Past President Interview: Melissa Dennis

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Past President Interview: Melissa Dennis

1. Discuss your background in libraries.
I worked in the J.D. Williams Library at Ole Miss as a Circulation student assistant for a year before graduating with a B.A. in English. I didn’t want to go to school anymore at that time, but an English degree didn’t exactly open up a ton of work opportunities near the small town in Mississippi where my new husband and I lived. I thought about the only job I had at this point and how much I enjoyed it, so I decided to go to library school at the University of Southern Mississippi. I was hired at Belhaven University (Jackson, MS) as a Circulation Manager and really enjoyed that work until I got my library degree. Then I went to Delta State University (Cleveland, MS) for 18 months as a Reference Librarian before an opportunity of Outreach Librarian opened at Ole Miss. I got the job! After I got tenure, I applied for the Head of Research and Instruction position and got that, too, which is where I am currently now. So, I have only ever worked in academic libraries in Mississippi for about 20 years!

2. Describe your history with SELA, such as your first involvement, positions held, and other service.
I first heard about SELA during my time at Delta State University. Several colleagues had been involved and it seemed exciting to me to go to a regional conference. At the time, we all rotated which conferences we attended so I wasn’t there long enough to go with DSU. However, when I got the job at Ole Miss, I noticed no one there was doing SELA and decided to attend a conference. The MLA SELA Representative position happened to be up for re-election so I managed to get that seat on the MLA Board and SELA Board for the next 4 years (2012 – 2015). I went to both the 2013 summer conference and presented at the SCLA/SELA conference in Greenville and have been active on the SELA board ever since. I have served as a member on the Legislative Committee, Membership and Mentoring Committee, and Library Instruction Round Table, and Reference & Public Services Section. I have chaired the Conference Planning Committee while President-Elect, and currently serve as the chair of the Planning Committee and Nominating Committee as Past-President. On the Board, I have served as Secretary (2015-2018), President-Elect (2019-2020), President (2021-2022), and Past-President (2023-2024).

3. Talk about your time as President of SELA. For instance, could you share any major accomplishments, initiatives, or challenges you faced while President?
I was President-Elect of SELA during COVID in 2020, and helped plan the Georgia Libraries/SELA joint online conference. It set a precedent for the next couple of years for online conference planning at state, regional, and national levels. In 2021, when I became President, COVID-19 restrictions were still in effect for many states and conference planning was still aimed at online (North Carolina) with some in-person planning happening – mainly for the NCLA attendees in the Winston-Salem area. In 2022, the joint conference happened to be in my home state of Mississippi for the first time in a very long time. It was a face-to-face conference, yet marketed as a hybrid in that some sessions would be recorded live and shown to attendees who could not attend in person. We found out that this approach had many drawbacks in the technology functioning in each room and it did not work. Luckily, the pandemic had pretty much subsided for the masses by then (though COVID is still around) and we had a large number of SELA attendees at the conference in-person to make it a good conference and I was proud of the number of Mississippians who joined SELA during that year. It was the first and last time I addressed the Board in-person as President and it was my very last session as President. Getting to lead the officer induction ceremony at the SELA Breakfast was very special to me.

4. SELA to remain relevant during the next 10, 25, or 50 years?
I have no doubt that SELA won’t remain relevant because of our active membership. Libraries will always need each other and SELA is an outlet for
members to work together to help get through problems. I would have never believed 15 years ago that I would be talking about censorship in libraries and banned books at the level we were in 2022 and now in 2023. It looks like problems will always exist that need our expertise and advocacy efforts to educate our collective patrons, legislators, and friends in order to keep moving our communities forward instead of backward.

5. Do you have any other comments or stories about SELA that would you like to share?
I have enjoyed the friendships and networking experiences over the past 12 or so years of being in SELA. I would have never met such wonderful librarians and had such fulfilling speaker opportunities if I had just stayed in local committees in Mississippi or only participated in the huge online sections of ALA. SELA helped me find a voice and helped me improve my confidence while being surrounded by a team of other leaders who never let me fail. I’m proud to still be on that team and want to continue holding that safety net for our future SELA leaders.