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SLA 2013 Graduate Stipend Award Winner Brian Flota

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by Brian Flota

Last year, in 2012, I attended my first SLA conference. Since I only had a limited amount of time to participate, I soaked up all I could. I spent hours at the INFO-EXPO, talking with vendors about their wares and meeting special librarians from around the world. I was able to sneak away to a few panels. One of them was very useful to me, especially as a graduate student at the University of Illinois’ (UIC) Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) about to start the second year of my Masters program. It was a presentation by Diane Goldstein of BST America who also present at SLA 2013. There, she provided nuts and bolts advice about how to tailor one’s resume and cover letter for an increasingly tough job market. I took furious notes and soaked up everything she had to say. Ultimately, by SLA 2013, I managed to get seven phone interviews, two campus visits, and a job offer! Needless to say, I was excited about attending SLA 2013 in lovely San Diego, located within two hours driving distance of where I grew up.

Being able to fully participate this time, I decided to attend as many panels and social functions as possible. At the General Session, I was riveted by Mike Walsh’s talk. He pointed out that innovation occurs by simply looking at the world us, not by trying to generate new, unnecessary complexities. His talk truly epitomized the theme of this year’s conference: Connect, Collaborate, Strategize. Connections were made at a variety of SLA functions. I attended the Western States Chapters Reception and Competitive Intelligence Division Open House & Business Meeting. Despite not being active in this information profession nor currently being settled in the Western U.S., these functions provided insight into the ways information could be delivered, accessed, and packaged. On Monday, the UIC GSLIS organized a gathering at Croce’s Jazz Bar where I was able to meet recent and past alums from my program. Plus the food and wine was very good!

I currently work at three different special libraries as a Graduate Assistant. At one of the libraries where I work, we are looking into updating our interlibrary loan system (ILS). I met with our Head Librarian who was also attending the conference and we talked with a vendor about their product and later attended their meeting to get more hands-on interaction with the ILS. This spirit of collaboration permeated the conference. I also attended a panel led by Nicole Engard of ByWater Solutions on Implementing Open Source, a form of software that is developed through collaborative means. She discussed the advantages of open source software as an alternative to corporate brands, especially as it related to her work with Koha. I attended another panel with our Head Librarian
that focused on Disaster Planning for Information Professionals. The tabletop exercises involving scenarios around a variety of potential disasters demonstrated the spirit of collaboration. Groups discussed what kind of plans would be implemented to help them react more calmly and efficiently to a disaster at their library. Making the panel even more noteworthy was the fact that my colleagues and I at our library wrote and designed the exercises for the panel!

Thinking about the road ahead for special librarians, especially as it pertains to the big players in the field, is a necessary part of one’s strategic plans and visions for the future. Events held by OCLC and EBSCO were especially informative, as both companies discussed upcoming tweaks to their services that are guaranteed to make accessing hard copy texts from around the world or online PDF items even easier. Perhaps the most invigorating panel was Monday’s morning’s session on Dream Jobs (subtitled What’s it Like to Work There?). Three librarians who had “glamorous” gigs at the San Diego Zoo, the Walt Disney archives, and the Sonoma County Wine Library discussed their paths to their distinct jobs. Each panelist looked back at the roads they had traveled, but, more interestingly, talked extensively about their strategies for moving forward. While each position has or had its perks (like getting to meet exotic animals, attending red carpet ceremonies for Disney world premieres, or attending wine tastings in Napa Valley), they also presented distinct challenges for each of the librarians who discussed their “dream jobs.”

As a soon-to-be graduate of UIC’s GSLIS with my career as a librarian right in front of me, I will look to their stories for guidance and motivation. Furthermore, SLA 2013’s focus on Connections, Collaboration, and Strategy will serve as a constant reminder to me of the key components of sterling librarianship. In addition to these themes, the panels I attended, the booths I visited at the INFO-EXPO, and the interpersonal connections I made showed me that innovation is as important as friendliness, that opportunity is there to be grabbed, and that San Diego has the best weather in the world.