# Collaboration is Key: A Public Reference Librarian's 25-Year Retrospective

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## Abstract

This article highlights various collaborative efforts during the author's career as a reference librarian at a large metropolitan public library from 1986 to 2011.

## Introduction

For nearly 25 years, I have been a reference librarian with the San José Public Library (SJPL) System. If there is a "typical" reference librarian position, mine would probably be far from it. First, the work has varied greatly; its only constant has been change. Second, there have been unique opportunities to work collaboratively with colleagues--from my own library system and throughout the region, state, nation, and world. These successful collaborative efforts have been the high points of my career. Currently, as we face drastic cuts in public library budgets and staff shortages, collaboration is more crucial than ever. It is my hope that readers will find in this brief retrospective something which sparks future creative and effective library collaboration.

## Entry-Level Position

In July 1986, soon after earning my master's degree in Library Science at San José State University (SJSU), I was hired by SJPL as a 32-hour-per-week librarian in the Media Center of the main library (then known as "Main"). As there was just one other Media Center librarian employed at the time (my supervisor, who later left me in charge of the unit during his paternity leave), I relied on the knowledge, expertise, and camaraderie of the small staff. Here, I acquired deep and abiding respect for colleagues at all levels of library work. The terms *clerical, paraprofessional,* or *support staff* do not adequately capture the value of their contributions.

Our collaborative efforts to best assist public library customers within the unit--although on a small scale--forged a firm foundation for the rest of my career.

## Unique Reference Center

Within a few months, I transferred to a brand new full-time position in the Silicon Valley Information Center (SVIC) on Main's reference floor. Following two years of planning, SVIC opened to the public in October 1986 for its third and final year of grant funding. In its fourth year, SVIC would become an SJPL reference unit, along with the California Room (local history archives), Online Reference Service, Periodicals, and Reference. I became the only librarian who worked for SVIC from the day it opened through its closing day seven years later.

SVIC was a collaborative venture of library staff and members of the Silicon Valley high-tech business community. The term "Silicon Valley" originally represented the unique concentration of high-tech firms in Santa Clara County; by the mid-1980s the boundaries had spread to the Greater San Francisco Bay Area. Guests at the SVIC grand opening included Bay Area corporate executives, representatives of high-tech industry groups, government officials, library management and staff, and other interested individuals. A local graphic design firm created SVIC promotional materials, including glossy grand opening invitations and a large neon sign which was illuminated at

the opening. Also featured at the event was SJPL's first online public access catalog, accessible remotely via dial-up ports. The "state of the art" catalog provided access to the SVIC book and videotape collection, a clipping file of newspaper and journal articles (selected, indexed, and cataloged by SVIC librarians), and donated corporate materials. These materials included financial, product, and historical documents shelved in archival boxes, as well as unique corporate ephemera. SVIC also displayed framed and unframed corporate posters.

To obtain materials for the archival collection, all SVIC staff engaged in direct mail campaigns, and librarians visited several large local high-tech companies. I also worked with the design firm to create a series of bold newsletters marketing the center, and attended regular meetings of the SVIC Advisory Board. As local business and civic community members shared efforts to document their own history, SVIC staff learned more about meeting their information needs. These challenging and rewarding collaborative efforts truly jump-started my career.

SVIC became known to researchers throughout the world as the only public center providing a collection and services to chronicle the origin, growth, and wide-ranging influence of the Silicon Valley high-tech industry. SVIC staff enjoyed responding to international phone and mail inquiries, as well as assisting patrons visiting from other countries. I had the pleasure of supervising two library school student interns from Germany, one of whom became a lifelong friend. SVIC staff and patrons learned from each other about library and business cultures different from our own.

After its first year of being open to the public (and final grant year), SVIC librarians were regularly scheduled in all Main reference units and the Adult Services unit, plus other units as needed. Online Reference Service librarians regularly worked in SVIC. I also provided occasional backup service to the Bookmobile librarian and Special Servic-

es (outreach) librarian, and may have been the only librarian trained and experienced in all Main-related public service points (except the circulation desk and literacy center). As a reference librarian specializing in SVIC, while also providing general library services, I worked with a wide array of staff to help meet the diverse information needs of SJPL patrons.

In 1992, SJPL confronted budget cuts that were, in retrospect, minor compared to those we face today. The Main library (renamed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library in 1990) had reached capacity. The library director determined that one effective way to cut costs was to close SVIC. Stating that the gap between the advanced level of SVIC and the rest of the library system was too great, he cut SVIC from the budget. Although SVIC staff presented alternatives to total closure--such as rethinking some staff-intensive projects, merging into the reference unit, and collaborating further with other organizations--SVIC closed to the public in 1993. We continued to get questions about SVIC and its collections for many years.

SVIC collection items were moved to the main library reference unit, the California Room, and the SJPL circulating book collection. Corporate ephemera that had been donated by Apple, Inc. were moved to the [Stanford Silicon Valley Archives](#) (established in 1983). The SVIC corporate archive collection is still accessible via the California Room. For more information please see the [Silicon Valley Information Center Collection Index](#) and the Online Archive of California's "[Guide to the Silicon Valley Information Center Collection](#)."

In the summer of 1993, one SVIC librarian left SJPL for a research institution, another returned to private industry, and the remaining SVIC staff provided backup assistance to vacationing SJPL branch library staff. Working at several branch locations, I met more colleagues and learned more about the entire library system. By fall, most

SVIC staff members were reassigned to the reference unit in the main library.

**Smaller-scale Collaboration**

During the SVIC years we engaged in other collaborative efforts. For example, when the entire reference floor was re-carpeted, several reference librarians assisted staff at one of our largest branch libraries, where we also provided a temporary mobile telephone reference service.

In October 1989 the entire Bay Area was rocked by the 7.1 Loma Prieta earthquake. While San José was fortunate to be on the periphery of its destructive path, the main library did suffer damage resulting in its closure to the public for weeks. Staff at all levels worked together to clean up after the quake, reorganize, and improve library services prior to re-opening.

A cataloging librarian who had worked in SVIC during its grant years joined forces with me to develop a job-share position in which she would work half-time in SVIC and I would work half-time in cataloging. Our supervisors initially agreed, but later decided we could not afford the estimated six months it would take me to get up to speed during the critical cataloging backlog at the time. Over the years it has seemed to me that such job-shares would benefit library staff as well as patrons; I am glad to note that some are currently taking place and others are under consideration.

During this time I also coordinated and supervised volunteers to assist patrons with simple procedural and technical questions at public access computers. Recently, similar volunteer engagement has taken place on a limited basis and is under renewed consideration for the future.

**Pioneering Efforts**

After SVIC closed, my reference librarian position could perhaps be described as "typical"--for about two yeas. In July 1995, upon returning from a four-month maternity

leave, I learned about the University of Michigan's new Internet Public Library (IPL) and its unique online environment known as a MOO (**M**UD, **O**bject-**O**riented). My professional (and personal) world expanded greatly the instant I first logged onto the IPL MOO. Chatting in real-time, I met like-minded librarians and library users from all over the world, forging a new online community in a new way. I made life-long friends from near and far, long before Web 2.0 or Facebook. Some IPL MOO librarians created a council to assist a library school graduate student in providing chat reference service on the MOO. It was a thrilling way to extend reference librarianship. The experiment ended when we acknowledged that Telnet text-based commands required too great a learning curve. Other academic MOOs such as Diversity University and Lingua MOO remained active for several years (schMOOze University still exists), and paved the way for collaborative web-based chat reference service as well as today's virtual worlds.

In 1997, Syracuse University launched the Virtual Reference Desk (VRD) as a collaborative resource for developing virtual (also known as online, digital, or electronic) reference services. Within a year it had launched the DIG_REF listserv, which continues to foster a valuable exchange of ideas, issues, and concerns among its subscribers. VRD was the source of seven annual conferences held throughout the U.S., four of which I was able to attend. The conferences attracted academic, public, and special librarians who shared their interest, knowledge, expertise, and positive energy in providing high-quality online reference services.

**Web-based Chat Reference Service**

My experience with the IPL MOO also paved the way for me to be Lead Librarian for SJPL's collaborative, web-based chat reference service. In July 1999, when chat (also called live online, real-time, synchronous, or virtual) reference service was introduced in the San Francisco Bay Area, my SJPL supervisor knew the Lead Librarian assignment

was for me. Over the past ten years, collaboration in chat reference service has expanded from the Bay Area to all of California, across the U.S., and throughout the world. It has been extremely rewarding to work with librarians around the globe to meet the information needs of our online library patrons. I have particularly valued the opportunities to brainstorm, plan, and provide feedback not only at regular software user groups but also on advisory boards working directly with software vendors and managers of cooperatives. Locally, an extremely rewarding effort was the shared SJPL/SJSU in-house QuestionPoint queue, accessed via the Qwidget on our merged website. The Qwidget chat service--accessed remotely as well as from within the large King Library--was popular with SJSU students, members of the general public, and the SJPL and SJSU librarians providing the service. In my [previous article](#) published in Collaborative Librarianship, I outlined some of the many changes we at SJPL experienced in providing collaborative web-based chat reference service from 2000 to 2010.

**Mega-Merger of Two Library Systems**

In 1998, just a year prior to the development of Bay Area chat reference service, SJPL faced a larger, broader goal. While both the public main library and neighboring SJSU library needed to expand and update, neither could afford to do so. Outgoing San José mayor Susan Hammer proposed a merger of the two institutions in one new library building. Although situated just a half a mile apart, the two institutions had engaged in minimal collaboration. After five years of mutual planning, the new, merged SJPL/SJSU Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library building opened to the public in August 2003. I'm proud to have been part of the process—from simply getting to know our SJSU colleagues, to forging joint policies and procedures, merging the SJPL reference collection (previously cataloged in the Dewey Decimal system) into the SJSU reference collection (cataloged in the Library of Congress system), moving into the beautiful

new building on the edge of campus, and, finally, celebrating with our patrons on Opening Day.

Nearly eight years later, the merged institution continues to evolve. The initially merged web site is now two separate sites. We no longer provide our previously successful joint chat reference service, but do continue to provide an active merged email reference service. The King Library reference collection and staff remain fully merged. Each hour of reference desk service is provided by one SJPL and one SJSU librarian, plus either public or academic support staff. Additional hours for SJSU students only are staffed by SJSU. I consider myself fortunate to have worked with SJSU colleagues and for SJSU students and faculty, at the physical reference desk as well as via online reference services. The work has broadened my appreciation of—and improved my skills in—general reference service. It has also positively affected my personal life, as I married an SJSU reference librarian in July 2009.

**Recent Efforts**

In the spring and summer of 2010, it was my pleasure to serve on the planning committee for the 2nd Reference Renaissance Conference, held in Denver. The conference, sponsored by BCR (Bibliographical Center for Research) and RUSA (Reference and User Services Association of ALA), emerged from the ashes of the final VRD Conference held in 2005, where it was recognized that "virtual" reference had developed sufficiently to be considered not separate from but an integral, vital part of reference service in general. Although unable to attend the Reference Renaissance Conference, I again enjoyed collaborating with a variety of reference librarians and was glad to learn of its success in reaffirming that reference service is not dead.

In January 2011, due to a change in California State Library funding, SJPL switched from participating in the 24/7 Reference Service Cooperative using OCLC QuestionPoint software to joining the Southern Cali-

fornia Library Cooperative (SCLC) using Altarama RefChatter software to provide collaborative web-based chat reference service. The small group of SCLC libraries which started up in July 2010 named the service "Instant Librarian." Patrons access the service via their library's chat widget, their own IM or Twitter accounts, or cell phone SMS texting. Participating southern California librarians have been very welcoming and helpful to SJPL librarians as we learn the new software and cooperative procedures. SCLC has set up a wiki to help participating librarians further develop this new service. However, at a time when California and other state budgets are drastically cutting library services, it remains unknown whether we will be able to continue to provide collaborative chat reference service to our patrons.

**Looking Ahead**

Although some collaborative efforts have recently been curtailed due to rising costs, it seems that more rather than less collaboration would be most cost-effective to library systems in the coming years. As distinctions between types of library services (e.g. online vs. face-to-face) diminish, so too do some distinctions between types of library systems (e.g. academic vs. public) as well as between library systems and other institutions such as museums. Libraries, their staff, and their patrons all benefit from creative sharing of library resources and services.

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