

## CHOOSE YOUR OWN (OUTBACK) ADVENTURE: MAKING THE MOST OF LIS OPPORTUNITIES IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

### ABSTRACT

With a population of just over 25,000 people, the central Australian town of Alice Springs would not appear, at first glance, to offer many opportunities for a newly-minted librarian. Indeed, librarian vacancies in the town are relatively few and far between, primarily as a result of very low turnover in these roles.

This paper explores how the author, who completed a Graduate Diploma in Library and Information Management at the end of 2012, has leveraged a combination of part-time, casual and volunteer LIS opportunities in a remote region to broaden her skills, develop a local professional network and enjoy some very unusual experiences along the way.

These opportunities include a part-time role as a jack-of-all-trades Liaison Librarian at Charles Darwin University, which has led to managing a Study/Homework Centre in the University Library for senior secondary students as part of a Commonwealth-funded program to help Indigenous and low socio-economic status students make the transition to university. Similarly, a casual customer service role at the Alice Springs Public Library has provided the opportunity to help develop and maintain a library service for inmates at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre. Meanwhile, volunteering has yielded an array of exciting opportunities, including working in a library and archives collection of national significance at the Strehlow Research Centre. Connections developed there have subsequently led to an opportunity to be involved in the Alcoota Fossil Project, preparing and cataloguing 8 million-year-old megafauna fossils at the Museum of Central Australia.

### PAPER

*Beware and Warning!*

*You and YOU alone are in charge of what happens in this story.*

*There are dangers, choices, adventures and consequences...The wrong decision could end in disaster – even death. At any time, YOU can go back and make another choice, alter the path of the story, and change its result.*

Introduction, Choose Your Own Adventure 6: House of Danger

For those who did not experience a 1980s childhood, *Choose Your Own Adventure* is a series of adventure/fantasy books for children, which in its heyday sold around 250 million copies worldwide in 38 languages (Choose Your Own Adventure 2014). Much like other adventure/fantasy series, the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books transport young readers to an array of exotic locations involving many thrilling scenarios, ranging from trekking the Himalayas in search of the Abominable Snowman through to preventing a horde of planet-destroying Ant People from destroying the universe. There are, however, a couple of things that set *Choose Your Own Adventure* books apart from others in the adventure/fantasy genre. Firstly, the books are written in the second person, enabling the reader to adopt the role of the main protagonist. Secondly, the format is non-linear, involving multiple narrative strands. At various stages throughout each story, the reader/protagonist is presented with several choices to determine the direction of the narrative, resulting in numerous possible endings.

With its reader-driven, choice-and-consequence format, the books can be seen as a kind of 'no-tech' precursor to the interactive computer gaming tradition enjoyed by youth and adults

alike today (Hendrix 2011). Certainly, as far as fiction goes, there are some very sophisticated concepts underlying the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books. According to Reilly (2006), the choice-and-consequences style format of the books “reflects the treelike structure used in game theory to chart possible outcomes based on initial circumstances”, while the simultaneous plot possibilities are reflective of the principles of quantum physics. As an avid reader of the series in my childhood, I was completely oblivious to these theoretical complexities. Many years later, however, as I reflect on my fledgling career as a new LIS graduate, the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series seems an appropriate metaphor for the way in which my LIS journey has unfolded, encompassing multiple, simultaneous pathways leading to various opportunities.

My LIS adventure first started in Alice Springs in the Northern Territory (NT), where I have lived since 2006. Alice Springs is a remote outback town located in the vast central desert region of Australia. With a population of just over 25,000 people, the town would not appear, at first glance, to offer many opportunities for someone keen on getting a foothold as a librarian. Vacancies for librarian positions rarely arise due to very low turnover; further compounding the situation is the low number of librarian positions to begin with, a situation not uncommon throughout the rest of the NT. While the NT’s percentage share of employment in Australia across all occupations represents 1.1 percent, its share of employment for librarian positions is just 0.2 percent (Department of Employment 2012), making Territory librarians the most underrepresented in terms of employment share compared to their interstate colleagues. Given this local context, it is perhaps not surprising that as a new graduate I have needed to rely on a combination of part-time, casual and volunteer work in a number of LIS sectors in order to develop and sustain my new career. Many of these roles have been undertaken simultaneously, resulting in a less-than-straightforward resumé. These roles include:

- Casual Customer Service Officer at Alice Springs Public Library;
- Volunteer and occasional contractor at Strehlow Research Centre Library & Archives;
- Part-time Liaison Librarian at Charles Darwin University;
- Volunteer on the Prison Library Service through the Alice Springs Public Library;
- Part-time Lead Mentor of the Into Uni Study Centre at Charles Darwin University, and
- Volunteer at the Museum of Central Australia

Taking on extra part-time and casual work in addition to my main, part-time Liaison Librarian role at the University was determined mostly by financial necessity; the inability to say ‘no’ to some very unique opportunities was what led me to take on the various volunteering roles. Regardless of whether the work has been paid or unpaid, all of these opportunities have helped me broaden my skills as a new LIS graduate, as well as given me an introductory ‘taster’ to some of the many areas of specialisation in the industry. These opportunities, or adventures as I like to call them, are described in more detail below. Before that, though, a brief journey back in time (in the tradition of my favourite *Choose Your Own Adventure* stories) to explain how it all started.

#### The very first LIS adventure

My very first LIS adventure in outback Australia began in 2010 in the unlikely setting of the Alice Springs Correctional Centre. I had been employed there since early 2009 as a Literacy and Numeracy Lecturer, where I was responsible for teaching the Indigenous male inmates at ‘The Cottages’, a minimum security facility located just outside the perimeter of the main prison complex. While a library collection was situated within the main prison compound, those items could not be lent to the minimum security inmates due to security reasons. Noticing the students’ interest in the small sample of magazines and books which I regularly brought to class, I decided to establish a small library for the inmates in ‘The Cottages’. After gaining permission from the prison authorities, I proceeded to stock the library with new

items acquired through a successful application to the Indigenous Literacy Foundation, as well as carefully selected public library discards. The library management system was the ultimate in simplicity; in the absence of a computer-based system, an old-fashioned card-based system was implemented. Meanwhile, an inmate was recruited to act as volunteer library manager, overseeing borrowing and returns. 'The Cottages' library project, while modest in size and scope, was well-supported by the inmates, with most books and magazines in circulation and regular requests made for new items, particularly those on the subject of central Australian Aboriginal communities and cultures. The success of this small project was very gratifying, sparking an interest in exploring a career outside teaching literacy and numeracy. In mid-2010, I applied for and was appointed to a casual position at the Alice Springs Public Library; at the end of 2010 I resigned from my teaching position at the prison and commenced formal LIS studies at the University of South Australia the following year.

#### A public library adventure

Trading in stable employment in a career I had spent some ten years developing for a casual, entry-level role at the public library in which regular hours could not be guaranteed was, needless to say, a risky proposition from a financial perspective. In terms of getting a 'head-start' on my LIS career prior to completing my studies at the end of 2012, however, it turned out to be a good decision. During my time at the Alice Springs Public Library, I gained experience in providing customer service to a very diverse group of library users, thereby becoming familiar with library systems, policies and procedures. I also gained valuable skills in other relevant areas such as information literacy and library promotions and events. In all, the experience gained at the public library in my customer service role was instrumental not only in providing context for my LIS studies and helping me receive an introduction to library operations, but also in helping me secure my first professional role as a part-time Liaison Librarian at Charles Darwin University in mid-2012, more about which is described later.

My association with the public library also led to being involved with its Prison Library Service project, which commenced in early 2013. This outreach library service for inmates at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre was developed through the advocacy and support of staff from a number of organisations, such as the Alice Springs Correctional Centre, the Alice Springs Public Library, NT Legal Aid and the Australian Law Librarians' Association. The seeds of the project sprouted when I submitted a proposal to the Manager of Library Services at the Alice Springs Public Library suggesting that a lending service be offered to inmates at the prison. The trial phase of the project was eventually launched following discussions with key prison personnel and was overseen by the Library Manager, with the service being developed and coordinated by the Operations and Reference Librarian. Following the trial period, the service was fully launched towards the end of 2013 and currently represents a unique initiative in the NT with respect to provision of library services to inmates (Criminal Lawyers Association of the Northern Territory 2014). Drawing on my experience as a prison educator, I was able to contribute to the development stage of the initiative in terms of providing feedback on the usability of the inmates' selection sheets and giving input on newly-developed procedures. In terms of assisting to maintain the service, I have been involved on an on-going basis providing readers' advisory and selection services for inmates, as well as offering some suggestions for developing the ASPL collection based on inmates' requests.

#### A special library and archives adventure

My first involvement with the Strehlow Research Centre came by way of interviewing the Archivist and Librarian there in 2011 as part of a university assignment, eventually leading on to a regular volunteering role. The Strehlow Research Centre houses "one of Australia's most important collections of film, sound, archival records and museum objects relating to Indigenous ceremonial life" (Department of Arts and Museums 2014). It includes materials acquired by linguist and author, Professor Ted Strehlow during some 40 years of fieldwork

documenting the language, songs, sites and ceremonies of Aboriginal people in central Australia. Also included are the correspondence and manuscripts of his father, Carl Strehlow, a Lutheran pastor who headed the Finke River Mission at Hermannsburg near Alice Springs from 1894 to 1922. The collection is vast; according to the Archivist and Librarian it includes over 1,000 ceremonial objects and accompanying documentation, 8,000 photographs and slides, 26 hours of film recordings, 150 hours of sound recordings, 10,000 pieces of correspondence, 150 genealogies and dozens of diaries. Not only does it provide a rich source of information on central Australian Aboriginal cultures for researchers, the collection also plays a crucial cultural maintenance role for Western Aranda communities.

Volunteering at the Centre has given me access to a veritable treasure trove of information on central Australian languages, cultures and history, as well as provided a fascinating insight into special collections and archives. With guidance from the Archivist and Librarian, I have been involved in activities such as original cataloguing rare books and ephemera, digitising photographic images for preservation purposes and creating a database of a sub-collection of Ted Strehlow's correspondence, to name just a few projects. More recently, I have been contracted to create indexes for a series of diaries kept by Ted Strehlow as an undergraduate student of classics and English literature at the University of Adelaide from 1929 to 1931. This work has uncovered Strehlow's early literary influences evident in his most significant work, *Songs of Central Australia*, published in 1971. The book translates the song-cycles of the Aranda people into Western poetical form and has since been regarded as significant in terms of helping "to elevate Aboriginal verse as literature, and to establish the Dreaming and the Aboriginal world-view as key concepts in an emerging Australian cultural identity" (Jones 2002). The opportunity to create indexes which will in future assist researchers to more readily access information on Strehlow's early years as a scholar has been a unique opportunity as a new LIS graduate. The experience has also provided useful insights into issues relating to the accessibility and discoverability of archival materials.

#### A museum adventure

My association with the Strehlow Research Centre has also led me to a most unusual adventure in the museum sector. Co-located with the Strehlow Research Centre is the Museum of Central Australia, both of which fall under the auspices of Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory (MAGNT), which is administered by the NT Department of Arts and Museums. In mid-2013, while working at the Strehlow Research Centre, I learnt through word-of-mouth of an opportunity to work on the Alcoota Fossil Project, which involves the preparation and cataloguing of thousands of fossil specimens from the Miocene Era, some eight million years ago. The fossils have been excavated over a 30 year period from the Alcoota Scientific Reserve, a rich fossil bed located about 160km north-east of Alice Springs. According to the Senior Curator of Earth Sciences at MAGNT, the fossil deposit at Alcoota is the most concentrated of its kind in Australia and has yielded megafauna specimens such as *Dromornis stirtoni*, commonly referred to as the Thunder Bird, an emu-like creature which was three-metres tall and weighed around half a tonne. Other specimens include *Kolopsis torus* and *Plaisiodon centralis*, which were two varieties of sheep-sized, wombat-like grazing marsupials and *Thylacinus potens*, a wolf-sized prototype of the extinct Tasmanian Tiger of the modern era. Under the supervision of the Museum Palaeontologist, I have been involved in cleaning, identifying and labelling fragile fossil specimens, as well as cataloguing the items on a MAGNT database using taxonomic information in addition to information extracted from excavation field diaries. While not specifically related to traditional librarian work, the project has nonetheless provided an excellent opportunity to gain exposure to registration and cataloguing practices as they apply to museum practice, as well as become aware of potential opportunities to apply my skills in fields beyond the library sector.

### An academic library adventure

Of course, the adventures described so far would not be possible without my mainstay employment as a Liaison Librarian at the Alice Springs Campus of Charles Darwin University, a position I have held since mid-2012. The University, which delivers Higher Education and Vocational and Educational Training (VET) courses to just over 22,000 students, is comprised of five campuses and three smaller centres located throughout the NT, with two more centres having recently opened in Sydney and Melbourne. The Alice Springs Campus, though smaller than the main campus located some 1,500km away in Darwin, is “a major educational hub catering for students in the town and in Central Australia’s remote communities” (Charles Darwin University n.d.).

Each of the University’s three libraries is located on a separate campus. The Alice Springs Campus Library is rather unique in that it is a joint-use library serving not only students and staff from the University, but also teachers and students at a nearby senior secondary school. As such, my role as a Liaison Librarian is a highly varied one, requiring a ‘jack-of-all-trades’ outlook. Interactions in a single day can be remarkably diverse and can range from assisting a senior secondary student with special needs select leisure reading material, through to providing information literacy support to a group of Indigenous trainee Park Rangers undertaking a VET course in Conservation and Land Management, through to delivering an advanced research skills session to a new PhD student. Working with such a diverse client group in an academic library context is relatively unusual, particularly as the liaison role in larger universities usually involves providing specialised support to a more narrowly-defined client group. While liaison work is increasingly becoming more specialised, particularly in the area of research support, I have found that working as a jack-of-all-trades Liaison Librarian on a small university campus offers advantages less likely to be available to my fellow graduates working in large university libraries. This includes exposure to a very broad range of subject or discipline areas, as well as management opportunities such as taking on an Acting Campus Librarian role to cover periods when the Campus Librarian is on leave.

Working at the Charles Darwin University Library also presented the opportunity to take on another part-time position in mid-2013 to establish and manage the Into Uni Study Centre for students attending the nearby senior secondary school. The centre, which operates out of the University Library, was established through Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, an Australian Government funding initiative which enables universities “to undertake activities and implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses with people from low SES [socio-economic status] backgrounds” (Department of Education 2014). Originally, I applied for a Mentor/Tutor position with the program, but was offered the role of part-time Lead Mentor instead. The Study Centre operates after school hours and is attended on a voluntary basis by students, who are provided with access to tutoring and mentoring staff, afternoon tea and bus transport home. My role involved overseeing the day-to-day activities of the centre, including liaising with and supporting staff regarding students’ needs, as well as collecting data to ascertain the impact of the service on student outcomes. Another, smaller, part of my role was to support the development of students’ information literacy skills, which has helped me gain a deeper insight into the information needs of the young adults accessing the University Library. When I first took on the role at the Study Centre, I wondered if I was ‘getting off track’ professionally, as I saw my work at the Study Centre as not being wholly LIS-related. I can now appreciate that this role has been a very valuable opportunity for me in professional development terms in that I have been able to gain experience in areas such as project management and supervision, transferrable skills which are of direct relevance to many LIS positions these days. The experience has also provided the opportunity to present a paper in August 2014 at the National Library of France as part of an International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) Satellite Meeting.

## Looking back

Looking back on this flurry of activity over the last few years, what exactly have I learnt? Firstly, despite what some might assume, there are actually quite a few advantages to living in a remote town as a new LIS graduate. As my account hopefully demonstrates, even small towns 'in the middle of nowhere' can yield some exciting and unique LIS adventures for new graduates. Furthermore, combining these multiple opportunities to the extent that I have been able to has really only been possible precisely *because* of where I live. While it is certainly true that those of us living in remote regions of Australia face the tyranny of distance, the one thing we do not have to contend with, unlike many of our city counterparts, is the tyranny of commuting. The township of Alice Springs, like many other remote towns, is small meaning that getting to and from my various LIS jobs has been a relatively easy, non-time-consuming experience.

Another benefit of living in a remote town as a new LIS graduate has been the ability to take advantage of the skills shortages that so often exist in these contexts, resulting in more casual, project and volunteer work than I can handle. While juggling multiple roles is a less-than-ideal situation from a financial perspective, the overall benefits have been considerable. For instance, gaining experience in different LIS contexts, including an academic library, a public library, a special library, as well as an archive and museum, has enabled me to develop a wide range of skills and knowledge, which will hopefully help me remain competitive in the LIS job market. While some may argue that taking such a jack-of-all trades approach results in spreading oneself too thinly, increasingly the boundaries of the library profession are expanding beyond traditional roles. Given that it has been recognised that in the Australian LIS context, the focus needs to be shifted "towards educating graduates to work in broader information environments and to consider new career paths in non-traditional agencies and organizations" (Yu & Davis 2007), it stands to reason new LIS graduates need to be able to demonstrate a rather broad range of skills. One way of achieving this, I argue, is gaining exposure to a wide variety of roles and responsibilities in a range of LIS settings, something which is considerably more achievable in a small-town context.

In addition to broadening skills and experience, taking on multiple LIS roles in Alice Springs has led to a number of other positive, yet unintended outcomes. While I was aware that my *Choose Your Own Adventure* approach to career development would help me cultivate a professional network, I did not appreciate how this would help build social capital in my local LIS community. Social capital arises from "the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively" (Woolcock & Narayan 2000, p. 226) and quite fittingly, the first reported instance of the term in the literature occurred in 1916 in reference to a case study involving a small, rural community (Ferguson 2010; Hanifan 1916). In my own experience, I have found that the value of social capital with respect to LIS lies in cross-institutional networking enabling identification of opportunities for, and provision of, services to new groups of clients. For example, professional networks developed at the ASCC as a prison educator and at the public library have played a role in helping to initiate and develop the Prison Library Service. Similarly, through networks developed at the public library, I have been able to initiate a streamlined service enabling secondary school students attending the Into Uni Study Centre to join the public library, thereby gaining access to Your Tutor, an Australia-wide online tutoring service.

When I first started my outback LIS adventure, I was also unaware of the opportunities there would be to receive mentoring from experienced professionals. The benefits of mentoring on a protégé's career include promotion and remuneration (Dreher & Ash 1990), as well as job satisfaction (Chao 1997). While a mentoring-protégé relationship can be facilitated as part of a formal program which is based on mutually agreed goals and time periods (Australian Library and Information Association 2008), a mentoring bond can also occur spontaneously and function in an unstructured manner (Chao, Walz & Gardner 1992, p. 620). In my own

case, the relationships I have developed with mentors have arisen informally, as a natural by-product of making connections with LIS professionals in the different central Australian organisations with which I have been involved. These mentors have provided an invaluable source of guidance in terms of career advice, information on and access to other opportunities, as well as interpersonal support, reflecting the notion that “the more mentors, the greater coverage of different types of advice and support” (Seibert, Kraimer & Liden 2001). Given that working as an LIS professional in a remote region can potentially lead to feelings of professional isolation, developing a network of mentoring support in the early stages of one’s LIS career in these contexts may prove helpful in building professional resilience in the longer-term.

While there have been a number of positive outcomes in my journey so far, just like the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series there have also been a few hazards along the way. Granted, there have been none of the grisly endings that can occur in the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books – I have not, for instance, become a meal for a colony of subterranean Ant People, neither have I been annihilated by the psychic powers of super-intelligent chimpanzees determined on destroying the space-time continuum. There are, nonetheless, a few potential dangers which new graduates should keep in mind when considering juggling multiple LIS roles. One of the main challenges, unsurprisingly, is maintaining a reasonable work-life balance. Although the experience of sampling from a smorgasbord of local LIS opportunities is undoubtedly very satisfying from a professional development perspective, I have found that overloading one’s plate is best avoided, even in a small town where coordinating a variety of opportunities can occur more easily. Another related hazard is overcommitting to projects. For a new graduate, the temptation of taking on just one more opportunity can be very hard to resist, especially given the possibility it might lead to a promising job prospect. In my experience, though, I have come to the conclusion that concentrating on one or two opportunities is a much more realistic and satisfying approach for both parties. Finally, there are also financial limits with regard to the amount of unpaid work one can afford to undertake. Taking on several volunteer roles as a means of augmenting one’s LIS experience can reap great benefits in terms of developing skills and professional contacts, but can only realistically be done in conjunction with regular, part-time employment over a finite period.

Looking forward: the next adventure

Obviously, the approach outlined above is not a sustainable option in the long-term, especially where maintaining a healthy work-life balance and bank balance are concerned. Yet, combining part-time, casual and volunteer roles as a new LIS graduate in a remote town has given me the flexibility to explore the world of LIS from my own desert backyard. I have not only discovered that it is possible to get a fledgling LIS career off the ground, but there are also numerous opportunities to develop a range of skills and employment potential, explore future areas of career specialisation, cultivate a local professional network, help strengthen the social capital of my LIS community and establish a support system of mentors.

So where will my outback LIS adventures take me next? It is hard to say. Unlike in *Choose Your Own Adventure* stories, where there are multiple, simultaneous possibilities and endings, I will eventually have to choose just one pathway. Until that time, though, I will continue to pursue at least some of my outback adventures, in the hope that the knowledge, skills and experience I acquire along the way will help prepare me for the next LIS adventure, whenever and wherever that may be.

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