

LEADER PROFILE

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES & PUSHING THROUGH

Throughout his career, Steven P. Anderson, past president of the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL), has had to overcome many obstacles. After being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2007, things such as walking straight across a room have become difficult and challenging. But through it all, Anderson persists and continues to work, serving legal professionals and helping unrepresented litigants understand and gain access to the legal system. "I was in love with law librarianship from the first day," notes Anderson. It is that love that helps him continue to keep pushing through no matter what.



“I was not interested in a career in law librarianship until I became essentially a law librarian,” notes Anderson. He had been working in libraries for a number of years and eventually moved on to shelving books at his college library. After college he worked for the U.S. Forest Service Library at the University of California Berkeley for two years. After receiving his JD from the University of Maryland in 1995, he began looking for potential jobs. “I had been in environmental law when I found a job that seemed tailor-made for me at the Baltimore County Circuit Court Law Library,” recalls Anderson. “The job required a JD—or rather, a JD with significant library experience—or an MLS. I interviewed and got the job, and after that there was no looking back.” After a few months, his boss at the time, Betsy Sanderson, encouraged

“I was in love with librarianship from the first day.”

Steven P. Anderson

him to get his Master’s, so he attended the University of Arizona and completed his MLS in August of 1998.

Anderson began his career as a law librarian by serving as director of research services at Gordon Feinblatt Rothman Hoffberger & Hollander LLC, from 1998-2005. After that, he transitioned over to the government side of law librarianship, becoming director of the Maryland State Law Library (now the Maryland Thurgood Marshall State Law Library), a position he has held for 15 years.

A member of the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) since 1996, Anderson has been active in the Government Relations Special Interest Section (SIS) and the Legal History & Rare Books SIS and is a member of the Law Librarian Association of Maryland. He

currently serves as a member of the Committee on Relations with Information Vendors, and he served on the Executive Board as president from 2013-2014.

Here, he talks about his struggles working with Parkinson’s disease, and why access to justice is so important.

Tell us about your professional journey—from assistant/associate librarian to director.

I was an associate librarian in Baltimore County. And that was pretty good because although we did some filing, it wasn’t the biggest thing we did. We did a lot of reference and reference projects and things like that. I then moved on to Gordon Feinblatt Rothman Hoffberger & Hollander, LLC, where I was the director of the library. It was a small library and there were three of us, but it was a lot more project oriented. I look back on those days very fondly. Then in 2005, when the state law library position became available, I applied and got the job, and I’ve been very happy here ever since.

What’s the biggest challenge you face in your current position?

It is probably no surprise, but dealing with Parkinson’s disease and working is a challenge in just about every way. Modulating my voice when talking to people is one of them. Another is walking straight across my office without leaning one way or the other, or taking a misstep and having to almost run because, when you have Parkinson’s, you tend to keep doing what your brain has told you to keep doing, which is either to not do something or to do something. In my case, the part of the brain that tells me to do things is switched on, so for example, if I start running my brain tells me to keep running, and I can’t stop.

You won the AALL Mersky Spirit of Law Librarianship Award for Public Service for your work with Parkinson’s Disease in 2017. Can you speak about your work and how being diagnosed with the disease led you to this commitment to public service?

The words public service really exemplify what the profession of librarianship is all about. We are a public service institution whether we like it or not. That means you should be a public servant in just about every aspect of your life. I still get calls to be on trials and stuff like that. I can’t

STEVEN P. ANDERSON

- DIRECTOR
- THURGOOD MARSHALL STATE LAW LIBRARY
- ANNAPOLIS, MD

QUICK HITS WITH STEVEN P. ANDERSON

**Favorite TV show to binge watch?**

The Great British Baking Show

Favorite travel destination?

U.S. Virgin Islands

Guilty pleasure?

Oh gosh, probably eating my wife's chocolate cake. She makes it with pumpkin, black beans, and cocoa. Her father still doesn't know what's in it, although he just loves it. And I've come to love it too, and I could just eat the whole thing up right now.

Superpower you wish you had?

I wish I never got tired and I never slept.

Words to live by?

"You think about what you are doing." This is something that my son said to me when he was a toddler. I was using those words—you think about what you are doing—to get him to think of not doing bad things like putting

things in an electric plug and stuff like that. I got very mad at him one day, unjustly so, for doing something. I don't know what it was. He told me "you think about what you are doing," to get back at me for whatever it was that I was preventing him from doing unjustly. And he called me on it. And I think we all need to think about what we are doing.

do it any longer because of the brain stimulation surgery I had in 2014, when I was president of AALL. But it made me want to give back to the community.

During your AALL presidency, access to justice (A2J) was a major focus for you and you remain active on A2J issues. Why is access to justice such an important priority for you and for the profession?

I think it's because the law is so far away from so many people. If you want to find out more about the coronavirus, all you need to do is type in "coronavirus" and you've got an answer, whether it's from Google or a database online at your local public library. You type in "adult guardianship" in the same platforms—Google and the databases used at the public library—and you should be getting 50 different results from 50 different states. But you're not. And that's very frustrating for many people. We have an obligation to make legal research easier for everyone. It's that public service thing again. You want to make sure that you're serving the public and all its needs. When it comes to access

to justice issues, it's impossible for most people to get the information they need without some kind of extra help. I think we're the best people in the courthouse to provide that, because you might have self-help attorneys who are partners in libraries, but they don't necessarily do all that we do in terms of keeping the right books on the shelves or subscribing to the right databases or conducting the right searches.

Your law library was renamed in fall 2019 as the Thurgood Marshall State Law Library, in honor of civil rights icon Thurgood Marshall. How did the name change come about?

It came about because of the Senator here in Annapolis, Maryland, Douglas J.J. Peters. He paid a visit to our courthouse sometime in the fall of 2018. He looked around and considered the shape that the building was in and decided that he was going to change the name of the library from the Maryland State Law Library to Thurgood Marshall State Law Library. There was some back and forth on that because we needed to keep the state name in there to ensure our law library wouldn't be confused with the University of Maryland Thurgood Marshall Law Library, which is about 30 miles up the road in Baltimore City. Once that issue was worked out, we were all in.

The name change ceremony reinvigorated the staff and patrons in the area. Name changes, when done correctly, are a good thing and can bring about positive attention to the work and offerings that the law library provides.

Back in 2015, as AALL's Immediate Past President, you testified in support of HB 162, the Maryland Uniform Electronic Legal Material Act (UELMA). What was that experience like? Why is UELMA important for states to enact?

A funny thing happened that day. Right before I was scheduled to attend, my back got very sore. I had some kind of herniated disc in my back. Just reaching out to take a piece of paper that someone was handing to me put me in tremendous pain. But participating in the legislative process was fun. It was handled very professionally. The senators were very receptive and very professional. So that gave us hope that access—at least to Maryland State government—is very easy, and that it will continue to be that easy. It was a good time.

UELMA is pretty critical to building a 50-state reservoir of legal information, because without that, we're kind of flying blind and

hoping that people are using the right material. If it's material that's already in a UELMA state, you can basically be assured that the material is good and usable.

What's the value of attending the AALL Annual Meeting?

I think it's invaluable. You get to meet so many new people and see so many older faces that you know. I have come to have deep relationships with my fellow law librarians whom I have met at the AALL Annual Meeting.

What career advice do you give to new law librarians?

If law librarianship isn't something you love from the get-go, think about getting out. I don't really know how to phrase it better than that. But you can tell if it's for you from the second you're behind the reference desk or the second you're behind your organization's website or in front of the catalog. You'll know if this career is right for you, and you can continue on and make AALL and the local chapter part of your everyday life.

What do you wish everyone knew about law librarians?

I wish everybody knew what we contribute to the legal information world. Just because so many things are online doesn't mean it's *all* online. And it doesn't mean that it's easy to find. My library was open yesterday with a skeletal staff and we already had two "thwunk" emails. A thwunk email is like when you appear with a stack full of papers that show you're doing a great job and you go *thwunk* on the boss's desk with them, saying "look at all this stuff that I've done right." Two different people yesterday commented how grateful they were because right now there is no other place to get any information. We're one of the very few libraries that is still open.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

The fact that it's always changing. I like being able to work on a research project, then make a human resources decision, and then answer a catalog question, or something like that. I like the diversity of the work.

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