

Medical Library Association  
Oral History Committee  
Interview

with

**Beverly Elizabeth Allen**

Interview conducted by  
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**SF:** This is an MLA oral history interview with Beverly E. Allen. Today is Monday, January 21, 2019, and we are in Marietta, Georgia. The interviewer is Sandra Franklin. Good afternoon, Beverly.

**BA:** Good afternoon.

**SF:** Today we will embark on part 1 of your oral history interview, and we thank you so much for being willing to participate in the Medical Library Association's Oral History Program.

So, let's get started with your background and education. What influenced you to go into librarianship, and then in particular, medical librarianship?

**BA:** I was interested in reading all types of materials when I was in high school. And from there, I decided maybe I would major in librarianship as an undergraduate, which I ended up not doing. But, I continued my interest and when I went to undergraduate school at the University of Missouri at Columbia I worked as a student. I started shelving dirty books and all the things that non-librarians do. I worked myself up to doing more professional things by the time I graduated in 1961. I worked for maybe 6 months at the University Library and then went off to grad school at Syracuse University. I returned back to Missouri in September of '61. I had been offered a job as a High School librarian and I took that job and stayed there through May of the following year.

In '62, I was offered the position of Assistant Law Librarian at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. And there I stayed until 1965. During this time at Southern, I went back to school at Syracuse and I graduated in August of 1965.

**SF:** So Beverly, who were your memorable mentors or teachers in your early career as a medical librarian?

**BA:** Actually, they were at the University of Missouri. When I worked part time, I worked for Margaret Brewer, who was the education librarian, and she had lots of influence on me, and she made sure that I went to grad school. The other important person was Dr. Ralph Parker, who was Director of the University of Missouri Library System. He helped me to continue to work all through undergraduate school and made sure that I did the right kinds of things and got the right kinds of education. When I graduated from undergrad school, he asked if I would come back to the University of Missouri after I received my Master's degree and... as the first black professional librarian at the library. And, I did that.

**SF:** So Beverly, describe your early library career. What was that like for you?

**BA:** The early part of my career was not spent as a professional librarian. As I said, I worked at a Junior High School library. I spent three and a half years as an Assistant Director at a Law Library, and I spent half of a year as an education librarian. So, after graduating, my professional career began at the University of Missouri Columbia again.

**SF:** So how long were you at Columbia before deciding to move to a different position?

**BA:** I became the Assistant Medical Librarian in 1965 and left the University of Missouri in 1970, or '71. And I had been offered, well... my life changed a little bit. I met a young man and we were going to marry. And he lived in Peoria, Illinois. And as it turned out, the University of Illinois at the Health

Sciences Chicago was looking for a person to begin a library, branch library in Peoria. So, I applied and was offered that position, and went to Peoria in 1970 or '71, and stayed there through '75. While I was in Peoria, it was a different kind of experience because the University, and this is part of the University of Illinois system, was headquartered then in Chicago was expanding its medical education program and opening branch libraries, branch medical schools, at Rockford, Illinois and at Peoria. And my job and responsibilities were to develop a new library, including not only collection development, but the architectural parts of building a school. I spent a lot of time with the professional people at Peoria who were doing the plans, and I learned to draw plans, to lay out buildings, to lay out libraries. And I spent a lot of time doing other parts, helping with the professional program with the medical students. While I was at Peoria, I also became interested in MLA. My direct supervisor in Chicago was Irwin Pizer. Irwin Pizer was a great MLA medical librarian, and he spent lots of time with the association, and therefore, I had all the support I needed to go to various meetings and work on committees and – most of which I don't remember the names – but I became very involved in MLA.

During that time again, at Peoria, I became involved with academic committees, learned about curriculum, learned about appointments and promotions. And I was the only non-PhD on most of these committees, and so it served me well and it helped me to fully learn about medical school education.

**SF:** So Beverly, it sounds like you had really good experiences at Peoria. What led you to leave Peoria and come to Atlanta to Morehouse School of Medicine?

**BA:** Peoria was a dead end in terms of librarianship. There was nowhere for me to go, move upward within the organization, unless I moved to Chicago, and I really didn't want to go to the main university library in Chicago. So, I left the University, and as things go, I met Dr. Gwen Cruzat. Well, I had met her before, but she met Dr. Louis Sullivan and she recommended me to him because he was looking for a director of the library for a new medical school in Atlanta. And I spent a good amount of time with him, talking about what was needed for a medical school library, the directions that they were going, the program dictating the content of the library, and the library's relationship to the academic program and being a part. But after spending all that time, and Dr. Sullivan and I must have spent three or four different times on this interview, and I also interviewed with other people in Atlanta. I decided I really didn't want to move to Atlanta. But unless you know Dr. Sullivan, you would've realized that that just wasn't going to stand. He goes after someone and he gets them. And so it was, that I moved to Atlanta, Georgia in '76... in September of '76.

Morehouse School of Medicine, and initially it was called... the program was housed and developed at Morehouse College. And we were the School of Medicine at Morehouse College. And when I moved there, they didn't have a place for me. And I spent my time at any office, any conference room, any place that I could to sit down and do work. Eventually we were moved to another building and I had an office, and at

that point I began to hire people. I hired Barbara Martin as the Assistant Director and Joe Swanson was also Assistant Director for cataloging and acquisitions and that sort of thing. And we stayed in that office for a short time – oh a year maybe – before we were moved to another building. And this was the former home of the Morehouse College library. Morehouse had just built a large building, and within that building, their library was moved. And the three of us – Joe, Sandy, and myself - spent the next months getting this place ready for the incoming class. One of the funny things about that experience was one evening we were all there looking at our works, trying to decide if what we had missed, what we needed to do. And all of a sudden there was this noise. And it turned out that they had located us next to the band room.

**SF:** Gosh, the band room?

**BA:** And so there was no way our students were going to be able to study there. And I invited Dr. Sullivan over to see this new library and to see how it was developing. And then when he got there and he looked and he thought he was very pleased... And I said “And I want you to hear this or see this, and suddenly the band started.

**SF:** You invited him at the time when it was band rehearsal? Very strategic!

**BA:** He was so outdone, but it worked out. We, he...they moved the band to another location. and that was the first home of our library. While we were there, we were also a two-year medical school. And we did not become a four-year school until later, and at the point we became a four-

year school, we moved into another building. And this time we were on the property of what was Morehouse School of Medicine. And we did all the things that you normally do in re-establishing a library. We did a lot of experimentation because Joe and I particularly, were interested in computers, and we tried to work computers into the academic program, student academic program.

I think I have gone beyond my timing because while I was at Morehouse, I also was still active with Illinois, and I worked on the national MLA meeting in 1973. And I would go to the meetings in Kansas City, as we were putting it together, and then go back to my job.

**SF:** So Beverly that was really a funny story about the band and being next door to the band. From reading some of Dr. Sullivan's writings, I read that you were more than just the Medical Library Director. You had some other roles at Morehouse School of Medicine as well.

**BA:** That's correct. I participated in most of the committees in the early development of the school, such as appointments & promotions, curriculum. The school had permanent education, not education committee, but a permanent body – a decision making body - and I sat on that committee. I sat on the same kind of committee in terms of the building – one was education, one was non-education. I did participation and planning, it just became more than "library". And as the school developed, we were a small school with lots and lots of programs. We established a program on alcohol... who was the former owner of the hamburger, McDonald's, they provided us the funds to make a section in the library on alcohol. We did jobs, and they're not really jobs, but we spent time with the

State Department, with international programs, we went to Georgia (the country of Georgia), and also to Russia. My part in that was to see what I could do in helping them develop libraries and computer knowledge. The other thing at Morehouse that was just so much fun, and interesting, was that we were kind of vanguard. We led the way in terms of computerization, not only the library, but of the school. We tried out various hardware, software, and when it worked in the Multimedia Center, which was the name of the library, then it was further used throughout the school. We dubbed... our library became mechanized and we were part of a developing program, which included Georgetown, and university medical school of South Carolina and Virginia – a good number of schools – and it was a private program so we were part of that. I also had two really special – well I had more than two – but one of the special activities that I did was to develop for the school our very first commencement. And our committee put together what commencement was going to be like for Morehouse School of Medicine. We also had white coat ceremonies, a variety of activities, and I chaired a lot of these, and in some instances just served on the committee. During my tenure at Morehouse, the institution, Morehouse School of Medicine, became involved with Emory, and a lot of programs not just for the library, but for the school. So, we participated in those and we developed use programs along with the Director of the Emory [Health Sciences] Library, Sandra Franklin, that was available to both Morehouse and Emory personnel.

**SF:** So Beverly, I remember, that's the space that was called the Satellite Library. It was on the sixteenth (16<sup>th</sup>) floor of Grady Hospital. And Morehouse students and Emory students shared that space in terms of

having a place to come into the hospital and use electronic resources to get to journals, electronic journals, as well as book collections, textbook collections. That was long before books were electronic and so there were textbook collections that were available... major medical textbooks available to the students as well that they could use on the sixteenth floor of Grady Hospital.

**BA:** Right! But that was the beginning for both of our libraries to move into electronic textbooks.

**SF:** That's right.

**BA:** And there are a number out there that we wanted and both of our schools shared the same initial textbooks, but I don't remember. I think I should explain about my memory. Besides having been retired and am now 1,000 years old, much of my history burned and I don't have documents to go back and refer to, and to get the correct sequences and the correct chairs. Not chairs, but the correct years. So, when I say I don't remember, I truly don't remember and unfortunately, the materials that were at Morehouse after I left, also were somehow destroyed. So, we don't have enough background to reinforce my lack of memory.

There are two (2) things that I do want to tell you about. I don't remember the year, again. Somewhere near 1993, I was asked to become a Regent at the National Library of Medicine. I was invited by Dr. Lindberg, and I did. I became that regent (a member of the NLM Board of Regents) and stayed there for four years. And that is a real honor for any librarian because the

regents are doctors, and lawyers, all kinds of people. And to sit on that committee is just more than you can think. The other committee that I served on, national committee, was the Institute of Museums and Libraries. And this time the invitation came from President George W. Bush. I remember one morning at home there was a phone call. I answered and they said, "This is the White House", and I said, "The Who House?" And the young man smiled and laughed, too, and he said, "We're calling because there's information we need in order to proceed". And I was just, I'm dumb, I didn't know anything about this and I said, "I don't know what you're talking about". And he had to break a little bit of his silence on what he could say to tell me that the recommendation had come again from Dr. Louis W. Sullivan to the president. So, beyond that he couldn't say anything. I spent five years, I think, on that committee. And it was an interesting experience because this committee served all libraries, all museums – not just medical. And it was a wider variety of issues that we dealt with. That committee gives out awards every year to the top five libraries, top five museums. And we would spend a good amount of time trying to detail to whom these awards should go. And that was a very special kind of experience.

**SF:** So Beverly, let's jump back for a minute to your Peoria days, when you first became involved with the Medical Library Association. Particularly, you had mentioned a meeting that was held in Kansas City, Missouri in 1973.

**BA:** Yes, that was the national meeting. And we had a program committee and a local arrangements committee all in one. And I chaired the exhibits committee for that program, for that meeting. And we would meet once a

month. And I would drive either from Peoria to Kansas City or Chicago to Kansas City as we developed that program. The real reason for me being on that committee was that I am a local hometown Kansas City person. So, I have lots of knowledge about places and how to get from here to there, and what we were going to do. It was a fun experience and it turned out to be a wonderful meeting. We did one thing that had not been done up until then, and I'm not sure I'm going to get this right, but we had an evening at a science library. and we did the exhibits that night at that library. And it became the opening. As you know, they do something of that sort now for all of the meetings. And it was a first for us, and it was a great place and time. So I enjoyed that experience and it was a real plus. I don't remember all the names of the people for that committee, but it was kind of special.

**SF:** It sounds like it was. When I looked back at the Kansas City program that's on MLANet, I saw that you were Chair of the educational exhibits, which I think is what you're talking about. And you mentioned working closely with some prominent MLA names at the time?

**BA:** Mmhmm. Yes, I did. Dr. Estelle Broadman, Dr. Farley who was at KU... I don't remember the librarian at Nebraska. It was a regional library – it was the regional library. Or no, I'm not sure. The regional library may have still been at Wash U. But these were people who were well known who had spent years helping to develop the association into the organization it was then. Sarah Brown was the MLA President Elect and she was from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Oh, there were others that participated, and it was one of the better – if I must say so – MLA Annual meetings.

**SF:** So Beverly, I wanted to ask you a question about MLA because in my early career I would see you and your entire Morehouse team participating in MLA meetings, but as a team. I think you were and have been the only one that I knew of that your entire group would be together in the exhibits and make appointments with vendors. How did that benefit you for your entire team to sort of be more cohesive at MLA.

**BA:** It was similar to how we did things in the Morehouse School of Medicine and in the Multimedia Center. We had department heads and assistants and all those kinds of organizations that everybody has, but in particular, I established what was called a Senior Librarian's Counsel. And rather than to make all the decisions myself, this group of people, six of us – four, five, or six of us – made decisions. And therefore, when we went to MLA, if we were looking at computer systems, we all did it. Maybe not at one time – some looked at this, some looked at the other. We would eat together and play together and talk about what we needed to do; the kinds of information we wanted. But it was pretty much the way the library organization ran. And I thought it was fun because I was the elder, of course, of the group and had had many of these experiences already. And I thought, “these young people...” I wanted to present to them the opportunity to go out and work other places, present programs at MLA, and they couldn't do it except if they learned from home what they were supposed to do. And they enjoyed it, too. I also would send them to represent me. Back in the day, the vendors used to invite us to various dinners or a cocktail hour. And what we would do is that some would go here, some would go there. It wasn't always me who went, so any of those young people turned out to be as good a Library Director as I was. And

they could manage any library based on the experiences we all had together. And I didn't think that was so new. I thought most people did that kind of thing.

**SF:** I think some of us have meetings today with specific vendors for specific purposes, but it just always struck me in my early days of MLA attendance that the Morehouse cohort, if you will, was a team – a cohesive team – and together and presenting, you know, visiting vendors, or just that togetherness that you had I thought was remarkable for me in terms of my early days of attendance at MLA. What other kind of comments or involvement did you have with MLA, or just comments you'd like to make about MLA in general?

**BA:** I spent a lot of time early on, on committees – and again we're talking about committees in the 70's – and I did not ever feel that there was an avenue for real, not participation, but real impact on the leadership. And that affected my attitude and my willingness to work. I didn't let it happen to our younger people. I wanted them to know, and in some cases to find out themselves, what it meant. And they did. They found out when they'd go to a meeting, and/or ask a question. There were sometimes when they were not answered, , or they'd make a recommendation, and nothing was ever accepted. I don't know that it's still that way. It got better, it really did, but I lost some of my interest in MLA.

I liked the American Informatics Association. I went to those meetings although that was light years ahead of me. I just didn't find that in my later years, MLA was as helpful and welcoming as I wanted it to be.

**SF:** What other associations did you participate in or attend meetings – you mentioned just a few minutes ago the American Medical Informatics Association

**BA:** The Association of Academic Health Sciences Library Directors

**SF:** Right

**BA:** The Biomedical Librarians Consortium or Consortium of Southern Biomedical Libraries or something

**SF:** That was CONBLS.

**BA:** The AAMC and I went to meetings at the AAMC other than AAHSLD.

Sometimes I made and presented information on behalf of Morehouse School of Medicine, not just the library. There were other committees, other computer committees that I was involved in, and I really enjoyed those until they became so far ahead of me... I didn't know what they were talking about. So that lessened the lessons that I could learn from them. There was an alcohol program that was within the Institute of... it had an institute name. But it was within... AiH, AH

**BA:** For a while, I was a member of ALA, but there were so many people in ALA that I'd go to a meeting and get lost, just because of the sheer numbers, and that's not the word I want, but there were just so many people. And there were not a lot of programs dealing with health sciences

libraries and so I didn't continue MLA membership, but we did do an institutional one (membership). I served on committees that originated at the National Library of Medicine, but I'm not sure either of us remember those because there were so many committees. But I certainly served there.

**SF:** So Beverly this has been really a lot of – a wealth of information that you've shared with us today. As we just reflect back, or you reflect back, what do you consider to be your most important contributions during your career?

**BA:** The development of two libraries from scratch – the Health Sciences Library at the University of Illinois Medical School, Peoria, and the development of the Multimedia Center Library of the health sciences at Morehouse School of Medicine. And again, from scratch. I learned so much in terms of what was needed to develop a school, as well as a library, and how to include, make sure the library was included, in all of this development. I think – both of those were regional rather than national – but I really think that those were the contributions that I made that really are meaningful. It also provided me the opportunity to influence other librarians. Morehouse is considered a black school, but it's no more black than this table. It was as integrated as an institution can be, and we had an integrated library. And I thought the opportunities to teach young librarians to work with each other – forget the color line – talk about skills, learn about skills, work with each other and to go out and work with the faculty. And again, to intermingle and take their education and knowledge to the faculty, and in turn receive from them their information, so that it helped us to

develop programs. And I feel very good about the number of librarians that I influenced and sent out into the world, and they've all been successful. So I think it never occurred to me back in 1961 or '65 that I would be anything other than a librarian in a reference department at some school, and I thought initially at Missouri. And my education and experiences have taken me far, further, than I ever thought. And I'm very pleased with where my career ended with my retirement in 2004. Thank you.

**SF:** This is the end of the interview with Beverly Allen, former Director of the Morehouse School of Medicine Multimedia Center. Thank you!

**BA:** Thank you, Sandra. I'm not so sure that without your encouragement and push, a little bit, that I would've done this. But it's a good walk back through history for me, and I appreciate you for doing that.

**SF:** Thank you, Beverly.

## **END of Recording**

NOTE: After reading the unedited transcription, Beverly Allen wanted to re-record the interview. With COVID on the scene in early 2020, we delayed. Beverly Allen would contract COVID in the fall of 2020. She passed away in Dec. 2020.

Obituary: Beverly E. Allen

<https://www.greenerpasturesfuneralhome.com/obituary/Beverly-Allen>

<https://s3.amazonaws.com/CFSV2/obituaries/media/10373/692225-allenmemorialfolder.pdf>