

Voices of SLA

Miriam (Mimi) Drake (MD)

Interviewed by Gail Stahl (GS)

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This interview is with Miriam (Mimi) Drake, past SLA president. My name is Gail Stahl; we are sitting in Mimi's living room in her home in Atlanta, Georgia, on April 22, 2009. Thank you so much for making the time for the interview. I'm sure that this will be of value to SLA over the years, long past our time. We do have some questions to ask that are standard questions, but we can divert from them, of course, if we want to. Perhaps the hardest question to answer is, what advice would you give to people just joining the information profession?

MD First of all, I would tell them that they are joining one of the world's most exciting professions. I would tell them that they have to continue to learn. They have to make themselves valuable to their organizations, learn about the work of their organizations, their clients, and customers, and people with whom they're working. They need to stay ahead of the technology and make the technology work for them, rather than the other way around. So often

the IT people think that everyone works for them. In fact they work for us, and I think that has to be made very clear. I would encourage them to broaden their interests, to read newspapers, whether they read them online or in paper, and to read magazines. If the people in their organizations are sports fans, learn how to talk sports. Learn how to talk IT--it helps to speak the language. And another thing I would tell them is stay curious. Very important.

GS You've been very involved with SLA for many, many years. What started you, and when and why, and what brought all of this to a beginning?

MD Actually, it was at library school. I had the great pleasure of studying with Ruth Leonard at Simmons College. When I was a student there, Ruth had been awarded the Hall of Fame, and that's how I learned about SLA. She encouraged me to join SLA as a student. And I did. And that's how I got involved with it.

GS So at that point in your career, did you have expectations of what the Special Libraries Association might give to you?

MD I didn't think about it a lot. I approached it from the perspective of wanting to experience it, rather than going in with expectations. And things were very different in those days. People had very different attitudes than they have now. But my attitude was, well, let's go to see what this is about. And that's what I did.

GS Some of the major issues for SLA -- and this is a broad, broad question, I know -- but over the years, the different levels, and different units you've been involved in -- what strikes you as some of the ongoing major issues over time?

MD Well, over time what's happened is that a lot of younger people don't have time for professional organizations. They're really busy balancing careers and families, trips to the gym, and taking the kids to soccer. They have very complex lives. I've thought, over the years, what can we do for them? I'm not sure we can do a lot, other than to be there when they need us, and when they want us. I think it's important to encourage people at the chapter level to connect with members. Very important. A lot of our members are not able to get to the annual conference, and that connection with members is very important. For those of us who've been around for a while, we need to be mentors if we can. I think that's very important. When I was President, I think I approached things a little bit

differently, in the sense that previous presidents had special programs, and my predecessor, Kitty Scott, had done a lot of work with visioning and strategic planning, and so I decided my job was to make sure the strategic plan was carried out. Our members had worked on it. To just toss it aside would not be very good. I thought that effort was important. Also, it was my unpleasant duty to have to ask the membership for a dues increase. Not pleasant, but we got it. I recall walking in to one of the mid-year sessions with a hat on, and saying "Don't kill the messenger!" (Laughter) You know, I'm asking for support for this." We got the increase, I'm happy to say. Another thing that I think is important in the leadership aspect is to be involved with students and try to interest students in the association, tell them what the association can do for them, for their careers, networking, and things on the personal level that I think are really important. One of the things that I treasure from my SLA experience is making some wonderful friends. And I treasure them. Really great. And I loved being involved when I was President with students, and chapter visits were absolutely great. Our members were warm, and welcoming, and just terrific. Another thing that I enjoyed very much was calling people on the phone and saying, "You have won an award." That was

the greatest feeling in the world. But going back a little bit to what I said earlier about the presidency, the program, and implementing the strategic plan--follow through helps. Another thing that I felt was important based on what I had heard in the halls, was people who were talking about running for the Board with their own agendas. And so I and my successor, Didi Pancake, worked very hard trying to educate Board members about why they were there - - they were not there for their agendas, they were there for the association's agenda. I think the association and the membership have evolved in very constructive and positive ways. I'm very happy about that.

GS How did you take care of your family through it all, have all these other interests? How can you give professionals a rationale for being in SLA? What is the rationale? Is there just one?

MD Oh no, there are many. The professional networking is extremely important. I think everyone wants to have and should have a network of people on whom they can call if they have a problem. People in our field do that, even if they work for competitors. So if a person can only get to a luncheon once a year and make some contacts, I think that's important. Click University, a tremendous asset: people can do this at home or they can do it in their

office. I think that's another reason for joining, building one's skills and abilities, and I think that's one of the strengths of the association. SLA people are very upbeat. It is a part of SLA.

GS Are there other things that come to mind that you think SLA should have done in all these years?

MD That's very difficult, because the membership would accept some things and not others. I can remember times when the membership felt very strongly that if you didn't have an MLS you couldn't join the association. Well, I disagreed then and I disagree now. I think we need to reach out to people who may not have an MLS but who are involved in competitive intelligence or other kinds of information work. As a sidelight to that, one of the interesting experiences I've had with several people, several IT people, is that they've gone to library school because they felt we had it all. They thought we had it all, and that was good. I hope some of those people go into SLA. I think it would be good for them and good for us. Our members are not doing the same things they were doing 15 or 20 years ago. There are new jobs and job titles I think are very exciting, and SLA is doing a much better job at making this technology work for members. The work that Stephen Abram has done in introducing new technology brings technology to

our members. It provides much greater scope, so I'm very pleased with what's happening. Going on to what we could have done, I think the answer was I think we could have helped members with technology earlier so that they felt confident that they could take the lead. Many folks were intimidated by IT! And I said, "Well, why don't you learn about it? Learn their language. Just remember they give you the pipes, we decide what goes through them." Since information professionals and IT people work in the same organization they can help each other. Partnerships are always good. There are good partnerships for everybody. Everybody wins in that one, I think, and I think that SLA has done some things that have really helped, such as some of the studies we did on the value of the information professional-- what value do we contribute to an organization? What's the value add that we provide? What's the ROI? And I hope that SLA will continue to do those kinds of studies because our members need it, and particularly right now with the economy the way it is. If a company wants to close a library, fine, I have no problem with that, but they need librarians. We have to demonstrate what we do and what value we bring. If SLA can do research in that area I think that's very important for our members.

And I will admit to some prejudice because I was chair of the Research Committee. (Laughter)!

So I think that's a lot of what's going on. It's great. The work that our people are doing is exciting, going beyond information provision. It's providing something to people that's making a difference for them and their organizations while saving time and adding value.

GS How did participation in professional organizations influence your career?

MD I learned a lot in professional organizations. I was active in both SLA and ALA, and I learned from both -- different things -- from both of them. And then I spent a lot of time on the OCLC board, and that was another learning experience; it's not an association, it's a business corporation. So all of that contributed to what I learned. I think from SLA, in terms of my own career, I learned values focused on ROI. In academe the attitude was on guarding the books. One of the reasons why I went to library school was to learn more about libraries, not to be a librarian. I was a researcher, I was a transportation economist. I was so frustrated with librarians because I would call up and say "I need this piece of information." "Well, you have to come over and look it up!" Wait a minute, something is wrong here! (Laughter) And so that's

when I ended up in academe. I said, I have to change things around here! We have to serve our people, and that's why we're here. Now we are much more outgoing. We are much more conscious of marketing, and we are going to people not waiting for them to come to us. When a new person comes to work in your company I'm sure you see them. Introduce yourself, "Here's what I can do." I know in one company the librarian was meeting a new person to say, "Let me check the computer and make sure you can access this, that, and the other thing, and let me check that for you. Here's my card," and the whole thing. We've come a long way. I'm delighted.

GS Talk about some of the individuals you feel were important in shaping your career.

MD I'll talk about a couple. Ruth Leonard obviously. She was always there for me. Kaycee Hale - she's a great leader, a friend, just fabulous. My dear friend, Jim Matarazzo -- I've worked with Jim a lot, a very dear friend, and I think Jim's a terrific person. My major mentor was Fred Kilgour. I was ready to go back into industry in the '80s. I had had it with academe. I wanted out. I wanted to go back into industry. Instead I went to Georgia Tech. I probably would not have been there if it wasn't for Fred.

GS You were there for some years.

MD For some people, 17 years too long! Fred always had a fresh mind. Fred was always willing, always wanting to experiment and innovate. I'm going to leave people out so I hope they forgive me --

Stephen Abram. Stephen is unique. He's extraordinary. And when I think of what he has brought to SLA in terms of technology accessibility, and basically saying to the librarians, "Look, there's all this stuff out there and you could use it," and showing them how to use it. I think that's very important. Jane Dysart has done terrific things for Computers in Libraries and teaching at conference. Donna Scheeder is another extraordinary person. She always says something very important. Other folks, who have, I think, excelled in many ways -- Christine Malesky from NPR, and her name is on the radio. I think that's great. Anne Mintz at *Forbes* is another librarian who has made a difference. I know many more people whom I think are fabulous and wonderful.

GS With the trend of young people "not to join" organizations, do you think it will have an effect on SLA and others? What do you think SLA and the profession must change to meet the challenges of the next few years?

MD We're the ones that have to demonstrate our value. And that's true of other people in corporations, as well. I

mean, everyone has to demonstrate their value. The CEO says, "What have you done for me lately?" The university president says, "How much money have you brought in this week?" That's the way it is. So we have to be constantly concerned with that. I think we have some very bright young people coming into the profession. I'm very excited about them. They've been well educated in terms of the basics of librarianship and technology. I think that we need to continue to enrich the field. I think some of our people now attend other conferences in subject areas. If they're working for a chemical company, they may go to the American Chemical Society. That's good. I think they need to do more of that. And I think our people will do that. Younger professionals have these very busy lives, but they do well. They're doing very well. So I'm very optimistic about the profession in terms of where it should go. I think we need to continue in SLA and in the library schools to give them the best equipment, mental equipment, social equipment. That is very important.

GS What effect will all the new, changing technology and social networking tools have on us?

MD I think at some point people may get overloaded. If you think about the folks who are on Facebook, LinkedIn, and who are tweeting. (Laughter) I think after a while enough

is enough. "Wait a minute, I'm getting overloaded here."  
Now, when that will happen, I don't know, but I think it  
will happen.

GS The future of the profession?

MD There are many different types of jobs from web master to  
archivist. The perceptions have evolved. It continues to  
evolve. I'm very optimistic about it.

GS What are the most important new technologies, in the next  
five years?

MD Not every technology is effective, and we have to be able  
to distinguish between what's valuable and what isn't. We  
don't want to waste our time and energy and maybe the  
company's money on something that isn't going to produce  
value. SLA is a safe place to learn about other people's  
experience. We have vendors and exhibitors at our  
conference. We need to ask them questions. No one should  
be afraid to say, "Hey, wait a minute, why should I buy  
this? What will this product or service do for me and my  
company?" I think that's very important. Oftentimes our  
folks don't do that.

GS How do you prepare to change with changing technologies?

MD I do a lot of reading, both in paper and online, and I look  
at a few blogs every day, and try to keep in touch with  
people in the industry. I'm not necessarily talking with

librarians as much these days. I talk more with publishers, people who design systems, and others who are part of the information industry. I try to anticipate what's coming down the pike. I can call people on the phone and ask them about things I need to know. I put on my *Information Today* hat and say "This is what I'm doing." And they're very happy to talk about what they are doing and where they think their companies are going..

GS The question that probably is not fair because we all have things in life we might have done differently. If you were starting all over again, is there anything that you might have done differently or chosen differently?

A: Yes. I probably would not be a librarian. I went into it not intending to be a librarian, but when my personal situation changed, that's what was there for me. I was able to work in the field and advance. I am very glad I did it. But had I not had that personal situation, I probably would not have done it. I would have done something else. I like to tell people about SLA. If they join, they will have a tremendous experience. They will meet wonderful people. They will have great opportunities to learn, network and to build their personal network, social network, and professional network, and I think that's very, very important. And they will have the opportunity to learn

every day from Click U, blogs, programs, newsletters and everything that's going on.

GS: Thank you so much for your time today

MD Oh, you're welcome!

**End - Miriam Drake**