Inspired by her librarian mother and legal publishing father, Madeline Cohen’s path to law librarianship seemed like a logical evolution. Now, having worked for several years in both the government and academic sectors, her knowledge of what it takes to succeed in the ever-changing legal environment is crucial to the law students she teaches in the classroom. Although the shift of moving from the courts to the classroom wasn’t an easy transition, her connections with colleagues from the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) helped arm her with the knowledge she needed to effectively take on her new role.
Madeline Cohen received her BA in French in 1990 and earned her MLIS from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1992. “I had originally thought about going to law school, but life sort of took me in a different direction,” said Cohen. Instead, she worked as a public librarian for a time and did a lot of research-related things, but always ended up flirting with law librarianship.

“I worked for a state legislator doing research, policy research, and writing speeches. After a while, I finally dipped my toe in the water and made the decision to go to law school,” said Cohen. She attended school at night and worked at a public library during the day, but the hours weren’t fitting into her schedule. Her first taste at law librarian work came as an accident. “I talked with someone at the law library, and once they realized I had a library degree, they decided to hire me and put me on the reference desk,” recalls Cohen. Cohen served as a reference librarian at the University of Denver Westminster Law Library from 2000–2004. She earned her JD from the University of Denver Sturm College of Law in 2003. After her time at Denver, Cohen transitioned over to a government position working as a policy analyst with the National Conference of State Legislatures from 2005–2007. She then moved to a higher position at the U.S. Courts Library for the Tenth Circuit in Denver, serving as the director and circuit librarian, a position she held for 10 years. Cohen currently serves as the assistant director for the Westminster Law Library and as associate professor in University Libraries at the University of Denver. Her scholarly interests include mediation, library management, health law and policy, and governmental systems.

After joining AALL in 2007, Cohen has been active on several committees and in special interest sections (SISs), including the Academic Law Libraries SIS and Research Instruction & Patron Services SIS. Her committee work includes serving as a member of the Nominations Committee (2016–2018), the Annual Meeting Program Committee (2012–2013), the Council of Chapter Presidents (2014–2015), and the Government Relations Committee (2008–2011). She is also the past president of the Colorado Association of Law Libraries.

Here, she discusses the qualities that make up an effective leader, the importance of advocating for yourself and your organization, and the impact AALL has had on her career.

What inspired your career path?
I think it was probably my parents. My mom was a school librarian and my dad was in legal publishing for many years. I think I went to my first AALL Annual Meeting when I was five or six years old with my dad. I think just being around that environment, being raised in a household of readers and researchers inspired my path.

You used to be a government law librarian, what inspired you to switch over to academics?
I had been thinking about making the switch for a while. I really liked my job with the court, but it had increasingly become very administrative and I had lost a lot of the ability to do some of the initial library-related work—the research and the heavy library lifting that I had done at the beginning. I wanted to be more involved in the creation of materials and working directly with patrons.

What are the qualities that make up an effective leader?
The two qualities that I always come back to and that are the most important for me are 1) not being afraid to fail, and 2) leading by example. If you expect people around you to do the things that you want them to do, you have to
show them that it’s a worthwhile endeavor. You also need to ensure buy-in. Change is hard for everyone to embrace—I’ve seen this time and time again, from when I was director at the court to my position as assistant director at my institution. Change is hard, and libraries are constantly evolving. If there is a way to encourage buy-in from librarians and stakeholders in your organization, you will be able to more efficiently manage change.

What do you enjoy most about your job?
At this point, it really is working with the students. I hadn’t really taught in the way I do now for a long time, and I wasn’t sure how I would feel about it. But I really love being in the classroom and helping the students outside of the classroom.

What role has AALL played in your career?
AALL has done a lot of really great things for me. I joined AALL in 2007 when I first got to the court. I started going to conferences and attending webinars, which was really helpful for me to make connections in the industry. Even though I had been a librarian for a long time, I didn’t really know the ins and outs of the law librarian world. I presented at the 2009 AALL Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, and that opened up a whole new world for me. I am so grateful to AALL for giving me the opportunity as a very new law librarian to present on a topic that was important to me. I have run for various offices and various special interest section positions and I feel like it’s a good symbiotic relationship—AALL does a lot for me and I love to give back to the organization.

What’s the advantage of joining an association such as AALL for law librarians or even students?
In addition to all of the educational opportunities available to you, there are so many networking opportunities available. There is the in-person conference, but also listservs and even having the opportunity to email people for advice both inside and outside your library type; that kind of networking is invaluable. I reach out to people constantly in this field because my switch from government to academia was a new, huge career shift for me and there were a lot of things about academia that I did not understand, so I’ve relied very heavily on relationships that I’ve made through AALL to answer some questions for me. I would tell new librarians and students to jump in with both feet and make those relationships. Even if you can’t travel to conferences, figure out a way to make relationships with other librarians because they will serve you well for your entire career.

What advice would you give to those looking to advocate for themselves or their libraries?
That’s a really good question, and the answer is somewhat different depending on what kind of institution you’re in. When I was in the court, a lot of our decisions were budget-driven and a lot of the judges and the court staff didn’t really understand what librarians do on a daily basis, or what we could do for them. So, you were constantly having to try and educate people about what librarians do and what we can do. There is a very different attitude about the library in academia. Law schools realize how integral the library is to the law school. But I think it is really important to constantly educate people about

Superpower you wish you had? Teleportation! I have so many friends who live far away from me and I would love to be able to just go into my basement, get into my teleporter, and be there in a matter of seconds as opposed to having to fly across the country to see my friends.

Words to live by? I go back to something that my father said to me a long time ago, “Don’t hit the send button right away.” Don’t make rash decisions. You can be angry, but always take a little bit of time to think about it before you react.

Favorite TV show to binge watch? My daughter and I really like to binge on cooking shows and cooking competition shows. We recently binge-watched a show on Netflix called Zumbo’s Just Desserts; it’s very entertaining.

Favorite weekend getaway? I live in one of the most beautiful states in the country, so it’s kind of hard to choose, but I think Glenwood Springs, Colorado, is my favorite weekend getaway.

Favorite book or author? I mostly read nonfiction, particularly political nonfiction. I think my favorite fiction book that I’ve recently read is The Girl Who Fell from the Sky by Heidi W. Durrow, and a favorite classic author would be William Faulkner.
what the library can do. Everyone knows about basic things that libraries offer, but tell them about the value-added tasks that librarians do.

**What skills do law students need to be successful in today’s workplace?**

I think students need to be very flexible. I cannot overstate the importance of being able to hit the ground running and do high-level legal research. I have noticed recent grads coming back and telling us how important the legal research skills we taught them have been to their success in their internships or jobs. The skills we teach are invaluable. I think having basic legal research skills first and foremost is so important for students to be successful throughout law school and later in their careers.

**What lessons have you gained through the leadership roles you’ve held?**

There are so many things that I’ve learned from these types of leadership roles. I think there’s a lot of opportunity for teamwork. I have gained a lot of knowledge about different areas of librarianship and law librarianship through the leadership roles that I’ve held in AALL, as well as the leadership roles I’ve held at the court. Librarianship is one of those professions where I think you’re constantly learning and staying ahead of the curve when it comes to technology or tools on the market. When you are participating in these leadership roles, it is also important to listen, not always lead, but listen and learn from the other people that are in similar roles. Through my participation in AALL, I have learned how to be a better team player. I’ve also learned how to give presentations to large groups of people.

**What career advice would you give to newer law librarians?**

We have actually been doing a lot of hiring here at the University of Denver, so I’ve seen a lot of newer law librarians come through. I think it’s important to set yourself apart. There are a lot of very talented people in the pool right now and jobs are getting a little more plentiful—for a while they were a little scarce. Get those value-added skills, whether it’s in research or providing reference or teaching or technology. I think getting those sort of niche skills is really important right now because a lot of institutions are cutting back on their staff. They want people to be able to do more than just a pigeonhole job. They want you to be able to do two or three or four different things in any position. So, the best advice I could offer would be to diversify your skills portfolio.

**What would you tell new members about getting involved in AALL?**

I would say that the time commitment is totally worth it. I know sometimes getting involved can seem daunting with all the different opportunities that AALL provides, but if your institutions allow it and you can make the time commitment, I would say jump in headfirst. There are so many opportunities to take advantage of, so don’t pass up additional opportunities to learn new things and meet new people.

Also, be willing to go outside of your comfort zone. It was really scary for me to submit a program proposal for the AALL Annual Meeting, having only been in the profession for a year and a half at the time. However, I jumped in and did it and was excited when my proposal was chosen. If I had been too afraid and said, “Oh no, I’ll never get picked,” I never would have had that opportunity. So, I think it benefits you to push yourself outside your comfort zone when it comes to getting involved.