A first-career law librarian, Sarah K. C. Mauldin never passes up the opportunity to volunteer to help others succeed. Having served as a library director since she was 26 years old, she has learned a thing or two about effective management and leadership. Here, Mauldin talks leadership, outsourcing in law firm libraries, and offers sound advice for younger law librarians looking to take on future leadership roles.

A
fter earning her MLIS from the University of Texas at Austin, Sarah K. C. Mauldin thought finding her dream library job would come easy—it didn’t. “Turns out, not having a JD was a major problem at the time,” she recalls. “I actually received the meanest rejection letter from a University I applied to that went something like, ‘You are so unqualified for this position, why did you even apply?’ which was harsh but it got me looking around for something that would fit.” What she found was a large private law firm (with 80 attorneys) in Las Vegas that was looking for a reference librarian. “I was supposed to be the reference librarian, but the librarian who was the director was pregnant at the time and ended up quitting by August. So I became the director and the only law firm librarian in the state,” Mauldin says.
How did Mauldin take on a role she wasn’t quite prepared for? She used the resources at her disposal, such as her American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) membership, her schooling, and her experiences working in other libraries.

An AALL member since 2001, Mauldin has been active on several committees, serving as vice chair of the Bylaws and Resolutions Committee, as a member of the Access to Justice Special Committee, and as a member-at-large for SEAALL (Southeastern Chapter of the American Association of Law Libraries). She was also recently chair of the Emerging Leader Award Jury. In addition, she is also a member of several special interest sections (SIS), including: Legal Information Services to the Public SIS, Private Law Librarians & Information Professionals SIS, and Research Instruction & Patron Services SIS.

After having spent a little over three years in Las Vegas (or as Mauldin refers to it, her Babylonian Captivity), she finally made her way back to her hometown as the first Atlanta librarian of a Texas firm with a specialty in tax controversy and then to her current position as director of library services for Smith, Gambrell & Russell, LLP. “I love that I get to do what I do every day,” Mauldin says. “If you’re not passionate and grateful to be doing what you do, it might be time to look for something different.”

How did you initially enter the field?
By accident! I kept changing majors—I went from pre-pharmacy through political science and public administration before landing in Letters (History, Philosophy, Literature, and Languages). I decided I liked archives after working at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta as an unpaid summer intern. Carter hosted an archives institute every summer with Dr. David Gracy (at one point he was the state archivist of Georgia), who served as an instructor. He was a professor at the University of Texas in Austin, and when I met him, he was the biggest evangelist for archives in the world. He loved it, so I decided I had to go to school with him even though I was attending the University of Oklahoma at the time.

Not long after, while working at the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and starting school, I had an introductory class with the dean of the library school, who at the time was Roberta Shaffer, who went on to become Law Librarian of Congress. She told us a story about the work she had done at Covington & Burling and I thought, ‘I want to do that, how do I do that?’ So with Shaffer’s guidance, I put a program together for myself on legal librarianship.

Describe one thing you’ve done to demonstrate your library’s value (to those who make decisions about the library’s future)?
Some of it is being very good at what I do. I take on projects that aren’t necessarily library projects, but are for the good of the firm. However, the biggest way I demonstrate my value is through the work I do onboarding new and summer associates. My firm has given me the opportunity to spend two hours training associates instead of the usual 10 to 20 minutes that many other librarians get. In the end, the associates look better and I have a wonderful selection of attorneys who understand when to seek my assistance, because eventually, they will be the leaders of the firm. The work I do with them is the most visible value I can show. With only two librarians and 200 attorneys at my firm, there isn’t much time for marketing and strategic planning in days filled with reference, research, and keeping the bills paid.

“I’m the girl that can’t say no to something. I love the learning aspect—there is always someone who knows something I don’t know, and they are willing to share that with me. It’s amazing!” Sarah K. C. Mauldin

SARAH K. C. MAULDIN
- DIRECTOR OF LIBRARY SERVICES
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What are the qualities that make up an effective leader?

An effective leader needs to be willing to ask people to do things, delegate tasks, and stay on top of the issues. A leader needs to be willing to get in there and do the work. I have always appreciated leaders that are willing to do the same work that I am—they aren't above any tasks. I don't know that I always do all of these things, but I appreciate these qualities in leaders. It's also important to understand that you don't know everything—be willing to appreciate the fact that someone might know more about something than you do. Every now and then you're going to need to reach out to someone who knows more. You have to be willing to look dumb sometimes, and be willing to accept consequences when things don't work out as you planned.

What do you see as the biggest challenges facing law firm librarians?

Our biggest challenge, and this is probably unpopular to say, is ourselves. We are willing to bellyache about what's wrong, that people are taking all our tasks away—yes, this is all true. But instead of moaning about it, take the issue and turn it into something that makes your firm understand why your work matters. Be willing to do things on your own time and on your own dime to make yourself better at what you do.

From a law firm standpoint, getting people to understand the balance of print and online—and that even if something costs more, there may be value in purchasing it—is a constant struggle. Intellectual property law is in all four of my offices; but I can't have the print of everything in every office. The goal is to provide the same services to people in outlying offices without spending any more money. You need to shepherd people through what's best for the firm and the future of the firm. I've gotten better at saying no and to get people to really think through their requests. Is this $36,000 purchase worth it, even though it will help us in only one specific area, or can we find something else?

Outsourcing is also a huge challenge. It raises the question, what about our value? How can someone who doesn't know the attorneys provide the same level of service? Having a professional law librarian who understands your firm's business can't be replaced. I am not upset that outsourcing companies exist; I only wish they were doing more to build the profession—going in and showing smaller firms how a librarian can help them rein in costs, get the right mix of materials for the firm's practices, and assist the attorneys to become more efficient and effective researchers and advocates. If they did that, I would cheer all day for outsourcing because that's growing the profession instead of taking people out of their jobs. Even if people get their jobs back, the relationship dynamic has changed.

What are two of the most valuable lessons you have learned in the leadership positions you have held?

I have chaired several AALL committees, I was the president of Atlanta Law Libraries Association from 2008-2009, and I was an officer in SEAALL. I'm also really active in the Georgia Library Association; it's as important to know what's happening in your state as it is in the law itself. Put things on your calendar and make them yell at you. Don't be afraid to ask people to do things they may have not have done before or think they are not capable of doing. This is a volunteer organization; we are all qualified to do something. Always remember, people like to be asked, they want
someone to recognize them as an expert and seek out their assistance. I have also run and lost a lot of elections—I’ve lost two AALL elections, two SIS elections, and one at Special Libraries Association. If you’ve run and lost an election, get over the disappointment quickly. Focus your efforts on all the other things you now can do.

**Have you held any leadership positions outside of the industry?**
I’m a graduate of DeKalb Leadership, class of 2013. I have served as secretary of the Board of Directors of 7 Stages Theatre (a professional theater company in Atlanta). In August, I met with the executive director and a board member of DeKalb Library Foundation to be a member of their growing board. I’ve been the vice president and learning ministry chair at my church in Las Vegas, and have served as learning ministry chair and treasurer at my church in Atlanta. I also do a lot of volunteer work. In January, the city of Decatur and Decatur Preservation Alliance are celebrating 15 years of making repairs for low-income senior homeowners that will help them remain in their homes safely for as long as possible. I act as materials coordinator, a sort of reference librarian for home improvement. I sit at Lowe’s and get calls from people at houses for things like lumber, as volunteers find new problems under the problems they are trying to fix. I end up doing a reference interview to get to what the caller really needs. I am also a longtime stage captain for the Decatur Book Festival.

**What opportunities are there for younger legal information professionals who want to become future leaders?**
Most young librarians already have a JD, and are second-career librarians or they went to law school and decided law librarianship was for them. There are jobs out there, but young librarians have to come in understanding that your career is your business. No matter what needs to be done to further your career, it’s all on you. It’s great when institutions pay for you to attend conferences like the AALL Annual Meeting, but you might need to do things out of pocket as well. No one will pay for me to attend this event, but with what I learn there, I’ll be better at what I do. Moaning isn’t good either; take charge of your career and know that no one will fix things for you. You have to do that for yourself.

**What role has AALL played in your career?**
AALL has meant so much to my career. I was by myself out in Nevada; I didn’t have any peers so I didn’t know what I was going to do. Having never met a stranger, I went to my first AALL Annual Meeting and started talking to everyone I could find. Together with my Westlaw librarian relations manager, we crashed the PLL Leadership Reception. There, I met the editor of PLL Perspectives and she asked if I wanted to be the editor. I said sure, so I ended up on the committee and took it from a printed publication, to a print-like, online-only publication, and finally to its current email newsletter format.

What I love about AALL is all of the people available to me who want to be mentors. It’s wonderful to be a part of an Association full of people who want me to do as well as I can. Having all of these people who I could call on or who could call on me when I was in Nevada was really useful. It was vital to my development as a professional, so I do all the professional service that I can because AALL has given so much to me.

**What career advice would you give to newer law librarians?**
This is a “small world” profession; don’t ever bad mouth someone to another librarian because that person might be their best friend. In places where everyone knows everyone, you’ve got to be aware of who you are talking to and care about your career. I’m doing what I love to do, and I have the privilege to do it every day. Smart people ask me difficult questions every day and I often get to see what happens with the answers I provide. If you don’t think it’s a privilege to have this job, think about what job it is that you do want, because this might not be it.

Ask questions; feel OK with picking up the phone or writing an email. You’re a member of the Association; if you have a question, it never hurts to ask. The person you contact may not know or have time and that’s OK. What did you lose by asking? Always be willing to learn new things and go outside of your content area.