

Memorial: Mary W. Oliver (1919–2005)

¶1 Mary W. Oliver, director of the law library at the University of North Carolina for thirty-two years and former AALL president, died in March 2005 in Chapel Hill after a short illness. Professor Oliver was a mentor to many current law librarians and a role model as an early dual-degree director. Mary was warm, friendly, and well respected, both locally and throughout legal education.

¶2 Ms. Oliver received her library degree from Drexel in 1943 and her JD from the University of North Carolina in 1951. She worked in libraries at Rutgers (1943–45) and Drake (1947–49), and the law library at the University of Virginia (1945–47), before coming to UNC. Ms. Oliver never considered going to law school until after she was a librarian. She worked ten hours per week in the law library for Ms. Lucile Elliott (UNC’s first law librarian) while completing her legal education. When Mary entered law school, there were only ten women in the whole school, and only three graduated with her class. Professor Oliver’s appointment carried faculty status, and she was the first woman on the UNC law faculty. She also trained with Miles Price at Columbia University during the summers and proudly wore the descriptor of “home town girl” which Mr. Price used to describe directors who stayed at one school for their entire careers.

¶3 In September 1952, she became assistant law librarian at UNC despite offers from other academic law libraries. Ms. Elliott would be retiring in a few years, but there was no assurance that Ms. Oliver would replace her. According to Professor Oliver, some members of the faculty thought it would be better to have a man for the job; however, she was appointed as law librarian and assistant professor of law. The university had some hesitation about appointing to the faculty someone whose main responsibility was administration rather than teaching, but the faculty was strongly behind her appointment, especially since she would teach legal bibliography. The law library had only two full-time staff members at that time.

¶4 Ms. Oliver regularly taught legal research and writing, legal history and advanced legal research in the law school, and law librarianship in the School of Information and Library Science.

¶5 Mary was very active in AALL and served as its president in 1972–73. She was a founding member of the Southeastern Chapter of AALL. In 1992, she received the Marian Gould Gallagher Distinguished Service Award. Ms. Oliver said that she found her career to be challenging and rewarding and often stated that she was glad she entered the profession when she did. She enjoyed working with the students and faculty very much and liked the professional contacts both in law librarianship and law teaching.

¶6 Her descriptions of the UNC law library focus on some trying times. She found that the most difficult things about the position were the lack of financial

resources to provide staff, materials, and services that users demanded and the faculty's refusal to permit a security system in the 1968 Van Hecke-Wettach building. There were frequent budget cuts, frozen positions, and holds on spending during those years. Both Ms. Elliott and Dean Henry Brandis (dean when she was assistant law librarian) were supportive and encouraged her to become active not only in AALL but also in the Association of American Law Schools and the American Bar Association at a time when there were not many women in the field as librarians or law professors. In addition to her leadership roles in AALL, she served on the AALS Executive Committee and chaired the Law Library Committee of the American Bar Association. Professor Oliver retired in 1984 after a distinguished career. She was remembered fondly by former students and staff members.

¶7 Mary Oliver could not have been a better mentor. Upon her retirement, she was available to me whenever I sought her counsel but she was determined not to interfere with the running of the library. She was a model of how to retire from a great career and have a happy life. Mary continued to travel all over the world in her retirement and had many friends. Ms. Oliver was wonderful to me and I often described myself as "the new Mary Oliver" at UNC. I can think of no higher praise than to be compared to this outstanding librarian and mentor.—*Laura N. Gasaway*¹

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