



LEADER PROFILE  
**PROMOTING  
DIVERSITY &  
INCLUSION  
WITHIN THE  
PROFESSION**

Mentors can have a positive effect on your professional life, but every now and then, they can even open the door to a career you never considered. A chance conversation with her mentor, early in her career, put **Nichelle “Nikki” Perry** on the path to a career in law librarianship. A career that eventually led to her present position as law library director at her alma mater—North Carolina Central University (NCCU) School of Law—and gave her the opportunity to work at a HBCU (Historically Black College and University) and continue to promote diversity and inclusion within the profession.

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**– Nichelle “Nikki” Perry**

After graduating from law school, Perry served as a judicial law clerk for North Carolina Court of Appeals Judge Clifton Johnson. Subsequently, she joined the staff of NCCU’s law school. “I was working at NCCU as the director of academic support, and I needed to figure out what my next move was going to be,” said Perry. “The director of the law library at that time, Deborah Jefferies, kind of suggested that I take a look at law librarianship as something to move into.” It was a win-win for Perry, who was able to enroll in library science classes at the NCCU Library School, and, in turn, the university provided tuition remission. She was also able to enjoy the benefits of being mentored by Jefferies. “Law librarianship was a really good fit and it ended up being one of the best decisions that I’ve ever made,” said Perry.

#### **NICHELLE “NIKKI” PERRY**

- LAW LIBRARY DIRECTOR
- ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
- NORTH CAROLINA CENTRAL UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW LIBRARY
- DURHAM, NC

While taking her library school classes, she was able to work as an adjunct professor teaching legal research. She completed her MLS degree in 1997, and officially became a law librarian in 2005. Her first position was as the reference and instructional librarian at the NCCU Law Library. Thereafter, she served as the reference/electronic services librarian at the Kathrine R. Everett Law Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. While she was working at Chapel Hill, her mentor, Deborah Jefferies, retired. “I wasn’t quite ready to serve in a director role, but was asked to consider applying for the assistant director position,” recalls Perry. “I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to return to my alma mater and work my way up the ladder. So, that’s what afforded me the opportunity to become an assistant law library director pretty early on in my career.” In 2014, Perry was hired as director. At NCCU, she teaches Advanced Legal Research and Law Practice Technology. She also serves on several regional and national library committees and is a member of the North Carolina State Bar.

Since becoming an American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) member in 2005, she has been active on the Diversity & Inclusion Committee, Innovations in Technology Award Jury, and is a member of the Black Law Librarians Special Interest Section (SIS), the Academic Law Libraries SIS, the Legal Innovation & Technology SIS, and the Research Instruction & Patron Services SIS. She has also been active with the South Eastern Chapter of the American Association of Law Libraries, serving as secretary from 2014-2016, a member of the Annual Meeting Program Committee in 2017, and a member of the Diversity & Inclusion Committee from 2018-2020.

Here, Perry discusses the importance of diversity and inclusion, how law libraries can demonstrate their value, and the role AALL has played in her career.

#### **Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, what new challenges is your law library facing right now?**

What isn’t a challenge right now? Besides the obvious—budgets, staff morale, and everything being different, communication has been a challenge, specifically developing interpersonal relationships with students. Prior to COVID-19, we relied heavily on

## QUICK HITS WITH NICHELLE "NIKKI" PERRY

**Words to live by?**

I have "Be still" tattooed on my wrist.

**Best book you recently read?**

I have two: *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett and *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* by Brené Brown. Brown can do no wrong in my eyes right now—I love her work.

**Guilty pleasure?**

Peanut M&Ms and wine. There's not a day when I don't eat peanut M&Ms.

**Favorite way to unwind after a long day?**

I phone a friend on the way home from work. There's a group of five of us that like to talk on our way home. If I don't reach one of them, then I just phone a random friend to catch up with. Then it's much easier to not bring work home so I can enjoy an "empty nest" dinner with my husband, a practicing attorney.

**Favorite quarantine activity?**

My Peloton! I've got to put in a plug for the Peloton law librarians' group, too. Join us!

**Favorite movie?**

*Hidden Figures.*

**Song or musician that always lifts your spirits?**

It's '80s dance music, like house music, and then early '80s rap. Who doesn't love LL Cool J, Eric B. & Rakim, right?!

HBCU for almost my entire career, and my entire career has focused on promoting diversity and inclusion in the field of law and law librarianship. I know that AALL has always recognized diversity and inclusion as being important, but it hasn't always been a topic that's in the forefront of conversations. One of my first AALL committee appointments was to the Diversity & Inclusion Committee in 2008, and we have come a long way since then. As a legal information profession, we have been trying to figure out how to promote and support diversity for a very long time. Now that there is a renewed and refreshed conversation surrounding diversity, I hope that we can effect some real change.

**How are law librarians uniquely positioned to make a difference in their law schools?**

We are information gatherers and information providers. We've been showing people that we have the tools and resources to push knowledge and information forward for quite a while now. But the thing that comes to mind most readily is our use of legal research products like Springshare's LibGuides and LibSeats (the newest product that everyone is using this year). LibGuides allow for non-static communication. You can embed videos, images, and your message in a quick and easy format. Law librarians have been using these tools and many others like them for a long time, but now we can share them with our colleagues.

**What are you most proud of as a library leader?**

That I am here. That I'm representing not only myself as a woman of color, but I'm also representing my institution as a woman of color. Also, my mentor and former director, Deborah Jefferies, who is also a woman of color, encouraged me to join this profession and this organization, and encouraged

the library as a space to spread our message and develop relationships with students about resources and communication. We connected with them using the physical law library space. Our staff offices are on the perimeter of the library itself, so, when I left my office, I could see all of the students who were using the study rooms or spaces.

If I saw the same student studying at 11:00 a.m. Monday through Friday, that means I could say "Hey, you're at your usual spot" or "What's for lunch today?" or "What are you studying today?" or "Hey, I see you're studying XYZ, have you thought about this?" It's a really good way to develop relationships and interject yourself into what they're doing. We have been

operating our classes remotely all year. Our building is open for access but with a lot of precautions—social distancing, masks—yet very few students are coming into the library. It's very hard to engage in small talk with someone six feet apart wearing a mask. This lack of interaction due to COVID-19 has meant that we are now communicating with students over email, and we are trying to find new and additional ways to connect with them.

**Is there something that's made you particularly hopeful and optimistic about the many D&I conversations now happening among the AALL membership?**

The very fact that they are now happening. I have been part of a

participation in AALL. So, I get to stand on her shoulders and represent her as well as other women of color in this profession and in this leadership role. Further, I get to pay it forward, and hopefully students will see me in this role and will realize that this is something that they can do as well.

### **How has participation in AALL impacted your career and/or leadership capabilities?**

I think the AALL community has had an amazing impact on my career and leadership capabilities. I have never called a law librarian in my career who didn't make time for me, even people who I didn't know have always been willing to share their resources, their time, and their knowledge. I feel like AALL not only supports you professionally but also personally. When I attended my first AALL Annual Meeting, I met some great people in the exhibit hall while at the attendee lunch; we bonded over programs we had attended. It's was a great way to make new friends and meet new mentors. These collaborative relationships are born out of the networking opportunities that you develop through AALL and the Annual Meeting.

### **How do you stay engaged and passionate about your work?**

I remember my purpose. I love what I do because there is always something new to learn. The profession is always evolving, and I want to learn it all. So, I try and remember why I'm here and what my job is. And once you remember that you're here for the faculty and the students, especially the students, you've got to love it. I feel like you can't let them go into the world without providing them with the tools they need to succeed.

When it comes to my students, I have to prepare them not only for jobs in the legal community, but also for the world. I want my students to succeed in their careers and in their lives.

I've noticed that it's harder to stay connected as you move up in administration. Therefore, I have to make time to step out of my office during the day to make sure I stay engaged with my staff, the students, and faculty, as well as the public patrons. As a director, it is easy to get bogged down in budgets and administration and who does what. But you must take the time to talk to and interact with others around you, especially the students, to remain passionate about the work you do.

### **What can law librarians do to showcase their contributions and accomplishments?**

Be present and be loud about what you're bringing to the table. I think that a lot of students and/or faculty members don't realize what librarians do or what they can do. This includes tooting your own horn when you make small accomplishments. Make sure your law school or organization knows what you do and don't hide it. Also participate in things such as student luncheons or a Women's Law Caucus event. If you're interested in breast cancer awareness and the students are having a breast cancer awareness luncheon or talk, go. Encourage your staff to go. Let the students see you as human and allow them to get to know what you do and what the library can offer.

### **In your experience, what makes for a productive, happy staff?**

This has taken me many years to get right. The first thing I am going to say is to respect your staff and make time for them. Again, you can go into your office and just leave this to your managers, or you can make the effort to get to know your staff and check in with them. This is something I miss doing since the pandemic. I miss the morning drop-in—when I would come into the library, drop my stuff in my office, and walk around with my coffee to say good morning to everyone.

Second, let your staff see you, not just as the boss, but as a person. We all have good days and bad days and it's important to allow staff to see that you're human and that you, too, make mistakes.

### **Describe your perfect day, post-pandemic.**

For me, it's an early morning workout, followed by a blend of things. A good morning meeting where people are generating new ideas and we're moving the library agenda forward. A good class full of interactions with my students—which is sometimes hard to make happen. Sharing something about the library with another faculty member or a colleague. I think all of this is perfect for me because it's a good blend of everything that I love. It's the administrative functions, the teaching, and the interactions with the students that make my job so rewarding.

### **What do you enjoy most about your job?**

Training this next generation of lawyers who are socially conscious, and being a part of a HBCU. I enjoy working at an institution that knows its purpose. I know what this law school meant to me as a student; the professors invested in my education and took the time to help me grow. Many of those professors are now my colleagues and friends. I love being a part of an institution that is like a family and creates a real community. ■

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 Professionalism + Leadership At Every Level