

**Oral History Interview**  
**with**  
**Bill Sleeman**

Interview Conducted by  
Cassandra Hartnett  
October 17, 2011

Government Information Living Indexes  
Oral History Project

# ***Government Information Living Indexes***

## ***Oral History Project***

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### **Interview History**

Interviewer: Cass Hartnett  
Transcribers: Cass Hartnett and Angelica Johnson  
Editor: Cass Hartnett and Bill Sleeman

### **Project Detail**

The oral histories collected as a result of this project will preserve the voices and experiences of government information workers who have invested a good portion of their careers to providing and insuring access to government information.

### **Legal Status**

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Bill Sleeman is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on October 17, 2011.

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### **About Bill Sleeman ...**

William (Bill) E. Sleeman currently serves as the Assistant Librarian for Technical Services and Special Collections at the Supreme Court of the United States Library, a position he has held since 2011. Prior to his appointment at the Supreme Court of the United States Library he was the Associate Librarian for Technical Services at the Thurgood Marshall Law Library, University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law. Bill has also worked at the Center for Sex Equity in Schools, The University of Michigan; The Enoch Pratt Free Library; The Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of the State of Maryland; OPIC; and, The U.S. Department of the Interior Library.

In 2007 he was elected as Chair of the Government Documents Round Table of the American Library Association. Bill has also served on a number of other GODORT and ALA committees including the ALA Task Force on the Proposed Google Book Search (GBS) Settlement, 2009-2011; the ALA-Society of American Archivists-American Association of Museums Joint Committee [CALM Committee], 2009 – 2011; and the American Library Association, COL Subcommittee on E-Government, 2008-2010. In 2007 Bill was selected by Library Journal as one of its “Movers and Shakers” for his work in advocating for access to government information. Bill has been a frequent speaker and writer on issues of access to government information and on the history of government publishing.

Bill was the creator of the Historical Publications of the United States Commission on Civil Rights digital project. He has also worked closely with faculty at the University of Maryland School of Law and members of the African American community in Baltimore to develop the African Americans in the Law archives and digital initiative.

Bill has a B.A. in American History from Oakland University, Michigan, an A.M.L.S. in Archives Administration from the University of Michigan and an M.A. from the University of Baltimore’s program in Legal, Ethical and Historical Studies.

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## **Bill Sleeman**

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Cass Hartnett  
October 17, 2011  
Arlington, Virginia



**Hartnett**            *Well hello!*

**Sleeman**            Hi, Cass!

**Hartnett**            *It's Monday, October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011 and we're here at the Doubletree Hotel in Arlington, Virginia. My name is Cassandra Hartnett and I'm here interviewing Bill Sleeman from the Supreme Court Library of the United States. Hello, Bill. Well, we're doing this of course as part of the GODORT Living Indexes project and we're making a bit of an exception with you.*

**Sleeman**            I haven't been indexed yet? (Laughs)

**Hartnett**            *You're not, we hope, to the end of your career or a retiring librarian. You have changed gears in your job and we wanted to capture you at this important juncture in your professional career, and thank you for agreeing. But let's start out with some pretty basic oral history questions. Tell me about the first library that you visited as a child.*

**Sleeman**            Okay. In thinking about it, my family wasn't a big book family. So really my sister Vicky was the first person to take me to a library. She took me to the Ferndale Public Library, which is a suburb of Detroit. Now of course, it's Fashionable Ferndale, back then it wasn't Fashionable Ferndale, it was just . . . a lot of things, but we'll just call it Ferndale. But my sister Vicky took me to the library, she is a big book person and remains so, and she's always one of my favorite persons to go to a library with, so she took me when I was younger, and helped me get my first library card. I think the book I remember checking out was a

youth nonfiction, one of those *Biographies of Americans* series. Remember those?

**Hartnett** *Oh yeah, yeah, I remember those. I remember them well. I remember what the covers used to look like. They had this uniform look and feel.*

**Sleeman** That's right. So I got this one about Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys. I still remember it. I just enjoyed reading it. It opened up a lot of history, it was just a fun experience. I still go back to the Ferndale Public Library. They have a brand new building. When I've gone back, visiting family, I kind of stop by the beautiful new building, a great library that is there still.

**Hartnett** *How old do you think you were when you took that Ethan Allen Book out?*

**Sleeman** Oh, probably about 8 or 9, maybe 10. Somewhere in that range, because I can remember us riding up on our bikes to the library.

**Hartnett** *How many brothers and sisters did you have growing up then?*

**Sleeman** I have three sisters and one brother. I'm the youngest.

**Hartnett** *I share that with you. That's why we're such nice people.*

**Sleeman** That's right. The youngest are always nicest. I suspect because there's always so much opportunity to train.

**Hartnett** *Do you remember, from the Ferndale Public Library or maybe from a school library, any librarians? What was your impression of librarians when you were a kid?*

**Sleeman** You know I don't have one. But because the library experience was so much built upon my sister -- that was the experience I had.

**Hartnett** *She was kind of your librarian, in a sense.*

**Sleeman** Yes, she was. She's turned me on to a lot of different books. She reads a wide range of things, and we still share books back and forth on Goodreads now. It's a lot of fun. But I don't recall any particular librarians.

**Hartnett** *Okay. If someone had told you in high school that you would be a librarian, and that you would be a librarian who specializes in government, what would you have thought? What would you have said?*

**Sleeman** That would have never happened. I'm sure if you asked anyone who knew me in high school that the idea of being a librarian was really far,

far from what they would have expected. Certainly not what I would have expected.

**Hartnett** *Do you remember anything of your early dreams or aspirations?*

**Sleeman** There was a period of time where I was sure I was going to be the next Evil Knievel. That was a big goal.

**Hartnett** *Did you literally like dare-devilly type stuff?*

**Sleeman** Oh my gosh, yes. I had this plywood ramp that my friends and I would take, and we would jump over anything. You could either put the ramp on it or you could try to jump over it. And then I went through a period where I thought for sure I was going to be the next Johnny Fever. That was it, you know. So that didn't work either.

**Hartnett** *By that do you mean the whole FM radio, that whole culture of '70s music?*

**Sleeman** Yeah.

**Hartnett** *Alternative music ...*

**Sleeman** Yeah, I worked at a college radio station. I was a broadcasting major for a little bit, then I kind of switched to journalism just as sort of a broader thing. But I was really into it. I enjoyed it. But it just wasn't a career option. I just couldn't see ... By the time I was in college, and working at a college radio station, I realized that it was really going to be hard to find work in radio. I just couldn't see myself putting up that much of a struggle, I guess! (Laughs) To eat.

**Hartnett** *If I can editorialize, I think you made the right call there, considering how radio has changed. I'm not sure how many radio jobs there are now.*

**Sleeman** Yeah, I think you're right. Career-wise, this has been great. I'm happy with the choice I've made.

**Hartnett** *So you grew up uniformly in Ferndale. Your family didn't move around or anything like that?*

**Sleeman** Oh no.

**Hartnett** *Okay now, how do we get from Ferndale to the next step of your life, which I assume was college? Did you go directly to college out of high school?*

**Sleeman** I did. I went to Adrian College for one year, and then I transferred, after

my father died, and I wanted to be closer to my mom, who needed some help at that point, to Oakland University. Which is a very good mid-state school in Michigan. When I transferred there, in the early '80s, it was still very much a suitcase college. They had a few dormitories, but most everyone commuted to and from. That's changed a lot. They continued to grow and have become a very good school. I had a really wonderful opportunity there: to work through school, take wonderful classes, great instructors. That was where I sort of – I worked at the college radio station– but I really began to sort of transition at that point. This is not ... college radio is really just not going to be a future. And towards the end of that period I began wondering, as all liberal arts majors do, what am I going to do with my life? And my history advisor, Professor Ann Tripp, suggested “you should look at library school. Of course you're really good at research, you enjoy research, the work you've done as an undergrad was well researched, maybe not all that well written, but was well researched.” (Laughs) So she was the one who steered me toward library school.

**Hartnett** *Well that's fantastic. I'm wondering if this – you mentioned that you started out in journalism or broadcasting. And then was it history that you settled on?*

**Sleeman** Yes, that's right. Good. I did sort of move into history and journalism, and it was the history piece that I got associated with Dr. Tripp in. And then went to Michigan. I was very fortunate to get in. I'm sure the people at Michigan looked at my transcripts more than once. But they were kind and gracious. And let me go there, and I'm forever grateful to the University of Michigan for giving me the chance. Well, you went to Michigan as well, right?

**Hartnett** *I even think that we determined that we overlapped by one academic term or so, because didn't you graduate – were you a December graduate?*

**Sleeman** I was a two-year student... I was in the Archives program.

**Hartnett** *Okay.*

**Sleeman** But at the end of that period, of course, like everybody, I was sort of hunting for jobs. And the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, I applied there and got a position just about the same time my student loans came due. So it wasn't a tough call: I've got loans, I've got a job, I'm gonna go! (Laughs) And that proved to be a good experience, it was a good choice.

**Hartnett** *Okay. But now I have to tease out some of the details in here, because there is ... I'd like to talk about the University of Michigan and the Library Studies program at the time you were there. Because in that*

*period of the '80s, the program really was in transition.*

**Sleeman** It was.

**Hartnett** *... A pretty dramatic transition. What was the program like when you were there, and how were you drawn into ... did you know right away that you wanted to do the Archival? And the other thing I wanted to ask was if you had a job working in a library while you were at Michigan?*

**Sleeman** I had a job, that's an easier one to answer. I had a job at the Hatcher Library.

**Hartnett** *The Grad Library.*

**Sleeman** I had a general reference job. I worked with a variety of folks there, I had a bunch of different hours built around classes, typical sort of work type, school type job.

**Hartnett** *It was an incredible collection to learn from.*

**Sleeman** Wonderful collection, and it was a good experience. I got to use DIALOG. There was a BRS After Dark, too. So we did those programs, and that was really sort of the beginnings of online research. It was just neat to do that, and to see where it is now is just ... I think about those big keyboards and that phone cradle they put the telephone receiver in.

**Hartnett** *... the acoustic coupler!*

**Sleeman** You'd wait for hours to get a connection. (Laughs) But that was cutting edge. And it was a good opportunity.

**Hartnett** *And so: two years of classes, and then the opportunity of Enoch Pratt in Baltimore. So this Michigan boy now leaves the Great Lakes for points East? Had you spent much time in the American East?*

**Sleeman** I had not. You might want to ask about library land when I was at Michigan. When I was there, it was very much a focus on, for lack of a better phrase, what we would call traditional librarianship and the Archives program. There were a few voices already starting to trumpet, if you would, the future technologies. The tools and the techniques that we use every day now were just starting to come into play when I was there in the '80s. I remember there was a lot of celebration about when we got the first Macs. Do you remember the first Macs?

**Hartnett** *Oh yeah, absolutely.*

**Sleeman** I loved being able to ... if you made a mistake, you just carried it over to that little green trashcan and you could dump it. (Laughs) What a great



technology!

**Hartnett** *It would make a little noise.*

**Sleeman** That's right, a ding or something, right? So that was a great experience. To begin to see the transition come into library training. That's not to suggest that the folks that I worked with and had the pleasure to learn from, at Michigan, that they were traditional librarians if you would; were not aware of those changes. They taught their classes to bring that content and those new tools into the process. But it was still very much a library-oriented program when I was there.

**Hartnett** *Are there particular classes or profs that really stick out in your mind, or were you pushing through, and it's mostly a blur now?*

**Sleeman** Well there were a lot of classes that I can remember. The instructors were particularly good, I remember things still from those classes that I use in my day-to-day work. Certainly Professor Slavens and the reference classes. Nobody taught reference like he did. It seemed, at the time, it seemed so tedious to fill out those index cards and make these little files about this reference tool and that reference tool. But I really learned how to approach a tool and understand how it works. So now I really appreciate doing that, having done that. Joan Durrance, of course, in gov docs, she was my gov docs instructor, and she was wonderful. If anybody had inspired an interest in government documents, it was certainly Joan Durrance. I remember my advisor was Margaret Taylor. She was just a wonderful human being, a good person.

**Hartnett** *Just a great soul, yeah.*

**Sleeman** Julie Beth Todaro – was Professor Todaro there when you were there?

**Hartnett** *I don't think so. That doesn't ring a bell.*

**Sleeman** She taught the library management classes, appropriately enough. I actually met my wife in Julie Beth Todaro's library management class. It was a lot of fun because we sat – my wife, Anne, my future wife then – sat in the back and just talked back and forth in a way that people who are courting one another do. And every once in a while, Julie Beth would just look at us and roll her eyes! (Laughs) You know? And I think I did okay in the class. My wife did wonderfully, because my wife does wonderfully in all her classes, she's brilliant, and I kind of scoot along. But we had a lot of fun in Julie Beth's class and I learned a lot, I guess, even despite the other activities going on in my life there. I use that, and I go back to that. When I read Julie Beth now in the library literature, I realize what a great opportunity I had, to be in her classes then. Really very good.

- Hartnett** *Thank you for sharing those. Those are some great memories. Now when did you and Anne marry?*
- Sleeman** We got married in '94.
- Hartnett** *I actually wasn't even necessarily trying to pin you down on the year, but at what point in this trajectory? In other words, did Anne move to Baltimore?*
- Sleeman** Oh, we had a long and tortured courtship. (Laughs) Because we were both doing our career things, and I was in Baltimore and she was in Detroit. She was building a career there, making good connections, and I was sort of building a career here, making connections. It just ... it reached a point, and this is such a sad commentary on our lives as librarians, we actually got engaged at an ALA meeting. (Laughs) Isn't that terrible? I believe it was a New Orleans ALA conference.
- Hartnett** *The Big Easy was a great romantic backdrop.*
- Sleeman** It was, but I can't tell you it was romantic. Again, as librarians, and she won't disagree with my interpretation, we took the more practical approach. We had a little list, the pros and cons, and it made more sense financially and travel wise to get married than it did to continue this sort of split life that we had. But it was very much a librarians' approach: we had a list, and it was organized and planned. It just happened to be at a library conference.
- Hartnett** *(Laughs) Now, I want to know about the list. Did both of you contribute to this list, or was this one partner's idea more than the other?*
- Sleeman** Oh, I think it was one partner's idea more than the other! (Laughs) But it was hard to argue with her points. So, you know. What was I going to say?
- Hartnett** *I'm just so pleased to be hearing these details. So many of our colleagues, our lives are interwoven with our careers and our conference going, perhaps not as directly as yours was. Okay, now we're in Baltimore. This is your first professional job. What is the setting? Tell us about Enoch Pratt at that time, the actual place where you worked.*
- Sleeman** Pratt was, and is, an extraordinarily rich public library. At the time I was there, it wasn't managed as effectively as it is now. Carla Hayden is top notch. I talk to people who work at Pratt now, who were there at the time I worked there, and it's just an entirely different place. That being said, I was very fortunate to work with a number of very talented librarians. So, coming is as a new librarian, even though the organization itself was not managed as efficiently as it might have been at the time, the people I had

the opportunity to work with were just wonderful. So I learned a great deal about providing quality service and in meeting the needs of a whole spectrum of individuals, the kind of people you would expect to get in a large urban public library, from the very detailed, academic researcher, to a street person who needs help dealing with a particular social agency or whatever. So it was a great learning opportunity, and wonderful people.

**Hartnett** *How many hours a day, or a week I should say, were you out there at the reference desk?*

**Sleeman** As a newbie, I drew a lot of hours. And at Enoch Pratt . . . they still do . . . I also worked at this telephone reference service. We had a giant lazy susan that we all had our little phone desks radiating off of the lazy susan. And we could turn it and find various reference tools and respond to telephone questions. There were no online sources for us then.

**Hartnett** *So you had learned DIALOG and BRS in Ann Arbor but this was not part of the mix at the public library yet.*

**Sleeman** Right. At the Pratt, when I was there, I think they still had DIALOG but only a few people were allowed to actually search it, because it was so expensive. You probably remember this from your career as well. It was dialup time, and it was really costly. So unless you could come in and be an expert searcher right at the get-go, it cost the institution money – big money – to conduct DIALOG searches. So we didn't use DIALOG at the telephone reference service. We used the giant lazy susan with all the books on it!

**Hartnett** *I just love that image. It is just so ...*

**Sleeman** I bet it's probably about, maybe, six tiers.

**Hartnett** *This was not a simple lazy susan, this was a ...*

**Sleeman** Oh, no! It was something. It was quite a device. And it was fun to work there because it was a great atmosphere. But you learned a lot about Baltimore. And when I worked there, one of the things I remember was that we used a criss-cross directory. There were a lot of criss-cross directory questions.

**Hartnett** *Explain to the uninitiated.*

**Sleeman** Sure. A criss-cross directory is a guide, either from telephone number to address, or address to telephone number. Hence the criss-cross piece. And people would call and say, "I need to know the number at this address." Or "I have this phone number, what's the address that relates to it?" And I recall once working there, and Baltimoreans have a very

distinctive accent which I had not yet learned to deal with. And he was looking for Bel Aire Road. But he was saying Blair Road, and I couldn't find Blair Road anywhere on the criss-cross guide. So finally I asked somebody, another one of my colleagues to look at it, and of course, they were like "Bel Aire! Oh sure, I know where Bel Aire Road is!" And this guy must have thought I was as dumb as dirt, because I had no idea what he was looking for. I just couldn't find it.

**Hartnett** *How long did you stay working at Pratt?*

**Sleeman** I worked at Pratt for about almost three years.

**Hartnett** *So a really good first position.*

**Sleeman** Good first job. They I went to the Medical & Chirurgical Faculty of Maryland, which is really the state medical association.

**Hartnett** *I see.*

**Sleeman** It was a very different job. After three years, I was anxious to try something different. I still felt that it was early in my career and I sort of wanted a chance to see what was out there ...

**Hartnett** *Yeah.*

**Sleeman** ... before I kind of settled down on a particular path. And so I took this opportunity at the state medical association in Maryland, which coincidentally had a really deep rare book collection. Because the medical association in Maryland was founded by several of the Big 4 founders at Johns Hopkins. So they used to buy, they would buy books for Hopkins for the Welch Medical Library but they also purchased a lot of rare books and unique medical manuscripts for the chirurgical faculty as well. So that was another exposure to rare book materials.

**Hartnett** *What was your position there?*

**Sleeman** I was the History Librarian.

**Hartnett** *And how many other colleagues did you have who were on the library end?*

**Sleeman** It was a fairly small library, and it was a membership library, so we didn't serve the general public. We really responded to practitioners in the medical community who were members of the Maryland Medical Association. It was a small staff, I'm sorry I don't recall the exact number.

**Hartnett** *I'm just ... it sounds so different from Enoch Pratt.*

**Sleeman** It was very different.

**Hartnett** *It sounds sort of like night and day. Were the questions more medical history or were you actually doing some health sciences reference?*

**Sleeman** I did do some health sciences reference, everybody had a little bit of work doing that, but most of the questions I did deal with were with the history collection. I did use some of the medical statistics and some NLM products.

**Hartnett** *You didn't toddle off to NLM to get trained, did you?*

**Sleeman** No, not too much.

**Hartnett** *Because I know that was a big part of the medical library background.*

**Sleeman** It is. The RML, regional medical library. I think they have a branch in Baltimore someplace. I'm really not sure – again, because it wasn't as important as the history piece of it, so I knew a lot more of the history side of things when I was there.

**Hartnett** *Any archival work as part of that?*

**Sleeman** Yes, very much so.

**Hartnett** *As we know, the distinction is blurring or becoming less meaningful, but what about in that context then?*

**Sleeman** There were some archival collections and that was one of the attractions to the position when I was looking. They had a number of papers. I had a chance to kind of begin working on some inventories and finding aids and using some of those skills in that experience. It was fun.

**Hartnett** *Were you getting involved in archivists' associations as well, at this time?*

**Sleeman** I did. I joined MARAC, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, and have stayed involved with them on and off throughout my whole career. It's a good group.

**Hartnett** *Great. Well, then, how long did that stage of your career last?*

**Sleeman** Well ...

**Hartnett** *(Laughs) You don't need to pin it down to months or years here, but you know ...*

- Sleeman** It sounds like I'm a job jumper. (Laughs) Unfortunately, they had less need for a history librarian than they initially realized. So I was there for a couple of years, and then I was part-time for about a half a year or so, and part-time just wasn't enough, so I took a job with Aspen Systems, which was a federal contractor, and then began working in some federal libraries around DC.
- Hartnett** *The role of the contractor is such an interesting world that not all of us have experienced. What was Aspen like as an employer, and then where were you deployed?*
- Sleeman** Aspen as an employer was a business. So I was a widget in exchange with another widget if they had one at hand. So as an employer, it wasn't a particularly good experience or a bad experience, it just *was*. Their job was to operate libraries at a particular cost benefit to them, and turn some profit, provide service, and that's kind of how they worked it. That's not a negative, it's the way it was.
- Hartnett** *Yeah.*
- Sleeman** I worked at the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, the Department of the Interior, and the Department of Labor.
- Hartnett** *Those were your three.*
- Sleeman** Those were the three work sites I was assigned to.
- Hartnett** *What are your recollections from some of those experiences? As you look back, certainly each location was probably pretty different and I'm sure had different needs. What kinds of things do you remember from that time?*
- Sleeman** Well one of the things that sticks out in my mind most and it's interesting to read now in the library literature about some of the California schools that are privatizing. And the library community is sort of reacting negatively to that. The notion of contractors being [used]. Now I don't know the details of what these California libraries will do in terms of hiring, if there will be librarians or not, but what it reminds me of is that when I was in the federal libraries, there was a real tension between the federal librarians who stayed and the contractors who were put in place. At all the sites I worked in, there were federal librarians and contractors. And even though we were librarians and we came in with the desire to offer the same quality service as our colleagues who were federal librarians, there was a little bit of tension, and I remember that. And I hope that, as this California thing goes forward, however it plays out, that everybody remembers that they're still librarians. That they're working for somebody else but they want to provide quality service, just as we do in a regular employment situation.

- Hartnett** *Yeah, yeah. At this time were you pursuing ... I know that at some point, you went on to other kinds of graduate work. Did that happen during this time, or was that a little later still?*
- Sleeman** That was a bit later, when I went to the University of Maryland, I took advantage of the tuition program that they offered for employees, and went back and got a second Masters in Legal Studies.
- Hartnett** *Now, did Maryland then happen chronologically right after your tour as a contractor?*
- Sleeman** It did.
- Hartnett** *So let's hear about your first position at the University of Maryland.*
- Sleeman** Well, I went there in ... I have to think for a second, it's all a blur ... '94. And I was initially hired to be the Information Services Librarian, which was Circulation, some ready reference type stuff, and did that for a couple years. And then the cataloger left, there at the library, and so they began sort of thinking about how can we reshape this position? I had an opportunity to sort of say, "I can do this for you and I can do that for you, so if you want to give me a chance to do these different things, I can still do the circ piece. And I can do some of the cataloging. I can do the government documents. I've got the rare book experience. Let's put it all together in one package!" (Laughs) And since I was willing to do it all for really just a small bit of money more, it became very attractive to them. You know, you've got to deal with the situation you're in.
- Hartnett** *So this was at the main library in College Park?*
- Sleeman** Oh no. The University of Maryland Law School is ~~downtown~~. It's in downtown Baltimore. All the professional schools are located on that campus. Well, most of the traditional professional schools were at that campus: the medical school, pharmacy, dental, the social work school is there, and the law school's on that campus as well.
- Hartnett** *So you started in at this, really performing multifaceted duties. How big of an operation was that, how many coworkers did you have in that situation? I think of law schools as being kind of a smaller setup.*
- Sleeman** It was a smaller environment. There were – I'm counting on my fingers now – there were eight people in the technical services department when I started there. Two professionals, myself, and my supervisor, Pam Bluh. The rest were support staff. Very talented, capable folks. So yeah, there were just sort of the two professionals and then the rest were support positions.

- Hartnett** *It's sort of hard for me to believe, in a sense, knowing how much reference you did at Pratt, and then doing these variety of different jobs, that you kind of ended up in technical services. Is that okay for me to [say]? Because I have to constantly be reminded, when I'm around you, that you're in technical services. How do you respond to that?*
- Sleeman** (Laughs) Yeah, it is kind of funny. You asked earlier about the faculty from the University of Michigan when I was there. I also took two different cataloging classes with Carolyn Frost. Do you remember Professor Frost? She's brilliant, but I'm sure if you asked her then or now if she thought I would be a cataloger in technical services, she probably would have laughed at you. I certainly was not the ideal technical services student. I can't, I really can't answer how I wound up in cataloging or in technical services, but I can tell you that the things that I'm interested in and I think the things that librarians are interested in – reference, quality public service – is a big piece of technical services. And I think that's the piece that often gets overlooked. When you asked “how did you end up in Technical Services?” – well I wound up in technical services because it's public service. It's about providing access to the content and the information that we have. And I do that reasonably well, so ... (Laughs)
- Hartnett** *(Laughs) One of the questions that I haven't asked so far: what did your friends and family think of your career choice?*
- Sleeman** Well, I think my mom was just happy I was employed. (Laughs) You know how moms are – “he's got a job, thank goodness!” But I think my sisters were a little surprised. And I think my friends, we've never really talked about it. I think if you'd asked them, like you asked me earlier, in high school, that someone would have envisioned, they'd probably said “no way.” But it's hard to know. We don't really talk about whether that's an odd thing or not for me to be doing. It's just where I wound up.
- Hartnett** *As Lady Gaga says, “I was born like this.” “I was born this way,” whatever it is.*
- Sleeman** I was born like this, that's right. Where's my meat suit? (Laughs)
- Hartnett** *(Laughs) People won't understand that, years from now. How long did you stay at University of Maryland School of Law? Your longest employment?*
- Sleeman** Certainly true. I was there for seventeen years. And it was ... I can't say enough about my immediate supervisor, Pam Bluh. Because if I've been able to have any sort of professional success, it's really because she was such a great mentor. She's the kind of person that opens doors and lets you really try and do different things. So when I went to the technical



services part of the law library there, I had a lot of different things I wanted to try and do. Because we had some special collections that needed work. I really wanted to take on the government documents and make that a vibrant public service that we offered at the law school, and she really let me do that. And she introduced me to people who could sort of help me in my career, so certainly seventeen great years, I hadn't expected to be leaving, quite honestly. You know, after about ten or twelve years you begin to think, "oh, this is it, you know -- I'm a lifer!"

**Hartnett**

*Yeah, yeah.*

**Sleeman**

And it was a very good work situation. The law school library at that time, and still does, has a very good director in Barbara Gontrum. I had wonderful colleagues; it was just really a great environment.

**Hartnett**

*And it was during those seventeen years that you decided to pursue additional graduate work, taking advantage of the tuition remission program. How did you choose the particular program that you went into?*

**Sleeman**

Well, I wanted to know more about the law, and how the law operated, but I couldn't see myself in law school.

**Hartnett**

*Occupational hazard of seeing so many law students come and go, and see what they go through or -- ? Or did you want to go to straight-ahead law school?*

**Sleeman**

Well there was a bit of self-assessment too. I think at that point, at the point I was doing it, and even now, I don't think I have the personality to sort of fully participate in the whole Socratic method. Now to be fair, the instructors at the University of Maryland have moved beyond that for the most part. They don't do that sort of *Paper Chase* kind of ...

**Hartnett**

*Professor Kingsfield, recitations...*

**Sleeman**

They're brilliant men and women who teach in a much more collaborative way and style than what one associates with law school. But at the time, I was looking for some other educational opportunity, I had this idea of what law school was like, and had met a few people that sort of fit that bill, the more *Paper Chase* type situations and I thought, "I don't want to do that. I would not be successful in that." But I did want to know more about the law and how the law operated, and so the program that I settled on the opportunity to do that, it was a night program, which was certainly important. But it gave me the chance to learn about the law and how it works and how people react to it. And it was less of a law school environment, for lack of a better phrase.

**Hartnett**

*And what's the actual degree, again? Is it Law and Ethics?*

- Sleeman** It's a Masters in Legal Studies and Ethics.
- Hartnett** *Legal Studies and Ethics. How is that interweaving with your increasing understanding of government information? I mean, was it just a great fit some of the things you were learning in the Legal Ethics class, program? Did it just – I'm assuming that it was also enriching your understanding of, maybe I'm making a mental leap here, let me rephrase. How did your degree in Legal Studies influence the way you think about access to information, for example?*
- Sleeman** Well I don't know that it did influence or change my concept of access to government information. Legal information is government information. That sounds kind of trite, but it really is true. So certainly having a chance to learn more about how that content's used by the legal community was helpful. That was beneficial, and it really was a good service at the law school and now at my current job, just to know how the community approaches this content. What they're looking for, how they use it -- that was really very beneficial. So that aspect of the program certainly had a direct connection to what I do in government information.
- Hartnett** *Now I understand over the years you've also taken on teaching. And that role, at University of Maryland, correct --?*
- Sleeman** Correct.
- Hartnett** *How many years have you done that, and what kinds of things have you – what kinds of classes have you been teaching, and in what context?*
- Sleeman** Well, they were at the law school. And they were seminar courses, usually legal history, some aspect of legal history. One was, it began as a team teaching effort with a faculty member at the law school, Garrett Power, and the former state archivist of Maryland, Ed Papenfuse, and myself, and we were designing a course that would focus on using original and primary sources to teach students about the law. And so much of the law now is storytelling. I don't mean that in sort of a dismissive way. But how do you communicate to the jury and to the court the facts in a way that's engaging, because you don't ... you want to make sure you get the information out, but you want to make sure that people stay tuned in to that content. So what we tried to do is we tried to get the students to think about all the content, all of the historical record that goes into a particular case and how you can use that to tell the whole story about an event. A little more than a car crash, A hit B kind of thing, but really what was going on in the social world, depending on the case, the health world, the medical environment and the business community, that affected the environment of how your case played out. And I also had a chance to work with another faculty member, Larry

Gibson, and again Dr. Papenfuse, and we did a similar sort of thing, built around civil rights law in Maryland. Working with Larry Gibson, who's fought the fight for civil rights. He was the first African-American faculty member at the University of Virginia, he was I think the second African-American faculty member the University of Maryland, he's been involved in so much, in terms of actually getting African-Americans access to the rights that the Constitution says they're supposed to have. He really has fought for and lived that. And so for that, it was a great experience just to be there. Just to learn from him. He's just an astonishing, gracious person. He shared so much of his life and his experiences. Really great.

**Hartnett**

*It's inspirational for me to hear about this individual because I know that all of our careers are really so influenced by some of these incredible people we come into contact with and it's actually hard to put into words because I mean as you're speaking about him it's clear to me there's so many dimensions of what you learned from that interaction. Well you brought up civil rights and certainly one of the things that you worked on at that library was digitalization around civil rights records and so on. Will you tell us a little about that project?*

**Sleeman**

Sure the historical publications of the United States Commission on Civil Rights was a project we initiated -- sort of began talking about it in '99. It really got off the ground in 2000/2001, eventually it went on to become a partnership with the Commission itself and GPO. I think it still remains one of the few; I think John [Shuler]'s project with the State Department [at the University of Illinois, Chicago] is the other, where we were directly partnered with the agency and the library. We began that project initially to respond to a faculty member who was teaching a course on voting rights and she wanted to have access to the various Commission reports on voting rights, so we arranged to scan those in-house and built a little website around them and this was in 2000/2001.

**Hartnett**

*Yeah, remembering back to early scanning, stick it on the [scanner and press Start]...(laughing)*

**Sleeman**

It's archaic by any standards now, I mean look at it, I'm like "oh my gosh we would never do that," but yet that's how we started, you gotta start some place. And the faculty member was very excited to have this in sort of a digital format she could share with the students and she was very gracious and generous in her praise to the library director, Barbara Gontrum, and so then we began talking about what else we might do. And I said well we really ought to stick with the Commission because we got a lot of material here in the library already and it's really important content. The commission is such an important agency, but at that time and still now people don't realize the really valuable work that the Commission does and so one of the things we wanted to do was to get that content back out in the market. It sits on the shelves in book

form, so maybe if it's digitized and indexed properly and catalogued and out there, people will find it again and will realize how important that content is.

**Hartnett** *If they discover it as they're doing [research].*

**Sleeman** And that's the thing, you gotta keep pushing that discovery...

**Hartnett** *Here's a question that will take us a bit into a different direction. How do you learn things on the job? Obviously you haven't been sitting still at all in your career so far and we will get eventually into your current job which is taking you into a completely different direction, but for example when there've been many times when you've been faced with a new collection or new work flows, new problems...how do you learn? What are some of the basics? I'm asking ...*

**Sleeman** I'm thinking about some of the things I, steps I do, things I do. I think one of the first things that any librarian needs to be – particularly, I think a new librarian -- is that he or she has got to be flexible. You've just got to roll with what comes and you know this from your own career, Cass. Stuff lines up on your desk and you can say oh that's not my job, which doesn't really help you or your employer, or you can say what can I do with this? That's not to open a reference to the movie Airplane and say, "Oh, I can make a hat, I can make a pterodactyl," (Laughs) but you know you can look at the things that end up on your desk and if it doesn't add up, you can think, "What can I do with this?" And I was very, very fortunate at the law school to have, as you alluded to, a number of different historical collections wind up on my desk and so I thought to myself, "What can I do to make these available to the public?"

Again a lot of them were about African American practitioners, about the civil rights movement, mostly in Maryland and the Maryland region and how can we get that story out there? And so I began to just sort of exploring that. You just got to sort of dive into it. You can't be timid. Whether it's learning how to code, which I wound up learning to teach myself how to code or creating a website that's going to help people understand this new special collection you got, you just got to dive into it. You've got to be ready to be flexible when something shows up on your desk that's not your usual routine and just plunge into it. And as librarians, we know how to research, we know how to teach ourselves about unfamiliar subjects and you've got to embrace that.

**Hartnett** *What has been the role of professional associations in your own growth and continuing education? Could you talk about some of the associations that you've been involved with?*

**Sleeman** I think professional associations are so very important, they really are.

That said, I'd be the first to admit I've a love/hate relationship with many of the associations I belong to. And that's because [as with] every other group of people, we are all trying to get to different solutions, everybody's personalities come into play and sometimes you get frustrated and well you think this association shouldn't do it this way, why don't they listen to me, but that's just life. I've been very active in GODORT obviously, I've been active in ALA, I've been involved in MARAC: the mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, I've been involved in the Maryland Library Association. All those have been worthwhile efforts. I can't say I've been disappointed or wish I hadn't done it for any of those groups and I am glad to still be a part of those groups. It really is important to have those professional contacts, and you can only get that through the associations that you belong to. It helps you to learn what other people are doing in the field, you can steal good ideas, you can find out that your idea is not such a good idea. You learn a lot from just that exchange and it's so very beneficial.

**Hartnett** *Because you've had a leadership role, at least in GODORT, maybe some of these other groups as well, what are some of the pleasures of working with some of the newer librarians coming up?*

**Sleeman** Well, I think it's just a challenge, in a good way, to see new faces, new blood come into GODORT and to push the organization, to say "Why do you do this this way? What's this about? That doesn't make any sense to me." And oftentimes, it's right: it doesn't make sense, even if you think you're trying to keep up and be cutting edge, you get locked into the same old, same old. Particularly in organizations, it's almost unavoidable, because some of it is just the way we've always done it. So I think it's really exciting to have new faces and a lot of new blood, saying "We really ought to go this way," and "We're done with that now." That's good, I enjoy that. It's great. That said, sometimes it can be a little off-putting too, you know. (Laughs) You think, "Oh gosh, I can't keep up with that. There's too much technology."

**Hartnett** *Sometimes I think of the two of us as part of a bridge generation. In other words, we were mentored by some of the other people who have been interviewed for the Oral Histories Project, by people like Bernadine [Abbott Hoduski] or Larry Romans or Andrea Sevetson and we also remember ... we're a bridge between that generation and this newer generation.*

**Sleeman** I hope so. I hope so.

**Hartnett** *Here's an oddball one. How do you suggest to those new to the field how to use the older, more traditional sources?*

**Sleeman** (Laughs) It sounds almost like hazing.

- Hartnett** *Yes, I know. Isn't it? (Laughs)*
- Sleeman** Again, I think many times it's a point of need. Some of this information is only in print still, at least at this point. You need to get into it and become familiar with it. Sometimes it's available in electronic form, as we all know, and sometimes just having the print, just works better. It's kind of nebulous. It's hard to define works better. What does that mean? But like a lot of things, we all know it when we see it! Sometimes having the print source is just easier to use, it works better. And the only way to become familiar with it is to use your collection. So use your collection to find things that are personally interesting.
- Hartnett** *To give yourself a hook, to hang some of the ... to give yourself something to hang the content on.*
- Sleeman** That's right. You've just got to use your collection for your own purposes, for your reference, technical services support, and just become familiar with what's there. But often times we're sort of forced to do that at point of need, because of our work situation, so you've got to kind of find the time, squeeze in the time to teach yourself about your collection.
- Hartnett** *There seems to be a strong sense of community among government documents people. Tell me about the government documents community, what makes it strong and what makes one so devoted to the field of government information.*
- Sleeman** Gov Doc Land is a tribe like no other! (Laughs)
- Hartnett** *It really is, we've got a bit of a reputation in the community.*
- Sleeman** ... in the library community. Yes we do! (Laughs) Gosh, it's fun. There are a lot of strong personalities in GODORT. That could be the kind of thing that destroys an organization or really builds it up. And we have been fortunate, I think, as an organization that those strong personalities, even when they're bumping up against each other, really grating on one another's nerves, still have the organization's success in mind. So that's the best part of the organization. I know I've sort of transitioned to a different type of career path, and I won't be active in GODORT as much as I was, I'll still keep my membership, but that's the group I most associate with in the library world. It's just because the organization is such a fine group of people.
- Hartnett** *You mentioned being at University of Maryland Law Library for seventeen years. And that you were not particularly looking to leave. What happened and where are you now?*
- Sleeman** That is what I mentioned. I'm at the Supreme Court of the United States right now, where I'm the Associate Librarian for Technical Services and

Special Collections, and I wasn't really looking for a job. A colleague sent the announcement to me from the online site and said "This sounds like a lot of what you're doing now, and it's at the Supreme Court. You have to take a look at it." Well, you know, it is the Supreme Court, and it's hard not to be excited about that prospect. So I applied for the position and because the Court was under a Continuing Resolution at that time, I had an interview and it was just one of those things where they said, you know "We just can't decide, we can't decide." I don't know if they couldn't decide because they couldn't or if they couldn't do anything until the Continuing Resolution issue was settled. So once a budget was put in place, they offered me the position. It's hard to describe, Cass, it's the Supreme Court! Why would you not, if you're interested in the law, if you're interested in government information, why would you not go to the Supreme Court? I could have paid *them* to go to the Supreme Court. Happily, they're paying me, and I think my family would say that's a much better arrangement overall, but really to work at the Supreme Court, I *would* pay them. It's just such a fantastic opportunity.

**Hartnett** *You've only been in that position for a matter of months now and I understand there's probably ... for some things, it may be too early for you to disclose a lot of that. What kinds of things are you doing day to day and how is that particular perspective different?*

**Sleeman** Well, one of the things that's very different, and I was telling someone about this this morning, from some of the other places I've worked, and the Court. And it's funny, everyone refers to it as The Court....

**Hartnett** *Of course....*

**Sleeman** ...so one thing that's very different about the Court is that it's very mission focused. And I mean that it in a good way. It's a very interesting environment and everybody is there to make sure that these nine men and women can do their job. So that's really cool. And that's a very different vibe than anyplace else I've worked. Our job is to make sure that the Justices have what they need so that they can do their work.

**Hartnett** *I think that might even be a refreshing change from academic, law or university – even within the law program, there are just so many possibilities of what we can be or what we should be and so many different constituencies you're trying to satisfy, trying to re-imagine ourselves as well as our academic institutions. But to hear what you just said, it sounds like a refreshing change.*

**Sleeman** You're right. That's exactly right. When I was at the law school, one of the things we were trying – it seemed like every year we were trying to figure out what were going to be the hot programs this year or over the next couple of years. How do we re-envision our self, this year, next

year? At the Court, it's we're here to serve the Justices, and everything else is secondary, it's third, it's way down the list. And that's a good thing. It's good to know what your mission is every morning.

**Hartnett** *What do you feel has been your greatest contribution so far to the profession? Now let's keep in mind that this is a story that's not – all of these oral histories are works in progress. So when you look back up to this point, what do you think?*

**Sleeman** I'm glad you said that about the work in progress. Because it is. I look back and I see someone like Larry Romans who's still contributing. I hope to be at that same point in my career. I hope to still be able to make a contribution. Yeah! I hope that it continues. I don't know where it's gonna go, but we'll see.

**Hartnett** *When history is written about you, what would you like for it to say?*

**Sleeman** Is that a Gladys Knight song? (Laughs) You know the one I'm thinking about?

**Hartnett** *I don't know the song. Perhaps you could sing a few bars. (Laughs)*

**Sleeman** Oh, I don't think I'm going to sing on my oral history, thank you very much. (Laughs) I tend to sing in the shower or in the car. The history, huh? I don't know.

**Hartnett** *It's hard.*

**Sleeman** Yeah. I hope that I made a contribution in moving GODORT forward. And I think that, as you described it, a sort of bridge position – maybe I should interview you next time. I think our effort to look at the future of GODORT during my tenure and try and map out ways that GODORT can move forward and continue to be an effective voice for government information, I hope I've contributed to that. It is a valuable organization and one that I care a great deal about. So hopefully that's what my history is. My contribution is helping GODORT and the next generation of GODORT members to sort of move forward.

**Hartnett** *Well, I can verify that you have.*

**Sleeman** Well at least they didn't move away! (Laughs)

**Hartnett** *Bill, is there anything ... I told you at the beginning that it would be difficult if not impossible to move through the questions and there are many questions we've omitted. Is there anything else that you'd like to share? Just take a minute.*

**Sleeman** I've had so much fun thus far in my career. I've been so very fortunate



to learn from and work for so many wonderfully talented people. I can't think of a particular closing statement. You know, have fun! Always check the card catalog! (Laughs) Be flexible. No, it's just been a great experience being part of GODORT. It's been great to be involved with government information in the Federal Depository Library Program.

**Hartnett** *And you've seen such a change over the 25 or so years, really.*

**Sleeman** Yeah, it's been fun. It's been crazy. It's been fun.

**Hartnett** *Well we appreciate your passion for the profession and your ability and willingness to teach and mentor others. You certainly taught and mentored me. And I appreciate that. And we look forward to the next chapter.*

**Sleeman** Thanks!

----- *End of interview* -----