the Association grew financially. By the time we were really stretching our arms and muscles in the early '80s, the Board had supported the move of the Association from New York City to Washington D.C. and so that was a major growth factor. One of the reasons of coming to Washington was to look at how we could form relationships with other associations and just not those in the information world, but since Washington is the headquarters or has more associations of all types headquartered here than any other city in the United States, it gave us the opportunity to explore directions with this cadre of friends. It also gave us a chance to look at our programs of services, of what we were doing in New York, how we could expand that, and the Government Relations Program became a real growth program. Not that we were lobbying necessarily for change in the information field, but it gave us a chance to be heard on the Hill with various issues. It was interesting- to read recently of Barbara Ringer's death. She was the Registrar of Copyrights and actually rewrote the copyright law in 1976. When I came in, in 1979, Efren Gonzalez was heading SLA's Copyright Committee. Efren worked for the next number of years, trying to make sure the special libraries' community

was part of the evolution of copyright and that our needs were going to be represented. Efren was very firm in that direction. The previous executive director had also been involved with that. But that was another whole growth issue that allowed us a chance to stretch out and be heard throughout library land but also on the Hill and in the Library of Congress.

Growth also meant expanding our membership into other areas that we hadn't explored before. It gave us a chance to look at new divisions and new chapters, new directions. Certainly, part of that growth became more international and how we were relating to some of our international associations and friends. Also, we explored in a more systematic way how we were going to service this growing membership. The membership went from roughly 9,000 up to just over 15,000, by the time I retired. That was a real change factor--how the mechanism of the Association with the chapters and divisions, and other kinds of groups and subgroups, we were going to need to explore so that we could continue this hands-on approach? Because SLA has always been unique in that we are very member-driven but staff-implemented from the directions that the membership has set forth. But on the other hand, the staff has also been in the forefront of helping to lay the direction of

what the membership is going to follow on. As we grew in size, we also had the whole relationship with the vendors and how we were going to bring them into the Association and work with them. I think that traditionally, people look at the vendors for funding programs and activities, and there are other ways that we certainly try to explore with them and how we can keep them involved in the Association. I think over the 20 years it was a good relationship that developed with the vendor community. I think if you look at the success of the Association right now, there are many, many vendors that line up and support the Association in many, many ways. Especially in this economic time, the Association would not be successful at all without the support of its community.

LM: I know that one of your major accomplishments, David, was growing the budget and working to grow the endowment and reserves of the Association. Were there any tough times economically like we're having now in 2009 that you had to go through?

DB: This is interesting that you ask this question, because two weeks ago I had a call from ASAE, the American Society of Association Executives, and they were doing an article on economic times and they wanted to interview five or six association executives who had retired and wanted to go

back over the last number of years and pick our brains or our ideas of previous economic hard times. When I really started thinking about this, that if you look at the economic situation over the years, this reoccurs about every ten years. There's about a ten-year cycle that there are just peaks and valleys -- nothing as severe as what the economy's going through now. But one of the conversations or threads that came out in the conversation with the individual during the interview was that in the mid '80s, we went through this economic hardship. Again, you can look at the mid '90s. It was hit again. And now, ten years later or so, we're going back through it. But one of the unique things that surfaced in our conversation was that somewhere in the process, SLA had started the growth prior to the mid '80s situation and must have come out very successfully somehow -- and I don't recall how -- but we bought the building at that point. We moved from New York to Washington. And we, within two years after moving to Washington, paid the mortgage off on the building. And so even if there were some economic hardships, it indicated -- at least in my memory -- that we had very strong support from the membership, from the chapters, divisions, and from the vendor community. And we still continued to have a well-attended annual conference. We still continued having

significant programs. The education program had caught on well by that time, and the change that was going on in the profession just allowed us to continue to be needed by the various communities or constituents, and somehow we did weather that storm. So I guess that my hopeful words would be, "hang in there, you'll weather this storm also. And you'll come out with a few scars, but I think that all will be well."

LM: Another question, David, is about the most important thing SLA did while you were one of its leaders, and changes that were made at the level of association management.

DB: This question is difficult in some ways to narrow down, to say one issue or one program, one activity was the hallmark that really ushered in a new realm of the Association. But I think just as we were talking about growth being kind of a key word, I think that if you go on into some other issues, service is probably another issue and part of this came through with the move to Washington. The Washington staff were much more in tune to servicing a membership and working with a membership that was diverse, that was just not national, it was not a continental kind of situation; it was a global situation. And I think that we weren't looking at just North America; we were looking at how we related to various communities around the world. I think

that the importance of that was not so much that we were looking at various cultures and the way people worked with other people through their culture or their work environment. But it also forced the staff to think in a global picture of how do you provide services across time barriers, across geographical barriers, across political barriers, and yet how do you still continue to monitor this?

I remember in part of this that when Sylvia Piggott was president and Sylvia and I went to Moscow as a follow-up trip to the previous study trip that had been done with the Museums, Arts, and Humanities Division in Moscow a few years prior to that. Sylvia and I were able to do some significant talks with a couple of organizations and how they were perceiving information and the value of information within a communist country at that point. But our talks and the outcome of that were significant in that it didn't matter what your political connection was or what the political scene was. Information was needed, and people wanted information, and they needed access to information. And the access was going to be different because of the political situation, but people still were looking and hungry for information. It was a time also that I think the Internet was being developed and information was

becoming much more accessible and people were not able to block information. This was a whole growth situation. I think that if you look back on the Association, technology is probably one of the issues that I feel that we just didn't move rapidly enough on. I think that part of this was due to finances, part of this was due to staffing, and part of it was due to a whole host of other issues. But I think that as we explored some of the bounds of that and the parameters of how we were looking at the relationships and how we were going to develop some of these activities, we needed that global approach and we needed it much more systematically than whatever had been done before.

LM: Is there something that you think SLA should have done that it didn't do during your years of leadership?

DB: Well, we'll spring back to technology because I think that at that point, as I've said before, we were a little bit like the cobbler's children. We were the last to adapt or adopt some technological hardware, software, whatever. But that was a double-edged sword. Part of that was a financial situation of trying to get it through the membership, of how fast we could actually grow and how much we needed to do in this arena. We were envious, at times, when we looked out at some of the corporate members, of what they were doing within their own operations and the

technology they were using, and if we could have jumped into that situation we would have been probably overwhelmed because we didn't have the staff to support it. But we were envious because the capability was there to do great things. When we look back at some of the old computer systems that we had, we just simply were behind the scene. But I do remember the first time that we really had access via the Internet to the Board of Directors, and one of the things that we implemented was a Good Morning, SLA, something of that nature. I can't remember the exact name that was given to it. But it was a message that went out from headquarters every morning to the Board, just to make sure we were still well and alive and that we were using technology. It was amazing how dead the responses were coming back, but over the time of how valuable it appeared to some of the members who were reading these good morning messages. They were picking up information from the Association that they didn't know anything about, but we thought we were doing this in a vacuum as well. So I guess that we learned early on that technology was a two-way communication tool and that somewhere along the way, everyone started playing the game with it and I think we got into it much more aggressive. I think it's encouraging now to look at the delivery of some items that are going on

in the Association, from the Education Program to some of the conferencing that's being done electronically and so forth. I think that finally the Association has picked up on some of those things, but I think it would have been much better had we had that capability, established that capability a number of years ago instead of now.

LM: Moving on from concepts and things, to talk a little about people, I'd like for you to talk about some of the individuals who were important in working with you during your executive directorship in SLA.

DB: Well, the first person that I have to always mention with my days at SLA is Vivian Hewitt. Vivian was president, as I previously mentioned, during my initial days, and without Vivian's guidance and leadership I would have been lost in that process. But I have to also say that the entire membership was a very open and welcoming group, that the first Boards of Directors that I worked with were very positive and very helpful. Remembering that I basically came in as an outsider to the profession, and even though I had library degrees and had spent my entire career at that point in the library field, I was unknown basically in the special libraries community. In addition to Vivian, I mentioned Efren Gonzalez. Efren's role within the whole copyright field and what he had done from a corporate

library at Bristol-Meyers was significant in helping with some of the early days. Elizabeth Ferguson, another name from the past, a very active member in the New York Chapter. Elizabeth's apartment was just a couple of blocks from the New York Office, and I remember a number of afternoons leaving the office in bewilderment and stopping to have a drink with Elizabeth. And after a drink with Elizabeth, everything seemed to be well again and in good order. So I think that those are a couple of names that just foster in the beginning. Richard Griffin, who was the assistant executive director during my early days stayed in New York City. He did not move with the Association to Washington. Richard played certainly a significant role. But each of the presidents that I served with over the 22 years was a real privilege, because I think each one of them had a unique contribution to make in my own development, but also in establishing directions for the association. Janet Rigney always is a significant individual for me. We could almost dub her the grandmother of special libraries planning. It was really Janet who started to foster some directions on long-range planning and what was going to happen with that. Pat Molholt was significant in picking up some of that direction, and Pat really was the visionary along with Vivian Arterbery --

that was the driving force of moving the Association from New York to Washington. Those two individuals had a role to play of what was going to happen there. And Guy St. Clair certainly is a significant character in my role within the Association, but the impact that he's left on the Association will be long-felt, if nothing more than the 100-year book that he did. I think that no one else could have done the job that has been done with the history of the Association as Guy envisioned it, implemented it, wrote it, and now is the spokesperson for the history of the Association. So I think that is truly a most significant role.

I think that probably if I had to single out one chapter, the New York Chapter would be the chapter that was most significant to me out of all of the chapters. The reason for that is probably because they were the chapter that I started with. I spent more time with that chapter in the early days. When the Association moved to D.C., D.C. became kind of the home chapter but there still wasn't that tie, give and take relationship that had been established with the New York Chapter. The Philadelphia Chapter, I will never forget, was where my first out of New York City chapter visit was made, and I also made my last chapter visit to the Philadelphia Chapter. That chapter and the

leaders of that chapter will be very significant, along with my monumental Hershey Bar that I think weighed five pounds that I carried with me after a number of trips to Philadelphia. Thinking of some other individuals that played significant roles outside of the library community itself, I think again, not to mention any particular names, but the vendor community and what role they played in establishing my role within the Association. I think we can look at also what was going on at the Library of Congress. Dr. Billington certainly had a role in some of my development at SLA also -- if we remember back to the days that he was going through his initial hearings for appointment. SLA was the one library association that supported him through that process. I think that we can also look back at one of the significant impacts -- and I use this as a negative impact on my career that I always thanked SLA -- because due to the FBI Awareness Program, I do now have a dossier at the FBI, a 43-page file on record of being anti-American or anti-terrorist or anti-something. And when the Freedom of Information disclosure was requested, the only thing we found out in those 43-pages was my name and a few other miscellaneous facts. So this isn't directly naming a person, but it certainly is an impact of what people did. So hopefully that gives you a

sprinkling of a few names at least, but again, I think the important thing is that everybody in the Association, all 15,000 members, had some role to play, from Nigel Oxbrow and what was going on with the European Chapter and many other early people that were just very influential in establishing the Association.

LM: You mentioned folks and you mentioned several chapters that you felt close to. Anything about divisions or division leadership?

DB: The divisions were always interesting in the fact that the real role of the divisions happened basically once a year at the annual conference, or perhaps twice at the winter meeting. Arts, Humanities, and Museum was a significant division. I remember, going back to Winnipeg, that division had a Fireside Chat program and I was one of their first presenters or speakers at that session. That kind of established a significant framework of working with that division, and one of the developments that came out of that was the study trip that was done. I don't remember, I think it was about 1987, that four members of that division and myself went to Moscow and spent a little over two weeks there of looking at museums, looking at restoration of museum materials and information and how it related. And so I think that division certainly is a significant one.

My background in education, I dipped in and out of the Education Division frequently. The Management Division was always an interesting division because I think that division was exploring things that were most significant to the direction the Association itself was going through, and some of the issues they were addressing for their membership had implications back for us. One division that I wished I had more time or just could have done more with was the Food and Agriculture Division, just because of my interest in food and cooking. It was a very selfish kind of thing but I never was able to get as much involved there -- and that was the problem overall with most of the divisions, that their programs and their activities were tailored by themselves and unless they had a direct relationship back to the Association, they functioned fairly independently. Whereas the chapters seemed, even if they functioned independently, they still were more of a give and take situation with the Association on most given days. They were more open, they needed things from the Association, and there was a greater tie between staff and the chapters. And so I think it was just part of the makeup of the Association.

LM: We've just been through a big leadership transition at the national level here in Washington D.C. with the presidency

changing hands, and so I wanted to ask you briefly. You had a transition into the executive director job, transitioned out, transitioned a lot of presidents, presidents-elect in and out. Are there any lessons learned you would like to share about how a transition should work?

DB: That is always kind of a hot potato, I guess I will put it mildly. I think that you always have ideas and thoughts in the back of your mind of how things should either go smoothly or things would be done differently if I had a role to play or whatever. I think when it comes the time for any transition to happen, I think as long as the individuals remain open and honest to both what they believe and the Association remains honest to what it believes, I think then both sides come out well. I think that if you look at SLA's transition over a couple of year period, there were some issues that were surfacing there. I think that people were just not honest overall to themselves, and I think that put the Association into some real touchy situations. I think that as it all worked out, the Association was a stronger organization when everything finally was settled. But I think that the initial changes that went from my tenure to the next individual then finally back to staff coming back in, and then finally with the hiring of a new executive director -- and let me say

again, I think the Association was a true visionary association when they changed the title from the executive director to the chief executive officer. We tried that back in Montreal some years earlier and it went nowhere. That was a great move for the Association and I know that there was some bloodshed on both sides of the coin. Not to rub any salt in any open wounds on it, but I think that it certainly gives the chief staff officer a role to play differently than the executive director role. I think that SLA is a real forerunner in the information field, because none of the other library associations have taken that direction. But if you look overall at the American Society of Association Executives, most of the major associations and memberships in that group have gone to some elevated title other than executive director. It could be CEO or it could be an executive vice president or it could be whatever. I think that, again, it just simply, looking back on all transitions, it's open, honest, and really stays committed to what your direction is, and stand up for that and not be so intimidated by anything that's going on or overwhelmed by it that you're willing to sell your principles.

LM: We've been talking about professional issues like growth and technology and globalization, management concerns

financially and location-wise. But I wanted to ask you just a little bit about SLA as a social community, as kind of a family that some of us feel it has become.

DB: I think that this is a good way to wrap this up, because any part of my sadness in leaving the Association really was built around that thread, that over 22 years we established a very close family, a family situation of caring and of just truly feeling like a year was not complete unless you saw some individuals out of that family. And when my retirement occurred and everything, there was all of the celebration and great times were had. But soon after September and I left the office and the new team came in and so forth, it really was a lonely time. It really was a time when you looked back on it and think, I'm not really sure that all of the relationships that you thought you had established, if they really were still there or not. And so I think of that a few years later now, as something good has happened for me with the 100th Anniversary or birthday celebration--getting back into the Association. First in January going to the New York Chapter to a chapter meeting and making a few remarks there and having a grand evening at a reception with many members of the chapter, and some old timers who came back and said the only reason they came out that night was because they

knew I was going to be there. It was a fun time. It was almost like going back to annual conference days and thinking of going to some of the receptions or division functions, the chapter functions, and so forth, and being so delighted of being with people. And I think you've touched on a good point in that SLA really is small enough to still be a family, it's small enough still to be a neighborhood community, and yet it is large enough to be able to put those communities throughout the world. And I think again, the basic organization of the association through the chapters and divisions allows those communities to grow for the membership. Staff will always be a little bit different than a member within the Association, and I think that just is by the nature of the individuals, that staff can't be 100 percent members even if staff are members and vice versa. We each have a different role and a different function. But again, from a time of ending a relationship, it was almost like a divorce, I guess, in that bingo, one day you were in the family and the next day you were kind of out of the family. Overall, looking back on those days, part of that was also what the Association was going through. I think the Association wanted some change and direction; I wanted some change and direction at that point as well. So I think that we each were probably

looking at things a little bit differently. And perhaps over the five, six, seven, eight years, we've all matured a little bit now and we have a different idea of what that family is as well.

LM: Just to let you conclude by mentioning anything that we haven't touched on or something that you really wanted to get on the record, and then say so long to the folks.

DB: Right. I think that we've actually, somewhere along the way, you know, kind of dovetailed most everything into some piece of the conversation. I think that we've touched on some of the early days, we've touched on some of the later days, the growing pains that the association went through with the move from New York to Washington. We will never forget. I a couple of former staff members on a social basis. Kathy Warye --our first Director of Education when the Association moved to Washington--Cathy and her husband and I see each other three or four times a year. Every time we're together, Cathy still laughs about the early days of unpacking boxes at our new Washington headquarters and that the only place the staff could go to lunch was Treoles. We were filthy, we were dirty, we looked like a bunch of street people actually, and Treoles was always welcoming to us and we could then go back to the office and proceed unpacking. But I think that we really have touched

on most every aspect of everything. I guess that if I had one issue that happened after my departure which I truly don't understand completely is the move to out of the city. It always has been one of those things in the back of my mind is that when I was getting ready to go off to college, a friend of mine said that you really need to look at a northern school and that you really need some direction of being where the action is, and that for me the action was Washington D.C. And going across the river is not the same as being in Washington itself, and there is a different direction, even though it's only a few miles. But severing the ties with the city and going across the river brings a whole new direction, makeup of the Association. I think that it was never as real to me as when we were leaving New York City to come to Washington. At that point, I said it really didn't matter to the membership where the Association was headquartered. We could be in the Sahara Desert or whatever, as long as we could communicate with the membership. After being in Washington and watching the Association grow and take on a different dimension and direction and have accessible so many different communities that we were working with, it was important to be in the midst of them and to be right in the middle of where everything was going on. I know that nearby is Alexandria,

but for me it still is an issue that has never been completely solved.

LM: OK. Well, thank you, David, very much.

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