



Growing the ASMS Voice

This year, it has been 50 years since the American Society for Mass Spectrometry (ASMS) was incorporated in 1969, although the conference was started a number of years earlier as an ASTM meeting. It is perhaps remarkable that, for three quarters of its history, Judith Sjoberg has facilitated conferences and developed the public face of the organization.

She currently serves as the Society's Executive Director.

Sjoberg's path became deeply enmeshed with ASMS when she moved with her family to East Lansing, MI, in the early 1980s. It was a perfect storm of timing and circumstance: the ASMS Board needed help shepherding a growing organization, and Sjoberg had just left behind a successful career in nonprofit management.

"Starting with ASMS was happenstance," says Sjoberg. She speaks with fresh, careful diction honed early in life on both the stage and debate floor. "I was married to mass spectrometrist Jack Watson, and the ASMS Board asked if I would help them as a sideline when he moved to Michigan State."

After outfitting her home office with one of the first personal computers – an IBM that looked like a bulky television screen with a keyboard – she forged ahead and helped ASMS over the next 36 years. Now, her business, Scientific Association Management, manages association services and conferences for several other societies and employs both of her children, Brent and Jennifer Watson.

"They each came to me at different points, asking if they could join the business. Brent has a chemical engineering degree. Jennifer followed several paths after university. They have really led ASMS to a new level in terms of its software development, content, and online presence. Both Jennifer and Brent share my commitment to service and attention to detail."

What is your background?

I am from a steel production town in Pennsylvania called McKeesport, now basically a ghost town. It never became part of the renaissance of the Pittsburgh area.

I had a great liberal arts education at Muskingum College in Ohio. My favorite classes were related to speech and public speaking, and I was very involved in drama. I played the bad seed in *The Bad Seed* [laughs], and a gender-neutral Puck in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. After graduation, I did a Master's in Speech and Hearing Science from San Jose State University in California. That is where I met Jack.

What was your path to ASMS?

We moved to San Antonio when Jack was reassigned to the School of Aerospace Medicine at Brooks Air Force Base. I worked as a clinical speech therapist and taught drama and debate in a high school. After San Antonio we spent three years in Strasbourg, France. France was fabulous! The university hired me to teach conversational English. Nearly every weekend we were off to explore France and Europe. We would take the train to Paris probably once a month, and we saw the Pope in Italy when we happened to be there over the Easter Holiday—I don't know what we were thinking. We then went to Nashville for 12 years until we relocated to Michigan State about the time Jack became involved with ASMS.

How did your scientific business grow?

I worked from home until my divorce in 1992. I thought that I'd stay in Michigan because both of my kids were at the University of Michigan, but a group of my ASMS friends came to East Lansing for a meeting. It was one of those awful cold and rainy days in March. Bob Murphy asked, "Why are you staying here?" I think I replied, "Where I would go?" to which Gary Glish said, "I can see you in Santa Fe." So, the next month, I flew to Santa Fe, and, I hate to admit it, but I bought a fixer-upper that weekend. That's how I've lived my life: taking advantage of what comes my way and never looking back.



“The biggest change in ASMS is the technology that we have implemented for the organization and the conference.”

After I moved to Santa Fe, the business started to grow. In the beginning, ASMS had about 1800 members, and the conference attendance was about 1000. Now there are over 8000 members, and the 2018 conference had over 7100 attendees. I added other clients, and within a couple of years, we incorporated as Scientific Association Management (SAM).

What are you most proud of?

The biggest change in ASMS is the technology that we have implemented for the organization and the conference. We have an outstanding mobile app now, and we webcast the oral sessions that thousands of registrants watch. But equally important, we are very detailed in our management of ASMS, and we strive to be friendly and helpful to members who contact us daily by email and phone.

How has ASMS changed over the years?

There has been quite an evolution in how ASMS views the annual conference. In the beginning, they didn't want anything to do with exhibits, for example. It wasn't until 1998 that they allowed table top displays by corporate members. Former ASMS President Graham Cooks argued that "it didn't make sense to come to a mass spectrometry conference and not be able to see a mass spectrometer." That led to exhibit booths. But, to their credit, the ASMS Board has kept the focus on science and education, and they have successfully prevented the conference from becoming a trade show.

I think ASMS has found the right balance between the corporate and the academic worlds, so to speak. Exhibitors are limited to one 10' x 10' booth and share the exhibit hall with a different set of hundreds of posters each day of the conference.

The educational resources provided by ASMS have also changed dramatically with the publication of *JASMS*, the addition of three small focused conferences, and

over 20 short courses. But what has not changed is the commitment of ASMS to keeping the high quality of these resources very affordable.

What do you like to do outside of work?

My life is pretty tied up with work. A typical day for me is working at my computer, making dinner, and watching Netflix mysteries. I also love basketball and am a huge fan of the Golden State Warriors. I am an avid gardener and enjoy tending containers of tomatoes and herbs. I'm not as adventurous in cooking as I used to be as a devotee of Julia Child. I do use short cuts [laughs].

Now that I know I like traveling by sea I am planning more cruises and excursions. I have changed my mind about those ocean liner monstrosities. What is not to like about total relaxation while exotic places come to me?

What do you enjoy most about working with ASMS?

One thing I've noticed over the years is how many young people are involved with the conferences. They start when they are graduate students working at the conference for assistance with expenses. I've seen so many of them progress, winning awards and becoming accomplished scientists. They often share how opportunities provided by ASMS have benefitted their careers.

The other thing that impresses me as a layperson is the sense of community among scientists, particularly those involved with ASMS. I don't know how the average academic scientist manages to keep up with all they need to do: writing grants, mentoring, making presentations. But they are always willing to help by serving on committees to assist with numerous ASMS projects. Some years ago someone commented to me that stock brokers/economists were the smartest of professionals. "Really?? I believe scientists are by far the most brilliant minds and contribute the most to society." It is my pleasure and honor to work with them.