

Interview with Lyn Dennison – Transcript

Interviewer – Lindsay Haynes – Greenblatt Library – Augusta, Georgia

June 13, 2007

Interviewer: Good morning. This is an oral history project interview with Lyn Dennison. Hello, Lyn.

Lyn: Hey

Interviewer: Alright, starting with our questions. Lyn, can you please describe how you became interested in librarianship and give a brief overview of your professional career?

Lyn: OK, well my mom was a school librarian, but she really wasn't the one that influenced me. I received a BA in English from Clemson University and was wondering what to do with that degree and accidentally became the circulation clerk at Clemson and I just fell in love with the academic library setting. So within the year I'd applied to library school at the University of South Carolina and I was in one of their early graduating classes. I think it was about the fifth graduating class from that library school. Got a Masters in Librarianship is what they called it back then – eventually it morphed into a Masters of Library Science...and then eventually into the MLIS that most people have now. I loved science and biology even though I was an English major, and I took a few extra courses in that that I didn't have to, while I was in college. And so I thought that a good match would be medical libraries for me so that's what I applied for. My first job was at the East Carolina School of Medicine Library. It was a brand new medical school - did not have a graduating class yet - did have students...and back in the 70's there were a lot of new medical schools that started up to meet the need for primary and rural physicians. And so I was lucky enough to get a position there. I did a lot of different things; I did reference and cataloging on the very clunky OCLC system at the time, I did audio visuals...which was kinda a hot new thing to be involved in, and I did collection development. Then I came to MCG after about three years there; I came to MCG as Collection Development Librarian. Soon after that I became Head of Reference and for most of the next 20 years, that's what I did. It had a lot of different names, had a lot of different titles, but I was still Head of Reference. The titles kinda reflected the interest at the time... It was like Reference and Education Services, Reference and Databases Services, Reference and Knowledge Management...

Interviewer: Whatever was hot in library world at the time...

Lyn: Right, right, that's how my title was structured and activities, but you know I consider myself a long term reference librarian. My last five years at Medical College I was the Assistant Director, but I kept my little pinky finger in reference, none the less, and retired in December of 05.

Interviewer: OK, Wonderful. Now let's talk about some of your Southern Chapter activities. Do you remember the first Southern Chapter meeting you attended? And what details can you remember about it?

Lyn: Yes, I do remember my first meeting. The meetings are usually held around October and I started at MCG in October, so I didn't go in October of '80, so I didn't go to the one that was held in... I believe it was Louisiana that year. But the very next year it was held in Augusta, so I did attend that one, of course. The main thing I remember was the friendliness of the Chapter. I just felt welcomed with open arms. It was very different for the Mid-Atlantic Chapter that I had come from - where it was very professional and very formal and very good information, but it lacked that just welcoming friendly feeling that Southern Chapter has. Another thing I remember from that is that I was asked to moderate a session and so this was my first event of actually participating at a professional meeting. Much to my chagrin one of the people just went on and on and on, one of the panel members, and despite all of the pleading looks I cast in her direction...she just kept going and going and going. This was a non-chapter member, by the way.... So, I felt like I was an utter failure at my first moderating event.

Interviewer: OK, can you please recount any funny or interesting stories, other than the one you just had, that you have about any Southern Chapter meetings you attended?

Lyn: Well I'm not a big rememberer of funny stories, but one thing I thought was kinda interesting was the preponderance of people named Tom as Directors of libraries. I think it must have been the late 80's or early 90's... There was Tom Basler, Tom Lang, Tom Williams, Tom Singarell, T. Scott Plutchek, who's fir...the T stands for Thomas, and then the Director at Emory - Carol Burns - her husband was named Tom. ...So it was just an amazing coincidence of the Directors names. And then another event that I remember was when we stayed at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis... Henry Lemkau, who's the, who was the Director at Miami; he must have been the President of the Chapter, or the Chair of the Chapter at the time and he led the Peabody ducks off the elevator into the fountain. Very properly, it was quite a ceremony and that was very neat to watch.

Interviewer: Can you talk about your observations on how the Southern Chapter has evolved through the years?

Lyn: It's just always been in tune with current topics, I've just been impressed how - as the topics have changed in the library world - Southern Chapter is right there on top of it. We've always been able to merge fun with professionalism, so that's not really evolving...that's just a constant in Southern Chapter. Something else I think maybe that has evolved is the exhibits. It seems like the exhibits were not that large or numerous in the early days, and now I think they have very nice representation of vendors for the exhibit hall.

Interviewer: In your opinion, what sets the Southern Chapter apart from other professional library org... associations? And I guess you have experience with others, so ...

Lyn: Well, you make friends for life in Southern Chapter, you really do. I've attended since 1981. When I started there were a lot of people I looked up to and kinda considered

my mentors and leaders, and then others I grew up *with*. You know we were all starting out our careers together and now we're retiring together - and so that's kinda neat...to spend your professional life with a lot of the same people. I really do consider them friends, beyond colleagues. Another thing that sets Southern Chapter apart is the level of awards and leadership that we provide. It's just so amazing that we have so much fun and and such a good time, but we are leaders. We have been very important committees and leadership roles. We've won research awards and Chapter awards. It's just a fantastic Chapter.

Interviewer: Were you ever a Southern Chapter officer and which committees did you serve on?

Lyn: I was the Newsletter Editor from 1989-90, which put me on the Executive Committee. I was on the Nominating Committee twice. I was on Hospitality and Program a couple of times, and I was in charge of the Contributed Papers sessions at the meeting in Carl Gables. I was probably on Bylaws and a few other committees, but those were the ones that I remember and required a good bit of effort on my part.

Interviewer: Can you tell us anything about the founding of the chapter or any chapter-related event of historical significance?

Lyn: Well, I'm not quite that old, but,...but I did have a sense that when I first entered the Chapter that it was a time of kinda settling in. I think the decade before - there had been regional groups rather than chapters...and states were coming and going. I think that various people that had been in the Southern Regional group included Louisiana and North Carolina, and maybe Kentucky. MLA was creating the Chapter structure and so we had just kinda settled into what our group ... how our group was defined - at the time I was joining.

Interviewer: That's an interesting thing to be witness to. How has the Southern Chapter impacted your professional development throughout your career?

Lyn: Knowing my colleagues as friends I think really helped my level of confidence in the profession. I could kinda test myself in a safe environment. I think I ended up pushing myself to excel more than I would have otherwise, because of the...the nurturing environment that Southern Chapter provides.

Interviewer: Do you know some of the names of the people who contributed to your professional career?

Lyn: That would be very long list. I would say all the Directors that I've served under; that includes: Joann Bell (before I moved to MCG), Tom Basler, Camilla Reid, Holly Buchanan, Tamera Lee. They have all been so supportive and encouraging. Then a lot of my Georgia colleagues too - I guess because of closer proximity in Georgia, you know, I've gotten to know more of those librarians and there have been some outstanding ones in Georgia. My colleagues at MCG - we just learned from each other

and that's always great. I have to mention Lucrecia McClure who's not in Southern Chapter, but she is to me is - a librarian's librarian - and really shaped the way I viewed reference service. Ada Seltzer...I remember her as always providing leadership through the years and being a great communicator of what was going on in the Chapter. Mark Hodges, who was at Vanderbilt, he was always such a gentleman, and so full of knowledge, and loved the profession so much. ...and those are some of the names that come to mind.

Interviewer: Ok, moving on to MLA, which I know you also participated in. What do you recall about some of the MLA meetings you attended?

Lyn: Well the exhibit halls were always amazing to me. Each year just seemed to out do the previous year. It was a lot of fun. It was great to see all the exhibits and talk to the vendors; it was the kind of the place where you run into people as well...and so the exhibit halls were kinda the social center, I guess, of MLA. Also, I enjoyed the Janet Doe lectures where we'd get to hear significant members of the profession speak on topics of the day. I just remember the concurrent sessions as feeling like musical chairs... You'd choose your time slot and go sit and listen - and then run to the next one and go sit and listen. You always wondered if you'd chosen the right one,... but they were good.

Interviewer: How has the Medical Library Association impacted your professional Development throughout the years?

Lyn: I think the main thing it's done is kept me focused on the important issues. Sometimes you can get caught up in the day to day drudgery of getting the job done and MLA kinda takes a step out - lets you step outside of that - and see what our overarching goals are and keep us focused that way.

Interviewer: How has the medical library profession changed during your career? Which developments in the field of librarianship had the greatest impact on your professional life?

Lyn: Well it's trite, but it's true; computers have really changed things a lot. I'm really proud that I've been part of the generation that helped to usher in the computer age. In libraries we began with teletype machines to search Medline on a main frame at the National Library of Medicine. Now we're using current Web 2.0 technologies over 30 years. I'm just kinda proud that we were able to not just adjust to that, but kinda usher it in and... I think libraries in a lot of ways, and librarians, were on the cutting edge of computer use and have always been attuned to that. In library school I actually learned to do a basic program and we had to use those IBM punch cards. I don't know if you even know about them,

Interviewer: I've heard of them.

Lyn: but, you know, to go from that to the personal computer was a big step and one we welcomed.

Interviewer: What advice would you give to new medical librarians, such as myself?

Lyn: Well you're going to get to work with smart, motivated people and exciting and changing environments, so just enjoy the ride.

Interviewer: Do you have any final comments?

Lyn: No, I think that covers it.

Interviewer: OK

Lyn: It's been fun.

Interviewer: Wonderful. Thank you so much.

Lyn: Thank you.