Member Spotlight

Jane L. Blumenthal, AHIP, Director, Taubman Health Sciences Library, University of Michigan–Ann Arbor

Editor’s Note: The Member Spotlight column for this issue is devoted to the two candidates for president-elect of MLA, Jane L. Blumenthal, AHIP, and Dixie A. Jones, AHIP.

MLA Member Since: 1986
First Professional Position: Cataloger, Scientific Library, NCI-Frederick Cancer Research Facility
Education: BA, College of William and Mary; MLS, Catholic University of America.
Favorite Website or Blog: I have to say my own blog, Wrenaissance Reflections (www.wrenaissance.com), because I have the fun of creating content as well as reading and responding to comments

What Do You Find Most Interesting about Your Work?
Variety and constant change—we work with five professional schools, a large biomedical research program, a premier hospital and health system, and our local community. I’m excited about the library and its role in the university and the community, and fortunate that I work with people who feel the same way. The opportunity to grow and change ourselves and our programs is stimulating and rewarding, even as it keeps us on our toes.

What Has Been Your Greatest Professional Challenge?
When I first became a director, I had to immediately transition from being a colleague to a manager. There were cuts in services, resources, and staff that had to be made almost immediately. Those decisions are difficult under the best of circumstances. As a new director, [it was especially difficult] and [I] felt it more deeply than I would have otherwise. I don’t think any decisions since have been as difficult.

How Did You Become Interested in Medical Librarianship?
I’ve always been interested in science and research. After I graduated and began work at the National Cancer Institute-Frederick, I became even more fascinated with medical research and its potential to improve people’s lives. I could see how the library and its management of information contributed to medical discovery and development of effective treatments. Will a librarian cure cancer? Perhaps not—but will anyone else without our contributions?

What Was Your Background Before You Became a Medical Librarian?
After college, I worked as a paraprofessional at several libraries. I learned a lot that’s helped me throughout my career. As a student I waited tables, worked as a hotel desk clerk, was a department store cashier, served ice cream, and shelved books in the library.

What Would You Be Doing if You Weren’t a Librarian?
When I started my career, I would have said bench scientist. Today, I’d say community activist or director of a health-related nonprofit organization.

What Do You Think Is the Most Interesting Issue in Librarianship Today?
Ownership of information, the issue underlying copyright battles, open educational resources, the National Institutes of Health public access mandate, and arguments about data sharing. What’s a fair return to data creators, artists, and publishers? What’s the role of the library in the spectrum of information access?
What Do You Consider Your Most Important Accomplishment?
Initiating and developing the [Health Sciences Libraries’] Taubman [Library] outreach program. It’s not the flashiest accomplishment, but it’s made a difference in bringing health information to people who need it.

Whom Do You Admire?
In no particular order: Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Raoul Wallenberg, Florence Nightingale, Albert Schweitzer, Paul Farmer, anyone who sacrifices his or her own well-being or comfort for others.

In What Other Organizations Are You Involved?
The Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries, the Association of American Medical Colleges Group on Information Resources, and my MLA chapter (Midwest; previously, Mid-Atlantic). I chair the Publications Policy Committee for the American Diabetes Association. I’m also a member of the Audubon Society and local animal, nature, and conservation organizations.

Is There Anything about You that Others Might Be Surprised to Know?
I wrote my first web page in 1994 using a text editor.

What Do You Do to Relax?
I’m a birdwatcher and nature blogger, and avid reader of mysteries, science fiction, and fantasy. I belong to a book club, which keeps me reading serious books as well. I love puzzles and word games—crosswords, sudoku, and various games on my phone such as Bookworm or Bejeweled.

What Do You Do to Maintain Work-Life Balance and Wellness?
I walk at lunchtime—not every day, but as often as I can. I work on time management skills—I’m a big fan of David Allen and Getting Things Done. I stay late at work if necessary, but try not to take work home. I find relaxation in nature. On summer evenings, I sit on the deck and watch the birds and wildlife. In winter, there’s always something interesting to watch through the window.

What Is Your Favorite Vacation Spot or Activity?
My husband and I have the most fun when we take unstructured time to explore a new city or wander around a new area together. I can’t pick one favorite spot or activity. There are too many I’ve loved: large cities to small towns, swimming with dolphins in Florida to a bus trip up the Dalton Highway in Alaska, fine dining to home cooking—we always have a good time, wherever we go.

What Is the Most Daring Thing You’ve Ever Done?
Ride a rollercoaster that did a complete loop, turning riders upside down at the top. I still don’t believe I did that.

What Advice Would You Give to A New Member of MLA, New Librarian, or Someone Starting Out in Medical Librarianship?
Don’t be afraid to try something and fail.

What Are Your Future Goals?
At the University of Michigan, I want to work with librarians and staff to grow our partnerships on and off campus, and to grow their knowledge and skills. Our environment will continue to change in ways we can’t predict. Keeping ahead of that means learning while doing, and that requires stretching our basic understanding as well as developing specific abilities.

I want us to grow both liaison services and informatics. One of my goals is to keep working on the resources we need for that. Another is to explore how we best use our physical space in an increasingly digital knowledge environment. I’d like to develop additional, meaningful partnerships with the hospital, and I’d like to grow our community outreach, both activities and funding, and to work with more localities and new populations. It’s important to me personally and professionally to give back to the community.

For my personal development, I’d like to improve as a writer and photographer. I don’t think of myself as artistic, but I enjoy what I’m doing with my camera and my blog. I’d like to be more skilled with both.
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**MLA Question for Presidential Candidates**

*Please identify an issue of strategic importance to MLA and describe the skills and talents that you can bring to MLA to help address the issue.*

The immediate and pressing issue for MLA is thriving in a difficult economy and challenging times for our members—essentially the same issues we deal with in our libraries, every day. The association’s greatest asset is the passion, creativity, and dedication of its members. It’s important to capitalize on that in a way that benefits both the members and the association.

We need to continue to use technology and social networking to improve communication, build community, and increase participation. We need to balance fiscal responsibility with value and service, and to foster not only the next generation of leaders, but also the next generation of members.

In my career, I’ve worked in public services and technical services. I’ve worked in one-person libraries and in large research centers. I’ve participated in services for education, for research, and for patient care. I’ve created my avatar in Second Life, and I’ve held in my hand a stone tablet more than 3,000 years old. Every one of these activities is a part of my professional identity. I’ve come to have a very broad, very inclusive definition of medical librarianship and to appreciate all aspects of what we do.

As a library director, I’ve built on this foundation. Over the years, my background and wide range of experiences have given me an ability to see the big picture and to recognize and take advantage of opportunities. I’m adept at recognizing patterns and seeing connections, then facilitating links. As a manager, I have to be practical and fiscally prudent. As a leader, I have to ascertain where there’s most value, and then bring resources in line with mission—not the other way around.

We, as librarians, know our value as well as our values. I want to see MLA continue to support, and advocate, for both.