ATG Interviews Leslie Straus
President, SkyRiver Technology Solutions

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ATG: Leslie, can you talk about SkyRiver for our readers who may have heard the name but are a little vague about what you all do?

LS: SkyRiver is a full-service bibliographic utility for cataloging. By “full-service” we mean that, over and above a robust database of MARC records for downloading into a local library system, we provide associated services. To mention a few, the database has a powerful discovery layer which gets catalogers to the records they need quickly; there’s a service that matches vendor manifests against the database to provide corresponding MARC records; and there’s a unique record requesting service if the record you’re looking for happens not to be in the SkyRiver database. Another way to describe what we do is simply to say that we are in direct competition with OCLC’s online cataloging service, the fundamental differences being our open data use policy and significantly lower prices.

ATG: Tell us about your background and what first got you excited about SkyRiver.

LS: Since the ATG profile provides ample background, I’ll just recount how during the spring of 2009 (three years into my retirement from Innovative Interfaces) Jerry Kline, Innovative founder and chairman, called me, told me that he wanted to create a bibliographic utility, described how it would fill an expressed need in the library community, and asked me to help him start it up. It was all very compelling despite some real ambivalence about coming out of a happy retirement. I think that what excited me most was the prospect of building a brand new company that could matter a lot to libraries — the mission. In addition, I’d be able to put all of my past experience to good use, even going back to my years as a cataloger in the ’60s.

ATG: Given your former association with Innovative Interfaces, some may think of SkyRiver as a spinoff or subsidiary. What is your current affiliation with Innovative Interfaces?

LS: From the start, SkyRiver has been a separate company from Innovative, with a formal licensing agreement for some of Innovative’s technology and a maintenance agreement for that technology. Having said that, our presence in the same building (we rent the space) fosters informal relationships that help in many ways. From the other direction, Innovative is licensed as one of SkyRiver’s marketing and sales partners, as are MCLS (Midwest Collaborative for Library Services) and LYRASIS. As for me, I’m employed solely by SkyRiver. SkyRiver’s separateness continues under agreement with our new investors, which is further described below. We actually have the best of both worlds — independence, yet strong external support as needed.

ATG: Along with Innovative Interfaces, SkyRiver just received a strategic investment from Huntsman Gay Global Capital. What will this mean for the company? Will it translate into new services for your customers? Does it give Huntsman Gay an ownership stake?

LS: There are no structural or operational changes — if there’s any change it’s that we can say with even more certainty that SkyRiver is here for the long run. Our new investors see the potential for a lot of growth and have strongly expressed their willingness to invest in this growth. I think that will translate into continued aggressive product development as well as a much higher profile for SkyRiver in the marketplace. Huntsman Gay and JMI join Jerry Kline as co-owners.

ATG: As the first president of the company, what was your role in the start-up phase? What were the biggest obstacles that you had to overcome? What did you find most rewarding?

LS: My role involved soup to nuts, as with typical start-ups — from choosing a logo, Web domain, and Website design, to hiring staff, helping to train customers, writing press releases, and presenting SkyRiver at conferences. There were some early frustrations such as learning that the Web domain we wanted wasn’t available and not for sale (though theskyriver.com has worked out well), the discovery that our newly-printed envelopes weren’t acceptable to the U.S. Post Office because of where we placed our return address, the fact that the bank would not issue a general corporate credit card to us because of our size — growing pains like that. The biggest reward has been participating in the birth of something that now is a going concern.

ATG: According to your Website “SkyRiver holds as a guiding principle that bibliographic metadata exist within the public domain.” What does that mean exactly? And why is it important?

LS: This is important in the context of OCLC’s historical stance regarding WorldCat records. While OCLC backed away from its highly restrictive 2008 draft data use policy, OCLC’s revised policy of 2010 still infers ownership of bibliographic records. OCLC’s highly publicized incursions into continued page 39