

Snapshot: Marshall Keys

"I'm in this profession because I want to change the world. Period."

Q *As a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?*
Once I got past the fighter pilot stage, I drifted into being an English professor.

How did you get interested in library and information science?

I was teaching English at a very good, small school in Jackson, Mississippi, but I was miserable. I hadn't much liked graduate school either. My wife finally asked me what I had ever enjoyed doing. Without thinking I said, "I loved working in the Rutgers Library when I was an undergraduate." My wife is a wise and dear woman. So she said, "You know, some people make a career of that." She might have said, "Well, duh", but people didn't say that back then. I loved library school and the rest is history.

What did you do before teaching and consulting?

For ten years I was executive director of NELINET, the largest library organization in New England. When I started there in 1989, almost no libraries had internet access, much less graphical access, to anything. Soon after I began, I saw the first T3 line demonstrated. There was certainly no Web and no Web browsers. Email was available only through something called BITNET or from commercial services like Prodigy; and no one had it on their desktop all the time. Most libraries did not have online catalogs and they shared information over proprietary telecommunication networks. When I left in 1999, both reference and technical services were fully deliverable through the Web. It was a \$12 million per year not-for-profit business and is probably much larger today. Now we expect instant access to graphics even over our PDAs and telephones. The Web rules!

Why did you leave?

The short version is that I went to Paris on vacation and saw that there is a saner way of living than we practice in the United States. Two weeks after I got back, I told my board of directors that I wanted to leave in six months. I loved every day at NELINET and I have never regretted leaving.

What does MDA Consulting do?

We do different flavors of strategic consulting for libraries and other information intensive organizations, helping them with planning but more importantly with learning to think strategically.

What do you like most about teaching?

I work with wonderful students at GSLIS. I really enjoy career changers because I am a career changer myself. I understand their struggle with hope, excitement, fear.

What would you like to change in the LIS profession?

Librarians need to be engaged with the world, not sitting at their desks eating yogurt for lunch and congratulating themselves on working so hard. How can you serve people in the community if you don't eat lunch with them, experience how they live? Libraries are inherently conservative organizations and many library staff are resistant to change. When I began, my focus was on helping libraries prepare for change, especially the kinds of changes that technology was going to bring. My goal was to make sure that no librarian I could reach would ever

be able to say, "Why didn't someone tell me everything was going to change?"

What accomplishment in your life are you most proud of?

I'm proudest of the fact that my students, clients and I predicted the collapse of the Faxon Company, a major library supplier, more than two years before it actually happened. Libraries lost hundreds of thousands, collectively millions of dollars as a trusted vendor went bankrupt. But anyone who exercised basic library research skills would have seen that it was inevitable. The methods that I advocate and teach were justified.

What's a fear of yours?

Intellectual stagnation as I grow older. I combat it by exposing myself to new things. I enjoy getting on a bus in a strange city, riding to the end of the line, taking a different bus in another direction, then making my way back to my starting point. Sometimes I scare myself, but I always learn something.

What do you like to read?

I don't read current fiction at all. I'm reading *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* by Rebecca West, which is a big, inchoate, life-encompassing book like *War and Peace*, although it's nonfiction. I like reading letters and diaries to see how people have weathered the transition from late middle age to early old age.

What website do you visit the most?

"Ship of Fools, the Magazine of Christian Unrest." They point you to places where you can buy a teddy bear dressed like the Archbishop of Canterbury to go along with your librarian action figure. But they also have reviews, often scathing, of church services written by the "Mystery Worshipper"—anyone who wants to contribute an anonymous review of a particular church. It's like a Zagat guide for churches. I think the idea is extensible to librarianship. Why don't we put up a "Mystery Patron" website where we can visit libraries in the guise of patrons and then write about them?

What do you do for fun?

My wife and I spend a great deal of time entertaining friends and family. I'm reputed to be a good cook and get immense pleasure from feeding people.

Hobbies?

I've been interested in model railroads for many years. It's the perfect hobby for a control freak.

Leisure?

The French have a word for it: I'm a *flaneur*, someone who strolls around in apparent idleness observing the world. I decided in 1975 never to be bored and since then I never have been. In rare moments of leisure I listen to music. Alfred Brendel.

A special pet?

Freedom begins, they say, when the kids move out and the dog dies. Charley, the world's most wonderful Cairn terrier, went to his reward about the time the kids finished college and he won't be replaced until our traveling days are over.

Marshall Keys teaches Fiscal Management of Library and Information Systems and Information Entrepreneurship at GSLIS in addition to his consulting work. He lives with his wife in Nantucket.



Marshall Keys on a bus, in Paris