

State, Court & County Law Libraries

NEWS

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Chair's Chit Chat A Tale of Two Cities

Charles Dickens' classic *A Tale of Two Cities* opens with the line "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." The tale of two cities that I'd like to share with you has a distinct Dickensian cast. While the setting of my story in Seattle and Omaha may lack the cosmopolitan flavor of the original version's London and Paris, the themes of power, influence, and money also drive the action in my modern SCCLL parallel.



When I accepted the Section gavel from Gail Warren last July, I asked what I could expect. Gail warned me that I would receive requests for our Standards. She also indicated that I should be prepared to field questions about operations in our types of libraries referred by headquarters. To prepare, I copied the Standards and the Section's bylaws and waited for the

phone to ring.

On August 20th, I returned to the library after a meeting to find a voice mail message from a reporter from the Omaha World Herald who wanted me to comment, as SIS Chair, on the fact that the Douglas County Commissioners had informed the county law library that the

county planned to halt their long-standing practice of funding the county law library. This action, if taken, would result in the closing of the library.

A decision would be made within the week. Would I please return the call, asked the reporter.

Before returning the call, I wanted to talk with the librarian. Using my AALL directory and a tip from the Associate Director of the Creighton University Law School Library, I located the name and telephone number of Ann Borer, the county law librarian.

What happened next is

the hook that ties this tale to this issue's theme of mentoring. While you might expect me to talk next about how a seasoned county law librarian led a junior law librarian through the mine field that is a local funding campaign, the reality of our shared story is not that simple. Our tale of two cities does, however,

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much more closely approximate the peer to peer mentoring model that SIS Membership and Mentoring Committee Chair Donna Bausch promotes in her article following this column.

Over the following three months, Ann and I have kept in touch. We have discussed strategies, provided encouragement, shared documents, and generally commiserated about the difficulties funding authorities have in opening their pocketbooks to adequately support public law library service. My interest in helping Ann became less theoretical and more urgent very quickly.

Two weeks after Ann and I first talked, I met with our county budget analyst and learned that King County's 1999 budget included an appropriation to our law library that was just over 1/5 of what we had requested. The practical impact for us would be the closing of our new branch library, unless we could convince the county council to increase the amount of the appropriation.

In the weeks since our first conversation, Ann and I have both experienced qualified successes in our budget lobbying efforts. Her library and our branch will still be open after the first of the year. We both found that our patrons, when asked, were more than willing to lobby on our behalf. Each of us faces real challenges to identify long-term funding solutions. One thing we both learned to appreciate as never before in this tale of two cities was that even in the worst of times, a peer can provide the practical and moral support to keep you going until times are better.

Most of us in state, court, county, and government agency libraries work in library environments with few employees.

The classical mentoring model doesn't work. Mentoring most often happens across department lines, and as in the case of Ann and me, across wide geographic boundaries. Mentoring in our libraries involves the sharing of information and support. Coaching and validation flows between the parties. In our environments, success is defined relationship by relationship. Many of us would confess to serial mentoring, as we develop a wide group of peer to peer mentor relationships over the course of our professional careers.

The Membership and Mentoring Committee hopes to develop an approach which will provide opportunities for the development of mentoring teams. The SIS will be exploring avenues to provide more structured training for peer to peer mentors. Because mentoring opportunities build strong libraries, we believe that they will also contribute to the strengthening of SCCLL as an organization responsible to its members' needs.

*Jean Holcomb, SCCLL Chair
King County Law Library, Seattle, WA*

Mentoring -- Now More Than Ever

In recent years, the AALL Mentor Project has experienced a diminution of participation. There are always enough experienced librarians who are willing to serve as mentors, but fewer and fewer librarians early in their career, or new to their type of library, who seek mentoring.

Why is this the case? My theory is that there is a growing perception that newer law librarians feel too busy and pressured to take the leap. Perhaps more im-



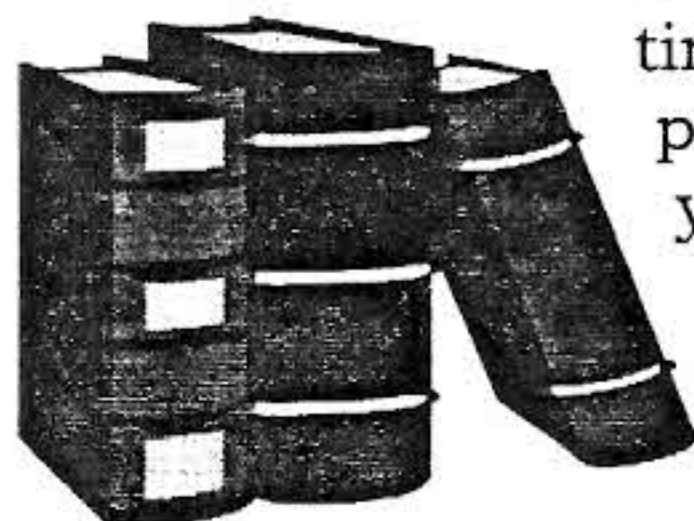
portantly, newer law librarians believe that whenever they need input, advice or reference assistance, they can simply turn to LAW-LIB or the SCCLL listserv and their concerns will be addressed. Although these forums have proven to be indispensable sources for the exchange of information and ideas, they do not lend themselves to a considered discussion in which different approaches to an issue can be weighed for relative merit.

Well, we are all busier than ever. Lifelong learning is no longer an ideal toward which we strive but a necessary reality. Listservs and Web sites have made us more productive and efficient and raised the bar of our customers' expectations.

One thing, however, has not changed. We still need each other--perhaps more than ever. And, in this most communitarian of professions, we need to know each other to do the best job we can. Our colleagues remain our best resource.

It is wonderful to get a concern addressed by an instant panel of experts on a listserv. However, it is also wonderfully affirming to turn to a mentor colleague with whom an established relationship based on mutual respect and trust has developed, and really hash out an issue.

I am not advocating any single method of developing professional support systems. What I do urge everyone to do, however, is to continue to nurture the professional bonds you have developed or to get out there and make some contacts if you



have not done so.

If the AALL Mentor Project does not appeal to you, locate and identify some "peer mentors." My peer mentor relation-

"We need to know each other to do the best job we can. Our colleagues remain our best resource."

ships have developed by accident over the years, but are included in my most valuable personal and professional relationships. In library school, the first of my peer mentoring relationships began with a couple of friends who remain among my best friends today. From our first jobs as students, to our first professional positions and later when two of the three of us moved on to different cities and types of law libraries, we have continued to call on one another for periodic reality checks, pep talks, and serious career advice. Over the course of sixteen years, we have always been there for one another. As each of us learned a new research trick, piece of law library news, or CALR tip, we'd rush to share them. When we tried to decide whether to take a new job or how to handle a problem customer, we had a built-in group of consultants who knew not just the situation but also our personalities. I wouldn't trade the relationship I have with these peer mentors for anything. We learned the ropes of the profession together and the bonds which unite us are strong because of shared experiences and perspectives.

There have been times when only someone senior to me in the profession could provide the professional advice I sought. Times when this type of mentoring proved most useful were when I moved

