

# Profile: Katina Strauch



We are very grateful that Katina Strauch took time out during the 2005 Charleston Conference to be interviewed for *Serials*. For those of you who do not know Katina, she is the main organizer of the highly successful Charleston Conference in the United States – and has been for 25 years. However, the 25 attendees at the first conference in 1980 would have been surprised to know that by 2005 the conference had (for the first time) attracted over 1,000 attendees.

Katina was born in Columbia, South Carolina and had a peripatetic childhood, rarely staying in one place for more than a year. Changing schools so frequently meant, she says, that she had few friends and was somewhat of a loner. She majored in economics at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and worked as a student in the library there, where she recalls she had to type and file at least two inches of catalogue cards a day. (The catalogue cards were colour-coded for each person so they could be checked up on!) She married her first husband in 1969 and after library school got a job as a librarian at the Nursing School at Duke University where the library was in the nurses' dorms! "It was the best job I ever had", she says. During that time she wrote a *Guide to library resources in nursing*, which *Choice* magazine made one of its outstanding reference books of 1980. She also gave birth to her son Raymond who subsequently went to West Point and is now serving in the Army in Iraq. Disappointingly for Katina, the nursing school library was merged with the medical library and her job changed to that of AV/media librarian – although she also undertook

online searching on medical databases, which proved to be somewhat unsettling as, whenever she ran a search, she imagined she had the disease being researched!

In 1977 Katina married her second husband Bruce Strauch – a figure known to many Charleston stalwarts – and began to search for jobs in Charleston. She finally secured one at Trident Technical College. The downside was that she had to take a \$3,000 drop in salary. The college library was in a very dilapidated building which the staff shared with a colony of bats. Moving on quickly from there she began working for the Low Country Health Advisory Centre setting up hospital libraries – since every hospital had to have a library in order to be accredited. Her office, when she wasn't out on the road, was based in the Medical University of South Carolina Library where she got to know the wife of the then Director of the College of Charleston Library. Coincidentally, the job of Head of Acquisitions at the College was advertised around that time and, despite the fact that she claims she knew nothing about acquisition, she got the job. Finally Katina was in the place which was to bring her to the attention of the international information industry.

Katina was under 30 when she ran the first Charleston Conference in May 1980. It was held in conjunction with the Charleston Antiquarian Book Fair, in a dormitory behind the library. It attracted some 25 attendees, mainly from South and North Carolina, and many were interested in rare books. She told *Publishers Weekly* in 1991, "We began this annual get-together when I was a frustrated new

librarian who knew nothing about acquisitions and had no travel money, institutional or otherwise, for professional growth and development. As the story goes, if Mohammed couldn't go to the mountain, the mountain had to come to him".

After the first conference people were eager to repeat it, and over the years the size of the conference grew, it moved from May to November (because acquisition librarians are busy spending their budgets in May!), delegates started travelling from all over the US and finally, the first intrepid Europeans arrived with John Merriman and Brian Cox of UKSG fame in the vanguard. And so we move on to 2005 when the conference was celebrating its 25th anniversary and for the first time the number of delegates went over the 1,000 mark so the conference finally had to move to a split venue. (Those readers with a mathematical mind will have worked out that there must have been one year that it didn't take place. That was 1982, when Katina's daughter Ileana was born.) To mark the 25th anniversary a *Memory Book* was produced. Here are two quotes from that book which sum up the essence of Charleston:

"Nowhere in my experience have I encountered such an energized association of people .... Much of our life is filled with routine of our daily lives, but once a year in November, we travel to this magic city and renew our friendships, share new information and begin to formulate more research plans for the future's solution to burning questions."

(2003 Charleston Conference, University of South Carolina, Tinker Massey, *Library Mosaics*, Sep/Oct 2004, Vol. 15 (5), p.17)

"In the words of Katina Strauch, the leading light of the Charleston Conference, who sets its wonderfully unique tone of hospitality, easy communication, and substantial information, the four keynote speakers were 'awesome'."

(Anna Belle Leierson, Vanderbilt U. Law, ACQNET Vol. 7 (41), Dec 7, 1997)

Also in the *Memory Book* Katina recalls some of her most memorable conference experiences, such as in 1992 in the Lightsey Conference Centre, when they opened the men's bathroom to women and made the men go elsewhere. "Boy, what a hue and

cry that created. Mistake!" In 1989 Charleston was devastated by Hurricane Hugo. "I walked down to the Mills House Hotel (couldn't drive, the roads were impassable) where the conference was scheduled to be, to assess things. The Conference that year happened. It was in the long skinny room on the Queen Street side of the Mills House. About 180 people attended".



Katina (right) with Justice Sandra Day O'Connor after being sworn in as a member of the IMLS Board

What with holding down a full-time job in the library, organizing a major annual conference and being part of a close family, you might think that Katina had little time for other activities. However, you would be wrong. In 1989 she established the magazine *Against the Grain* because people wanted to keep in touch in the time between conferences. She also sits on the Board of the Institute of Museum and Library Services which is a stand-alone government agency with a budget of some \$63 million for funding research. In order to be selected for the Board she had to go through lots of hearings and admits it was weird when "the White House called". In 2000 Katina ran for President of ALA. She was unsuccessful but she says gleefully that it made "good material for a novel". That is because Katina is also a writer (she has been writing a library mystery since 2000); furthermore she is the editor of the ten fiction books Bruce has published. Bruce is also a painter. ("He's the grasshopper, I'm the ant!" she says.) He has had many periods and currently it is his 'dog period'!

Finally, to return to the conference: there would be a lot of disappointed people if the Charleston Conference were to stop. When asked why she keeps on running the conference she says simply, "It's where I live. It's fun. And I learn a lot."

Long may that continue.