

SLA

Voices of SLA: Emily Mobley

Interviewed by Janice Anderson

This is Janice Anderson in Houston, Texas, on June 14, 2012. We are here to interview Emily Mobley. Emily has been a member of SLA for nearly 45 years, and held the office of Association President in the years 1987 and '88. She also had leadership roles in the Michigan Chapter and participated in the Engineering, Science & Technology, Library Management and Information Technology Divisions. Following her year as President, she served on the Awards Committee as Chair and was the Association Representative to IFLA. Following her reign with the Special Libraries Association, she was also very active in ALA and ACRL. I am pleased to have the opportunity to interview Ms. Mobley today and we look forward to her insight into a number of questions.

Emily, let's start with what advice you would give to people joining the profession today, recognizing that a lot of changes have taken place over the last 43, 45 years.

EM: I feel quite old right now, as I recall it. But I think flexibility is probably the greatest advice I would have. People need to stay abreast of what is happening in the larger world and how it impacts their positions. I think that's...

JA: So "flexibility" is the key word.

EM: Flexibility and I guess global awareness, and I'm not talking about geography, mind you, but global awareness of the information environment today.

JA: OK.

EM: I might want to add just a tad to your introduction. It was the Association of Research Libraries I was active with –

JA: Not ACRL?

EM: Not ACRL.

JA: ARL.

EM: Although I was a member of ACRL, too. And I also was Chapter Cabinet –

JA: I left that out. I apologize. Thank you for that correction.

EM: - Chair.

JA: How did you happen to get involved in SLA to begin with? What was the motivation, what was behind that?

EM: Well, at that point, I was working as an engineering librarian at Chrysler Corporation and of course, it was natural that I would join SLA. My supervisor at that time took me to a chapter

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meeting at SLA, and I guess one thing led to another and I became a member. And a lot of my activity really started because Bob Gibson, who was head of GM's Research Labs, asked me to chair a committee when he was President, and at that committee, as I recall it was called Resolutions Committee, and at the annual conference, which was held in Detroit, sometime around that time, '70, '71, I had to speak. And so, and that's when I met a lot of people at the association level.

JA: So, being *asked*, being *taken*, being *invited* –

EM: Yes.

JA: – was what got you involved.

EM: That is correct.

JA: Overall, did your association involvement meet specific needs or expectations that you had?

EM: Well, it met them...I think, how can you say? For me, it was just “that's what you do.” You don't just sit in your office or just go to work. You *partake* in your profession and I merely considered that partaking as later, when I started doing research and writing, that to me what was a professional does.

JA: OK. A lot of people characterize associations as having some sort of mission or purpose that is for the greater good. SLA historically has really focused on education and networking, but through the years, different priorities, different issues come up, fade away, come back. What were the major issues when you were really active in the Association, and are they different than they are today?

EM: Well, amazingly, this recent, within the last couple of years, competencies and what our name should be, it was like *déjà vu*. Because those were the issues back in my day, too, it seemed to be.

JA: Twenty-five years ago.

EM: That's correct. And we haven't moved away from apparently twenty-five years ago. But now the competencies, no, those should be revisited and revisited because things change. As I said, flexibility, stay with the changes so, I have no criticism of that being revisiting. *Image* was a big thing back in the old days. In fact, I remember a woman we invited in who became active from the Fashion Institute, who gave –

JA: I remember her.

EM: – who gave a lot of talks on image and all and –

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JA: That's when "Dress for Success" was a big kind of theme.

EM: Yes. So we went through all of those themes. An interesting issue when I was, I think it was Chapter Chair Elect, which at SLA moved to Washington, our offices were in New York, and a location had been selected in Washington, D.C., and it wasn't a hands-down, it wasn't divisive, but not everyone was on the same page. And I have a feeling this may have happened again when the Association moved to Virginia.

JA: The Association has obviously changed through the years. Some things have changed; some things have stayed kind of the same. What do you think are the most important things that SLA has done or changes that have occurred over the years, primarily at the association level?

EM: Oh, that's a hard question for me, because once I left the Presidency, I was in a different job that required my focus to be away from SLA, so even though I was a Fellow and I would read the issues and what was happening, I really was not engaged in the issues. I don't know whether it was the fact that the Association did not move forward into what I call "The New Information Day" as well as it should, or whether so many members were unemployed, but I think the Association lost a lot of membership since my heyday.

JA: And is that just indicative of what has happened with associations overall, that they're less appealing? I know one of the other challenges that several associations that I'm involved with – attendance at conferences, whether they're regional or national or international, has dropped precipitously, and that's one of the ways that most associations make a lot of money. Is that a change that you would want to see any association make, in terms of rethinking how they make money and rethinking the annual conference all in one place, "big event" sort of mindset, sort of model?

EM: Well, yes. I think associations need to rethink their financial models. And if I may give an aside here, over the years, I was very involved in the discussions related to the price of scientific serials, particularly the cost for academic libraries. And many of those high-cost journals were journals of scientific societies and associations. And the reason was, this is how they made their money: the sale of journals. The dues did not pay for the association's needs. It was conference and journals. And you look at SLA, and probably other associations that do not have the type of scientific journals that bring in that kind of money, well you have the same challenge, that is built on the income from conferences. As the economics of the world changes, the models have to change. Now into what, I don't know. But nevertheless, this is what has happened. And with SLA, my sense...it seems as though I remember a time when companies stopped paying the dues for the associations, for the librarians. And at that juncture, there was a loss of members, because people would not pay their own dues.

JA: That was actually going to be a follow-on question for me, because I've seen this happen in a number of associations, where the individual doesn't value it enough to pay it on their own, and if their employer won't pay, then they drop out.

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EM: Yeah, well, it's probably no different from when I was in West Lafayette, Purdue quit paying the membership to the local country club for its deans and executive members, and the club almost went under. I certainly didn't pay. So I...

JA: And how does that balance out with being involved and committed to the profession, partly to get, to learn and to get to know people and to have relationship, but also, ultimately, to give back?

EM: Oh, right. And this is something we're not, shall we say, imbuing or beating into members from the beginning. The importance of profession, professional associations and your need, what it provides for you and what you should provide for it. "It" being an association. But the times are so complex, what you find out is that *one* association does not do it for you. And then you find you need to become a member of two, perhaps three –

JA: – three –

EM: – four, and that gets quite daunting. And if you're working for an employer that also does not pay much of your freight, as I call it, to go to conference, then you have some enormous expenses.

JA: Right.

EM: And yes, I have known, it's very interesting that I had my foot in the corporate world and also my foot in the academic world, where there were substantial differences. And you know, in the corporate world, if you were going to be active, you were supported and that meant the days when you had your membership paid, you had conference paid and all like that, and in the academic world, we didn't do any of that very much.

JA: How do you feel about the idea of various associations that have similar missions perhaps to slightly different audiences – is there a need or almost a requirement these days that they be more collaborative and cooperate with one another, as opposed to each one kind of having their constituency and trying to be all things to all people?

EM: Yes. Not only collaboration, I'll take it one step further, and say that perhaps it should be a *federation*. A federation of associations where there is a central, shall we say, office and perhaps a central board, a central operating location and personnel and officers, with each of the associations perhaps doing things that directly affect their membership. Now, if that sounds like I'm talking about something like ALA, that is an interesting model, and what has happened of course in ALA over the years, is each of the associations started to have its own conferences and all, and those conferences are germane to that group. The Public Library Group, the ACRL, the academic, and all, and what's happened is now ALA is going "Gee, how do we get people to the annual?"

JA: To the "big boy" conference.

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EM: To the “big boy.” Although, those are still large, but they’re sort of like two kinds of conferences now. And so some type of federation like that may be in order.

JA: How do you think it would be received, if – ?

EM: If it’s anything like the past, it’s going to go “plop!”

JA: Fall flat.

EM: Fall totally flat.

JA: And is there anything that we as senior members could do to help influence a different mindset?

EM: [laughter]

JA: Am I being a little...Pollyanna-ish, here?

EM: I don’t know. I have watched SLA, as I say, go through this and go through things and miss opportunities, where there should have been leadership on things of this nature. And perhaps, there were discussions and that’s how I think we ended up with giving the Records Group and some other group and all sort of a special rate for conferences. So we could have some interaction but we never went past the “give them a special rate”, and actually, perhaps, had the officers of each association sit down and talk about, look at common goals.

JA: OK. Let’s change gears just a little bit and think about the profession of librarianship as a whole. Where do you think it’s heading today? The internet has changed a lot about what we do and about information and content delivery and any other label that you might want to put on it.

EM: I’m going to go back to my addresses, back in 1987, ’88, back in those days, where I said “One of our problems is we are associated with an *artifact*.” We’re not as librarians, we’re not associated with exactly what we do. Because we are *content providers*. We are *content specialists*. And it does not matter what *wrapper* that content is in these days, but as you know when I tell people I was a librarian, they say “Oh, you must read a lot of books.” OK. That tells you right there. Librarian, *liber*, Latin, book. And they think of you as nothing with books. When I tell them I was an information specialist, they went “Oh, you work with computers.” Now, that tells you, you know, right there, I think where some of us, from what I can see, are continuing to miss what it is we really do. We have not moved to really explaining, by our name or anything else, what it is we do. Because it doesn’t – I used to always preach, it doesn’t matter whether the information was in a book, in cyberspace or in somebody else’s head, you would get it. I mean, I remember, oh don’t get me started on this, this is my real soapbox and has been for years. I mean, you talk about getting information wherever it is, I remember I had a question, I think I was working at GM Research Labs then, about the weight of a human bone, a tibia or fibia.

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Whatever those leg bones are. And there was nothing in anything that I could find that had the answer. So I called up the morgue and actually got the city's coroner. He says "That's a very interesting question." He says "Now, you want to know what live bone weighs, and of course, I only deal with dead people. However, some of them haven't been dead too long when they get here. So how long do I have before I give you the answer?" And I said "Well, I think this researcher would be glad to have it whenever." He said "Give me a couple weeks and I'll weigh a few."

JA: What an interesting approach.

EM: And sure enough, he came back with it. The researcher was very happy. He says "I'll weigh them as soon as they get here."

JA: And may I be so bold as to ask why did the researcher want to know how much a leg bone weighs? Or a kind of average?

EM: Well, I was in the automotive industry then.

JA: Oh, of course! Of course.

EM: Accidents.

JA: Their accidents. How much weight is on that accelerator.

EM: Whatever. I couldn't remember why he wanted to know...Again, that's the thing, you get the answer. It's the content. I got the information from a mouth, from someone else.

JA: OK. I'm involved in an another association, the Association of Records Managers and Administrators, and I know that many individuals who are in corporate, and sometimes even in academic settings, who have a library or information science background, end up dealing with business content, sometimes called records, sometimes not. And the focus is sometimes on finding or delivering content but it's also involved in the life cycle management. How do you organize, classify, describe, store, retrieve that content? Talk a little bit about your exposure and experience in that arena and how SLA needs to, or should consider that as a space that they should touch on.

EM: Well, I think when that started, from my perceptions, this kind of really came into focus, records management, as technology came into deal with it. That's-

JA: So it became more visible then.

EM: And that's when I remember we were looking when I was at GM Research Labs, we were looking at a system for the library, and one of the systems we looked at, one of the features was you could do the records management for the whole company using this same system. And I

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think that's when I became more aware of that portion of the company and personally, I think we missed a great opportunity there that we didn't get together back in those days. I think we continue, perhaps, I've known some people were involved in competitor intelligence, and all of that goes hand in hand. I don't know, have I slid off the question some?

JA: No, no, I don't think so. It's just my perception that, thinking as holistically as possible, with an organization, information is information and whether we characterize it as a record or a research report or a blog, to be a little more current –

EM: Well, we didn't, and [unclear] my soapbox again. One of the things I found back there in the 80's is a number of proud, as I call it, librarians in companies who were proud, and it's OK, to be librarians, but they focused on cataloging and they focused on books and the information from books. Now what went on in the rest of the company, they seemed to have been not only unaware, but didn't *care*. My sense is, and this goes back to the education of librarians, I think it was a time when we had *sold* companies on the need for formal education and they were hiring a lot of people who were degreed librarians, but had absolutely no knowledge of the corporate world. And sort of went in and catalogued up the whole place. I'm trying to say this all in a tactful way. The special librarians of old *understood* the corporation and the need for information.

JA: And they knew how to put it in terms that would communicate value and explain the costs and benefits –

EM: Right, right.

JA: – coming from that.

EM: That is correct, and when we came back to that era again, this cost benefit analysis. Back in the 80's, we used to say that, I know the book that Betty and I wrote, we really focused on the fact that you are in what is called a “staff position.” You are spending money without making money. You *always* have to prove your value. You're not in an academic library, where it's inherent. Even public librarians often do a better job, you know, so.

JA: Knowing what you know now, would you do anything differently in terms of education or job choices or...life choices?

EM: Oh, that last one was “oohh.”

JA: That's a hard one, I know.

EM: No, I actually, I loved my jobs over the years. I just, I don't know, I'm just kind of laid back and it was fun. I like challenges and I found that all of my positions were challenging. I found the profession was challenging. I liked providing information to people, particularly when they didn't think you could find it. And you found something, and you were forever their friends. I

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liked the corporate world, in that you were making more decisions about what you were giving the person, the researcher.

JA: Explain that.

EM: OK. There were times that I actually wrote a report, usually for the executive levels. I wrote the report. They'd ask a question and I didn't give them a stack of documents to read, but actually *wrote* the salient points for them.

JA: Analyzed, compiled and synthesized something to deliver to them.

EM: Right. That is correct. And I never did that anymore once I left the corporate world, and I think that's probably why I'd like the idea of research and writing and was germane to the academic world, because I *missed* that part of the job. But, like I said, I had a ball. I don't think I would have done anything different. I became interested in special librarianship when I was in the 11th grade, 12th grade in high school.

JA: You – I didn't even know what that was –

EM: Well –

JA: – when I was in 12th grade. Wow!

EM: Well, what happened is we had one of those career days, and I had been working in the school library or in the public library, both of those I worked in as pages. And one of these career days, a woman came, Dr. Denton, to this day I remember her name, her last name, and she worked at that time it was Wyandotte Chemicals. It became BASF and who knows what it is now. And she talked about her job, and she had a PhD in chemistry and what she did. And what was interesting is I was going into science, chemistry, and the thing that I did not like is spending all my time in the lab. I like people. And she and I had a long talk about how you could blend that stuff.

JA: Wow.

EM: And so, from that day, I thought it would be interesting. I made a one year detour to teaching in public schools so I could pay for my master's degree, and my first library job was at Chrysler Corporation.

JA: Where did you go to library school?

EM: Michigan.

JA: Michigan?

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EM: Mm-hmm.

JA: And what in the wide world brought you to Houston, Texas?

EM: Retirement.

JA: OK.

EM: I got married late in life. I met my husband in Hawaii. He lived there for 26 years and when we finally decided that we would get together, I promised him that after I retired it would be no ice and snow.

JA: And Houston was about as hot and humid as you could possibly get, compared to Hawaii, right?

EM: Well, he was actually leaving Hawaii. Hawaii actually does not, well, it's a long story. I actually did a sabbatical there, and after four months, I had island fever. You know, when you grow up in the Midwest, you can't handle. And the cost of living was so expensive; I didn't like the notion of living in a closet. But anyway, he was ready to go because he had some medical work that he needed done that he couldn't get done there. And anyway, I said "You move to Indiana, we'll get married, you move to Indiana, I'm going to step down from the deanship, I'm going to go to half a year, and we will spend the winters looking on where we were going to live." And I have a sister who had moved here and she was like "Move? What's wrong with Houston?" And then my mother, who was at that point in Chicago, was making noises about needing to be near me, needing more help, and she was unhappy there, and I said "Houston, you'll be near my other sister." She said "OK." So that's how we ended up here. It never, my husband had never been here, we didn't come, we flew in and the first of November after the Katrina hit, wherever that is over there –

JA: New Orleans.

EM: New Orleans, and bought a house, in two days, we bought a house. Mid-December closed on it.

JA: Wow.

EM: That was like.

JA: Well, I feel so fortunate, because the primary reason I was asked to interview you was because we were so close, and I wouldn't have had that opportunity. What kinds of questions did I not ask you that you think we ought to talk about today?

EM: Well...

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JA: Do you have any other soapboxes? Maybe that's the better question.

EM: Well, I think I would like to talk about some of my mentors.

JA: Oh, right.

EM: And the importance, if you're in association work, well, actually in any position, just living, it's important, is the importance of *guiding* other people along, being a coach and a mentor. I've had an *enormous* love of that, although I am a very opinionated person, but there's some kernels there. And my mentors in SLA from the first association meeting I went to, way back there in Detroit, were Robert Gibson, was instrumental having me do that Resolutions Committee. And he later hired me at GM Research Labs. So he was a mentor.

In SLA, Betty Ferguson, and these are two former Presidents-

JA: You mentioned Betty, is this the Betty who wrote with you?

EM: Betty Ferguson, yes. From New York. I met Betty one summer when she would come out every summer to the University of Michigan and teach the special libraries class. And I met her one summer and we hung out. Boy, Betty could put away some bourbon. Oh, boy. Love Betty. And the time came a few years later, when she was asked to write a book on special libraries, and she thought of me and said "You know, I can't do this alone. Would you be part of this?" And so we wrote that book together. And in the process of writing it, we spent lots of time talking about things and the SLA days, she was very much a mentor.

Edythe Moore, who was from California, was another mentor, and of course, Vivian Hewitt was a great mentor.

JA: Vivian was another SLA President.

EM: She is another SLA President also. So with Edith Moore.

JA: OK.

EM: And then another SLA President that was a good mentor was Vivian Arterbery. I remember Vivian, because I was just about in tears one evening during some kind of meeting, and I think it was, after a board meeting, just after I had become President. And there were a bunch of politics. I will not name these people, but the politics were ridiculous. And I told Viv, and Vivian said "Look, Emily, stay your course. Don't get down to their level. Don't do anything. Stay your course and stay above the fray." And that was what I would call a "life message" for me.

JA: Wow.

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EM: Because I *used* that in my life. Not just SLA, in my life. But I'm sure there are more mentors. And then I remember David Bender fondly, the Executive Director. He could make a President look real good, so. I think that mentorship, and I can say – you didn't ask the question "What did SLA do for me?" But I think that without SLA, I would *not have risen* to the level that I rose in the library world.

JA: That's a powerful statement.

EM: And I will say, this is not bragging, but I am sure that I was probably the highest ranking black librarian woman, female, in the nation during a portion near the end of my career. I know no one out-earned me.

JA: Again, powerful statement, attributing some or even a portion of that to your association involvement.

EM: No, *it was all due to SLA*. Oh, I forgot one of my mentors. Joe Dagnese.

JA: Oh, yes?

EM: Joe hired me at Purdue and I became a dean at Purdue and why did I end up with a full professorship and ultimately a distinguished chair? Because I had been President of SLA, I written a book thanks to another SLA –

JA: SLA member.

EM: – SLA President. So...Bob Gibson hired me at GM, when you look back, these – *SLA was the common thread* that propelled me to a deanship at Purdue University.

JA: How can leaders in associations and specifically SLA today challenge the newbies to sacrifice and invest their time and energy in an association with the idea that some of those same benefits, those same outcomes that you've experienced and shared, might be theirs, 20, 30, 40 years from now?

EM: I'm not sure I know, but I feel like if you, as a leader or just another SLA member, working with a younger member, if you *start* that sort of conversation with them, and stay with them and then essentially there comes a time when they move to another mentor, it works. I am pleased to say that some of the presidents that came after me I had a hand in. Some of the other –

JA: Kind of helping groom them, prepare them?

EM: Yes. Some of the other leaders at other levels that I had a hand in sort of grooming them. So I think that it's a two-way street. Someone has to, in a way, work with you. You also have to be the kind of raw material that is moldable to go there. And I will say quite openly there are people who wanted my mentorship, but they didn't get it.

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JA: And they didn't get it because?

EM: Sometimes people are not willing to do the work that is necessary-

JA: Not willing to make the investment.

EM: – to move on and they just want to – yes. Not willing to make the investment and feel more entitled.

JA: Ah.

EM: And there is an investment you must make. And I think one of the things is you have to see these positions as *careers*. You have to have a career, not a job.

JA: Not just a job.

EM: And I've seen a lot of, too much downfall in the area where people have jobs, not careers. And so a person has to have a career mentality in order, I think, to succeed and have this.

JA: Emily, it's just been wonderful to talk to you, and I will say I'm looking forward to some more chats over dinner.

EM: OK, great.

JA: Thank you very much.