

View from the top

Linda Owen, of the University of California,
with an overview of the technicians conference held in Darwin

The theme for the *Techs at the top* conference, held in Darwin in July, was 'Challenges and changes around the world'. As stated by conference convenor, Kaye Bartlett, the conference was an opportunity to look at education of library technicians, issues in the work place, and technology and how it affects technicians. It also provided insight into libraries in other countries.

Two words come to mind as I reflect on this conference: intense and exhilarating. It was intense because of the many, many activities offered. Each day included a keynote addresses, general session speeches, parallel sessions, workshops, exhibits, tours and social events. It was exhilarating because of the people. Participants came from Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, the United States and from throughout Australia. There were over three hundred delegates, each with their own base of experiences and perspectives.

The preconference program included discussion groups and an open forum. Each group had a moderator whose job was to open the session with provocative question and to act as a traffic cop if the discussion got off track or heated. The participants took it from there. The success of these sessions can be attested by the fact that some groups chose to meet later in the conference to continue talking about the issues raised.

Who's left to clean the garderobe [toilet]? was the topic of the afternoon forum. The panel offered a variety of interpretations of and

answers to this question. My favorite was the one given by Jean Bailey, 'Anyone can do it, but a cleaner will do it best.' In other words allow the people who are trained or competent in a specific area to do the work they are qualified to do. Use their expertise. Library technicians in the 1990s are skilled in processes, planning and organization, detail, systems, control of stock and equipment and occupational safety.

According to Jean, the educational standards for library technicians are equal to that of librarians. It is vocational, rather than, philosophically and theoretically oriented. Library technicians are equal members of the library team and should be recognized as such.

Each day of the conference was organized around a subtheme: *Challenges, Change and Around the world*. Major sessions talks on Challenges included a keynote address on *Career development of library technicians in Eastern Indonesia*, by Sara Wirawan, *Paraprofessionals in reference services*, *Library technicians in the Australian Library and Information Association*, and the *Benefits of multi-skilling and task rotation*. Sixteen parallel sessions and workshops covered topics such as quality service, education, enterprise bargaining, marketing, service to special needs patrons, training, and video-conferencing. Each participant was faced with choosing between equally inviting programs.

Change as provoked by technological advances was explored on the second day of the conference. The provocative idea that paper library might disappear with the increased

use of the internet was offered. Specific systems were described and the impact of computers on the work of library technicians was discussed.

Speakers on the third day talked about libraries around the world. Speakers drew from their personal experiences to discuss establishing libraries in eastern Europe, coordinating international aid programs in Cambodia, and described the plan for libraries in Singapore. Library service to Australian Aboriginal communities was covered, as well as, the importance of specialized collections to the history researcher. My presentation outlined the status of library paraprofessionals in the United States, the libraries in which we work and the work we do.

Added to the full program agenda were sessions on the internet, visits to exhibits and tours of nearby libraries. Of course, I can't leave out the opening reception held at the Northern Territory Parliament House, the conference dinner at the Trailer Boat Club by the beach, the evening at the Mindil beach markets where everyone applauded the sunset, and the swim in the waterfall fed pool during the Litchfield Park tour.

I would like to commend the organizing committee for this conference. Headed by convenor, Kaye Bartlett, they did an extraordinary job. Information about the conference and photographs taken during various programs may be found on the conference home page: <http://www.ntu.edu.au/library/techs.html>

The library technicians conference is held every two years. The next conference will be located in Canberra in September of 1997. ■

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