

Voices of SLA

James (Jim) Tchobanoff (JT)

Interviewed by

Marjorie Hlava (MH)

January 29, 2011

MH: Good morning and welcome to the continuing additions of the “Voices of SLA”. Today we are going to be interviewing James B. Tchobanoff, also known as Jim. I am Marjorie Hlava, also an active member of SLA. We are enjoying the wintery landscape in Wisconsin on Jan 29, 2011.

Jim has been a member of SLA since 1976, which means he has 35 years of service on the Association, Chapter and Division levels. I wanted to tell you just a moment about some of his accomplishments over the last 35 years. He’s received the President’s Award twice from 1986 to 1988. He received the John Cotton Dana Award last year in 2010. He served twice on the Board, once as Division Cabinet Chair and once as the Director-at-Large. During that time as Director-at-Large, he was secretary of the Board; which means he carried quite an extra burden. He has chaired a number of committees at the association level, including Chair of the Long Range Planning Committee, Chair of the Special Committee on Research, member of the Task Force on the Value of the Information Professional, Chair of Bylaws Committee, Chair of the Committee on Committees and he was elected a Fellow of the association in 1991. He has also served at the unit level and been very active in his own division which is the Food Agriculture and Nutrition Division and he was given a Distinguished Member Award by FAN in 1992. Active also in the Minnesota Chapter, he’s been Chair of Minnesota Chapter and in 2011 the Chapter gave him a Life Time Achievement Award. I think you will find his insights and take on the association over these many years very thorough and thoughtful.

JT: Thanks Margie for your very generous introduction. We have been longtime friends and I really value and appreciate your friendship. I don’t think I could have done so many of the things that I’ve done in the association without help from you and others who are as equally committed as you are. Thank you for being my friend.

MH: Thank you Jim. How or when or why did you become involved in SLA? Has that involvement met your expectations?

JT: When I moved to Minneapolis in 1976, I started work for Pillsbury and started attending Chapter meetings of the Minnesota Chapter. We did some programming with other information related organizations in the area and that kind of got me started. Then I was asked to run for President Elect in 1979, which I did; Pillsbury graciously supported my activities and that’s kind of how I got started. From there you read the list of things I that I’ve done and that’s kind of how I got into it. Overall...Yes, it has met my expectation of being involved. I’m a child of the 60’s, Margie. John Kennedy, President John Kennedy was one of my heroes and one of the things that have always struck me is one of the things that he said at his inauguration address that I will paraphrase: “Ask not what SLA can do for you, ask what you can do for SLA.” That’s kind of been part of my drive to contribute to the association.

MH: I find it interesting that your Chapter shanghaied you the same way mine did. I also became a President in the Rio Grande Chapter in 1979 and that's where I met Jim, within the Chapter Cabinet; all of those children of the 60's, coming up to look into the SLA activities. What do you think were some of the major issues for SLA when you were in the leadership role? You have done it at all levels: association chapter, division, committee, fellow and so forth, so why don't you pick out some you thought were major issues for SLA Leadership?

JT: When I first became active, copyright was a big issue and the association took quite a positive role in addressing some of that -- stating the position that special libraries have, which is much different than if you were a library in the public sector. So I was very pleased that the association did that. In the 70's and early 80's, SLA had primarily been in the reactive mode and beginning with the long range planning efforts they started to have more of a focus on looking at what's ahead and trying to shape the association so we could be heard. Some other things that came up were always the struggles of the bylaws. There was a group that wanted to form a Medical Division and they were not quite kosher in the way that they went about it. It caused a lot of who-ha, that eventually got resolved. I think the other thing which the association always struggled with is being responsive to member needs, which are continually changing. Over the years, I think those have been the major things that the association has been dealing with.

MH: So you have already begun to allude to it, but what reasons would you give other information professionals for joining SLA and taking an active role in the association at some level?

JT: I think the first and major benefit of SLA is to have a means of developing professionally and our professional developing programs are a great benefit. Back when you and I were first involved that was one of the first things that I had an impact on the association, because back in those days SLA only had 6 courses and at the annual conference and they were not well attended. There were a lot of complaints that they did not meet member needs and it was in the Cabinet, Margie you and I...I think it was Nolan Pope and Craig Booher, there was a bunch of us, and we passed a motion in Chapter Cabinet recommending to the Board of Directors that beginning at the 1980 Conference there would be at least 10 CE classes offered at annual conference. Since then CE classes have been relevant, more heavily attended, and on the financial side for SLA it has been more financially rewarding. So once again, one of the big impacts that we had was on the professional development program. I think the opportunity to network with your colleagues is something that is essential for doing the job, because you get exposed to so many different people. You can find people who can act as resources for you and ask them questions. The other thing is from that network you can develop a number of lifelong friends and you and I are classic examples of that.

MH: You were talking about the CE classes reminds me about the same time I think we began having some of the divisions give workshops on Thursday instead of just taking field trips and that caused quite an upheaval.

JT: That was also a struggle, Margie. That happened during the time when I was Division Cabinet Chair, Margie, and I think we got a reasonable resolution of that although it is still a struggle. I think ITE is now the primary division that is doing things like that. The rest of the divisions may co-sponsor something, but they haven't been as active in actually conducting the annual

conference CE programming as ITE and that is definitely a feather in ITE's cap and we won't say who the rabble rouser was who caused all of this.

MH: Okay moving on what was the most important thing that SLA has accomplished or changes that have been made at the association level while you have been a member?

JT: I think the major change in SLA has been to stop being so reactive and think more ahead of what we want to be and how we can position ourselves as an association to be there. The second thing, and this started during the time when I was in Division Cabinet Office, was starting to make a deliberate effort to train the incoming leadership of the association. It started out as DACOLT, Division and Chapter Officers Leadership Training Program. It's now evolved into the Leadership Development Institute. It's all the same thing. We basically want to do two things. One is to help train the people who are in leadership positions within the association at the chapter and division level and give them some tips on how they can best accomplish their job. The second thing is to give them some general leadership skills which can benefit them not only in their association position but in their real life position back at work. From this pool we can look for future officers of the association and hopefully have given them some better skills. I remember one of the first training programs that we did; I was looking around the room and said: "Forget about the board members who are sitting in the back of the room and who are currently serving in offices, but a future president of the association is sitting in this room." I'm sure I scared some people when I said that, but it's our deliberate effort; that this is the pool we are trying to develop for leadership positions within the association.

MH: Are there things that you think SLA should have done or done differently during your years of membership?

JT: I wish the board had been a little bit more open, in the sense that I wish the board would publish a readily accessible summary of board actions. I wish the summaries of financial statements were more widely accessible. For example, the Medical Library Association, in their bulletin publishes these after every board meeting and there is an annual financial statement available for general members to peruse and to see what the financial situation of the association is. I think that's the major thing that I would change. I mean the board meets in open session, which I applaud the board for doing. However attendance by non-board members at open board session is minimal. I can remember at what used to be called the Winter Meeting of the association where both the Chapter and Division Cabinet watched the board meeting during the mornings and in the afternoon there were Chapter and Division activities. It was interesting to watch the board and kibitz with the people around you about what the board was thinking or doing. While the board would listen to the members of the audience if there was something to be said, sometimes we had to actually standup and wave our arms, but we would eventually be recognized after members of the board spoke. I think it was a good two way street and in some cases I think the board is a little bit isolated from what the membership really thinks right now.

MH: I can remember lining up at the mike with you more than once to comment on what the board was saying. How did participation in a professional organization of any kind, but particularly SLA influence your career?

JT: Well, I took advantage of as many CE classes as I could and they helped me with some of the skills I needed at work. I took management classes; I took database classes. Thank you Margie

and ITE for doing some of those, they were very helpful. Those were good. I think the other thing was professional connections that I earned through my networks. There was always somebody that I could call on if I had a problem and needed some advice or something. And I was very thankful that my fellow SLA members were so willing to give advice. And if they didn't know the answer to the question, like any good librarian they would refer me to someone they thought or knew could help me. Again the network connections are very important.

MH: So speaking of your career what jobs have you held and which have been the most rewarding and why?

JT: My first formal library position was in the St. Clair Shores Public Library it was right after college. I was thinking of becoming a librarian and that helped me get my feet wet. After I got my library degree in 1971, in those days the Medical Library Association and the National Library of Medicine had NIH training grants. So I went to Memphis, Tennessee and participated in the Post-Graduate Training Program for Science Librarians. That gave me a real sense for what the physicians were actually using in their work; so I got to understand the library from a customer's point of view. That was always something that I focused on during my career. After that I went to the University of Missouri-Kansas City and became a Clinical Medical Librarian (CML). Of the positions that I held, being a CML I think was always my favorite. As a Clinical Medical Librarian we made patient rounds with the teaching team every morning. Many times at the reference desk it's so hard to understand the context of the question that is being asked, but on rounds the patient that you're seeing is the context and you have to be aware of what is going on with the situation there. In many cases there was a direct question "Jim, can you investigate this issue for us?" Other times the student or resident taking care of the patient or the Senior Docent would give me the high sign and I knew I had to look into something. And the most rewarding part about it was that I would go back to the library, do my research and then give the answers or result I found to the people who were taking care of the patient. And then shortly thereafter, I got to see how what I did was being used in the management of the patient's care. And that was very rewarding to me and it was personally satisfying, Margie, because I knew that I helped in the management of this patient. That was good. The other thing that was good was it was a short time between the time the question was asked and the time that you saw how the answers I found was implemented. Now my time at Pillsbury was much longer, I had much greater challenges but the time between when a question was asked and a new product was rolled out was much longer, so your involvement "Did I do that, Margie? Yes, I did do that or I helped with that." It was a different kind of reward, Margie. Right now I am doing freelance work and it is harder to see the results of my work, because I don't have day-to-day or face-to-face contact with a lot of my clients. I still enjoy the hunt. I enjoy playing Sherlock Holmes, I always have, Margie. But seeing how what I do makes an impact on people it is much less direct. Being a CML was very rewarding.

MH: During your career have your employers supported professional association membership and activities?

JT: Pillsbury was very good about that for a couple of reasons. They realized that I could grow professionally and consequently they would benefit. Also at R&D there were only two people who had formal library training on my staff, me and one other person. So unless I took a deliberate career change, Margie my opportunities for advancement within the company were going to be limited. So partly they supported my involvement because it would have some direct impact on my job, but partly it was to keep me happy because they knew and I knew that

my advancement within the corporate ranks was going to be limited and frankly that never bothered me. I always enjoyed and appreciated their support.

MH: What has been the most rewarding aspect or specific event in your career that you want to share with us?

JT: I already mention about the CML stuff. Working with the people on my staff, watching them grow and develop professionally is kind of like you're a parent who watches a child grow. Some of them left my staff to pursue positions at other places and I was very pleased, honored and humbled when they would come back to me and say "Thank you, Jim for teaching me this or that or for showing me how to do this". And that was very nice, Margie. My wife and I don't have any children. I have work children. I think I had the same kind of feeling as a real parent has.

MH: Would you join the profession again if you were starting over again?

JT: I think so; one of the things that primarily drew me to the profession was being able to find answers and playing Sherlock Holmes, which is something that I enjoy, Margie. So that kind of draw would be there. I have a background as a chemist as well as librarian, so the science area is a perfect place for me. I don't think I would be happy in a public or university library -- the corporate world is much more suited to my thinking, particularly a research environment. So, yes, I would join again.

MH: So knowing what you know now, is there something that you would do differently in education or job choices or some other aspect?

JT: I think in my education, I went to library school and graduated in 1971, so what I learned then and what's being taught now is as different as night and day, Margie. The concepts are there, the technologies are greatly different. So that would be a much bigger difference than just the change in times. I think that a major choice is when thinking about an employer. Libraries in particular in a corporate environment are a cost center, Margie and you really need to look for "I'm going to say a "progressive employer", Margie; somebody who is really open and supportive of library work for an organization, because that is going to help you in your battles for resources. You always have to prove and make your case when it comes to budget time, but if the atmosphere is supportive it's better for you than if you have an environment that is always criticizing every penny, nickel, or dime that you are spending and they are more oriented towards finances as to benefits and outcome. So, I think I would be very careful about the choices of employer. I wish, well Pillsbury was good, I wish I would have had a little better environment, Margie. Pillsbury is a food company, not a high-tech company. High-tech, pharmaceutical companies, and chemical companies tend to be more information-oriented and supportive of information. Now that is not always true but in generality.

MH: Going back to your comment on education for just a moment, how do you think it was different then versus today for information professionals?

JT: I think conceptually the concepts are the same, but the technology is much different and when I was in school there was much less emphasis on technology and more emphasis on basics skills and concepts. Today technology is more important and critical role in library education. On the other hand, you can't play down the importance of the concepts within the library training and also the need to teach much more collaborative skills. Libraries can't do their work today

without a strong partnership within the IT organization within their parent organization. Just because they are another department within your organization doesn't mean "A" that they are going to be cooperative and "B" that you are going to get the resources that you need to do your job. That kind of teaching doesn't happen in library schools. Building relationships and partnerships are essential for getting your job done today and that is something I think library schools should work on.

MH: What advice would you give to people just joining the profession?

JT: Enjoy your work; it's a lot of fun. The training you will get is the basis of what you will need, but most importantly when you get on the job is to be flexible because you have to learn a lot of new things. Be open to change and open to new ideas. In particular the world we live in today is a technology driven world. What is technically impossible today becomes feasible if not tomorrow, then the day after tomorrow and we have to be aware of those things that are happening and more importantly realize how these new developments can help us to do our jobs better. By the same token the most important thing about being a librarian is relationships with your customers, the people on your staff, and the people that you partner with. You need to have a fine balance with being technologically savvy and have strong personal relationships so that you can get the job done. If you don't have the right balance you are going to be frustrated one way or the other, so be cognizant of that and be working on both sides of the equation.

MH: You already talked some about the continuing education and the impact that you had on it and the impact it had on you from SLA. So, other continuing education and professional development opportunities where there some from schools, organizations, your employer and what subjects in general did you cover?

JT: From my employer it was primarily supervisory, management topics, because I was in a management position at Pillsbury. I've also taken advantage of SLA's CE events, I mentioned that. Our chapter has held CE events and I've taken advantage of that too. I have not had the opportunity to do some other college classes or whatever; I've taken advantage of what I could.

MH: What do you wish you would have learned in school?

JT: The importance of management, personal relationships, that is so important in helping in getting your job done. Library schools when I was enrolled were basically about learning the basic skills and didn't really get into a lot of the management and personal relationship issues that are really so important, Margie. When I was in library school, technology and computers were really just beginning to get involved in libraries at that time. So technology was a minor portion of your education, where it is a major portion today. That would have changed anyway, but there's a lot of stuff I learned on the job. I learned to be a searcher and reference librarian when I was in library school and one of my first jobs. I didn't realize that searching a database is easy Margie -- it's the part of the iceberg that's above the water that you see. Building the database is the part of the iceberg that is below the water surface; and I didn't realize what that was until I got on the job and started building a database for myself. And it is so easy to search, but so hard to build and keep them up-to-date, particularly, if you can't buy the input that you need. If you are depending upon people to build or contribute documents to an internal document database; if they don't write it or contribute to it, it doesn't get into the database. You have no control of that. That's one thing that I forgot to mention about what being taught

in library schools. Library schools, when I was in school were basically focused on what's available in the public domain and they really never talked about what happens within an internal organization, especially like a research organization like Pillsbury, where the internally generated information is at least as important to know and be able to find as what is published in the public domain. I'm crass at being practical. I would have paid researchers to send me a copy of their research report or their lab notebooks and stuff, so that I could get them into the database.

MH: It seems to me that you did a big project to go out and collect things from the researchers on the floor. You sent people with a cart to their....

JT: Yes, we did...We had people go around and pickup stuff, Margie.

MH: That's very proactive.

JT: Unfortunately, we got more of the status type of information and not a lot of the meat and potatoes stuff but, at least we got something.

MH: So, let's move to someone of the individuals in the profession SLA members or not who were important in shaping your professional believes and your career. Really who were your mentors?

JT: I never really had a formal mentor within the association, but I had a lot of people who had a strong influence on me, Margie. I think Jean Deuss was one of the first along with Joe Dagnese. I learned a lot from David Bender, Margie. People within Pillsbury, my supervisors there, Jay Morgan taught me about stage management, I didn't always learn it well, but he taught me about the importance of managing the situation. Jerry Rabe taught me about strategic thinking and I highly value that -- particularly the part about critical thinking. It is so important today. Sally Shlossberg taught me about professionalism and the importance of presenting myself well. Within SLA there are so many people that I worked with over the years, I just can't name them all. I think the important message to take away is that all the people that you meet have something to teach you -- just be open to it and learn from them.

MH: Can you name a few people that you would categorize as the best thinkers or innovators in the field, particularly in SLA and share a little bit about what puts them on your list?

JT: The number one person (Jim points to Marjorie Hlava and they laugh).

MH: Thank you.

JT: Marjorie Hlava, you've helped me think things through a lot of times. You see things that I didn't see. I think you have a who's who of the world, particularly in the technology world and databases. You know so many people and have so many contacts. I so appreciate your counsel and your friendship. Frank Spaulding was very important to me; as a thinker he is was always concerned about the positioning of SLA. I served with him on the board; he put me on the Task Force for the Value of Information Professional; he asked me to Chair the Special Committee on Research. Frank was very adamant about the need for doing something about research. Another person is Jim Matarazzo for his work on the importance of research within the special library field. Jim raises some uncomfortable questions for us and many times we don't have answers

about basically what is the future of the profession? But I think those questions need to be asked, need to be stated.

MH: You have already given a lot of pearls of wisdom, but what advice would you give to people just joining the profession?

JT: Again this is something we covered already a little bit. I think I would say be flexible and be open to new ideas. Technology changes so quickly. We have to be aware of that and also make sure you are keeping and building strong relationships with your customers and partners because that's how things get done.

MH: In your opinion, where is the profession heading and how do you think SLA and the profession must change in order to meet the challenges in let's say the next 5 years?

JT: I think the profession is changing, instead of being more of a place it is becoming more of a virtual thing, but there is nothing to take away the place, I mean people need that face-to-face contact. So I think as a rule we are becoming more of an information facilitator as opposed to an information warehouse, Margie. That's also important especially in the technical world today we need to be able to teach about information literacy and how to use the tools. The tools are useless unless you know how to use them. The other thing that is imperative about that is we need to teach better about critical thinking. I can remember that if it was in print it had to be right; if it was on the computer it had to be right. Now if it is on the internet it has to be right, well it isn't necessarily so.

MH: As seen on TV...(laughter)

JT: Well yeah...(laughter). One of the classic examples is when the internet was first becoming widely available a professor at Mankato State made a spoof website for the City of Mankato Minnesota showing a picture of Diamond Head in Hawaii. The average temperature in Mankato in January was 72 degrees. Well anybody who has any experience about the climate of Minnesota in January knows that the chances of hitting 72 in January are slim or none. But again this comes down to information literacy and how to use the tools of critical thinking that need to be taught. In the corporate world there is so much of a need that the library has to focus on organizational alignment. In the corporate world you are not going to be a success unless the library's goals are in tune with the organization's goals and those goals change. What's hot today; is cold tomorrow. So you have to be on the alert. You have to be going out and asking "What is Critical" and then figure out how you can best put the library resources against today's issues. If you are not, the library is not going to be successful. Organizational alignment in the corporate world is essential for what has to happen. SLA with the Alignment Project has been bringing some of those issues up to the membership. They found what executives think and made a report. The report included some statements on how to address some of the issues. Librarians in many cases tend to use "library-ese" when they talk to their management as opposed to management speak. Part of the report says use appropriate management words when you are talking to management. One of the things that is very disappointing to me right now is while the Alignment Project was first reported two years ago in January of 2009, there was a task force established to develop a tool kit. We do not have a tool kit for members yet. I'm very disappointed that we do not have it. So SLA is taking steps, but just not moving fast enough.

MH: What are the, you covered quite a few...But what any additional important skills and competencies librarians will need as they move into this future?

JT: I've already mentioned flexibility; I can't stress enough the ability to develop strong working relationships with your partners, particularly with the people in IT. That is critical to any success in the library working with your customers and those skills are not taught. Again the corporate alignment is something you just have to do. You will not be successful unless you are aligned and using the library resources to achieve your parent organization's goals. So pay attention to those things and make sure you are on top of it. For example, I forgot the gentleman's name [Reese Dano], but he was working in a small advertising company. With the slow economy they had to shift from creating advertisements to getting new customers. So what he did was change from being a librarian to being a client developer, Margie. He had to go out and help his company find new business. He was in tune with his company and he shifted from being a librarian into getting into client development. That is organizational survival and it is very important and something you don't learn in library school.

MH: How do you personally prepare to change with changing times?

JT: I try to be as open as I can to new ideas. I tend to be a practical person and sometimes when there is a new technology or thought I sit there and I say "What in the world" and I struggle with how that can be useful to me in doing what I am doing. So, as that's a struggle and a learning kind of thing. I try to keep up, I don't always read The Harvard Business Review, but I glance at the table of contents to see if there is something there of interest. I try to stay on top of news sources particularly non-US sources. The Economist magazine for example is a good resource, because it looks at world situations and from a different perspective than the American perspective of whatever is going on. So, I think it is important to look at an issue from another person's or another country's point of view. Something that is different than what you are used to. The other thing is to make sure that you are staying in touch with the people who are your clients or customers. Understanding what their needs are because they are continually changing and as their technical needs change that has an impact on what you are providing resources and services for in the library, so as the needs change you have to be aware of them and be able to go out and find new resources and develop new services that are going to help your clients do their jobs better. There are changes all around; technology is one of them you need to be aware of so I think that is about it.

MH: So one more...What do you I asked you, Jim is there any final thoughts you want to share with the community of SLA?

JT: I wish you wouldn't ask me any more questions (laughter...) I am about questioned out. I think within SLA, again the most driving thing for me is ask not what SLA can do for you, ask what you can do for SLA. Many times chapters and divisions have difficulty finding people to fill committee appointments or elected positions. Please say "yes" if you are asked. You will benefit from it personally and professionally. Don't wait to be asked -- step up and volunteer. The other thing I would say to people within SLA is try to look at the big picture. Many times we get focused on the nitty gritty details which is not to say that they are not important, but we need to focus on the bigger picture and figure out how we can get over the nitty gritty details and work towards a common goal which is how we can grow SLA and make it more relevant not only for today's membership, but also for tomorrow's. Thank you Margie for interviewing me it has been my pleasure.

MH: It's been mine Jim. Thank you very much.

JT: You're welcome.

Addendum:

When asked about thinkers or innovators in the field, especially SLA, I forgot to mention a few people.

I can't say enough about Stephen Abram, who I've had the privilege to work with and call a friend.

Stephen's writings – both his monthly "Info Tech" column in *Information Outlook* and his blog, www.stephenslighthouse.com – are interesting, thought-provoking and timely. I'm amazed at the amount of energy that he has, his passion for the profession and his willingness to share with others. Stephen is an engaging speaker who can pull information from a wide variety of sources to make his points. Being graphically challenged, I also envy his mastery of PowerPoint. I can't think of a better spokesperson for the profession.

Jane Dysart is a two-part thinker for the profession. First in her role as conference planner, she is responsible for putting together the programs for the annual Computers in Libraries Conference, the Internet Librarian Conference and the KM World Conference. All three programs promote the library profession and expose attendees to interesting speakers and topics, as well as promote networking between the various library communities: public, academic and special, to say nothing of the growing area of knowledge management. Secondly, together with her business partner, Rebecca Jones, they teach courses in library management, strategic planning and strategic thinking, which are so important in today's environment. The blog on their website, www.dysartjones.com, as well as their posts on Facebook are always exposing us to interesting news, sources or points of view about professional topics.