LEADER PROFILE

CAPITALIZING ON GOOD LUCK

CJ Pipins found his way to a career in law librarianship by what he refers to as “questionable choices” and some very good luck. “I went to law school without a huge desire to be a lawyer,” recalls Pipins. “I happened to meet a law librarian who was assigned to be my staff mentor, and after mentioning that I needed a work/study job, I started working at the law library, and from that point on, I’ve loved working in this profession.”
During his time working at the New York Law School Library, Pipins met law library director and fellow American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) member Camille Broussard, who is now one of his mentors. “Camille placed me in a bunch of different jobs. Eventually, I worked in a lot of different areas of the library, and when I finished law school, I went to the University of Arizona to complete my MLS,” said Pipins.

After earning his master’s degree, Pipins became the reference librarian at Florida Coastal School of Law. In 2013, he moved to Baltimore to become the research librarian at the University of Maryland School of Law. After six years in that position, he took on his current role as associate director for public services at the University of Baltimore Law Library. In his role, he teaches legal research and a class on Law Practice Technology. He also supervises the circulation, reference, and instructional activities of the law library.

A member of AALL since 2007, he has been active on several committees and special interest sections (SISs). He was a member of the Committee on Relations with Information Vendors (CRIV) from 2015-2017, serving as chair from 2018-2019. He was also a member of the Committee and Jury Chairs and the Annual Meeting Local Arrangements Committee. He is an active member of the Social Responsibilities SIS (SR-SIS), the Academic Law Libraries SIS, and the Legal Innovation & Technology SIS, to name a few. He is also a past president of the Law Library Association of Maryland and a member (soon to become vice president/president-elect) of the Southeastern Chapter of the American Association of Law Libraries.

Here, Pipins talks about the COVID-19-related changes he is planning to keep, and how he stays up on the latest tech innovation, and he offers advice to newer law librarians.

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

I always sort of knew that I wanted to be an associate director from the very beginning. I’ve also been very fortunate to be part of organizations and had mentors and supervisors who would allow me to work on skills and take on responsibilities to grow my career.

When I was a reference librarian, I was excited about teaching and did as much of it as I could. At Maryland, I was the academic technologies librarian, as well as a research librarian, and so technology became part of my job, as well. And I think that really helped open the door, because I was incorporating teaching technology as well as research. Then, after so many years, I thought well, maybe I’ll give this a try now. And eventually, it worked.

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

The pandemic is definitely still a...
big challenge in terms of time and space. I feel like I don’t have time to do everything that I need or want to do. I don’t have access to the facilities and the spaces that I necessarily would like to have access to. I don’t have as much patience as I would like to have about all of those things. Nobody knows what the future holds—we aren’t even sure what’s going to happen as the semester progresses, so we have to constantly plan. We’re making plans that we’re not sure are going to be possible or implemented. So, I think that’s a big challenge that I’m having right now.

What advice would you give to librarians interested in moving into leadership roles?

The first thing I would say is to show up. Make sure that you respond to emails and requests, particularly when you’ve signed up to do something. Make sure that you communicate well, and don’t disappear off of the team. Another thing that I usually say is, make sure that you learn about the people in your profession, the connections you make in that way will serve you well. You also need to know the people within your organization who are not legal information professionals. You have to be open to learning from all types of people from all types of teams. Finally, don’t surround yourself with people who agree with you all the time, and don’t surround yourself with people who look like you. You need to be challenged to grow.

What COVID-related change—either personally or professionally—do you plan to keep?

Well, one thing professionally that I think I’m going to continue is videoconferencing. I know Zoom fatigue is real, and I get it too. But there are times when it is helpful to be able to share screens, and if I’m trying to teach somebody something and I want them to be able to see the same thing, videoconferencing is a great way to do it. It’s also more convenient for meetings, since staff in other buildings don’t have to travel to my office.

Personally, I have definitely upped my at home exercise. I’m working out at home more, and there’s a group of Peloton law librarians, #Pelotonlawlibrarians, that I enjoy working out with. So, that’s definitely going to continue.

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

Being involved in AALL has been one of the major pillars of my career and my leadership capabilities. I was very enthusiastic when I finally became a reference librarian, and was then able to participate in AALL on the committee/special interest section level.

Has there been a particular committee or SIS that really made an impact?

Oh, absolutely. Far and away, the Social Responsibilities SIS, and the standing committees that make that up; that has always and probably will always be a major part of my professional organization work and the thing I look forward to within an active membership. The other one is the Committee on Relations with Information Vendors (CRIV). I was very fortunate to be put on CRIV, and absolutely loved it. I ended up chairing CRIV and learned so much about managing communications,
people, and deadlines, and helping facilitate what other people wanted to do.

How do you stay on top of developments in legal technology?
I teach a class about legal technology, so, that really keeps me motivated, because I don’t want to miss something. My students are pretty savvy, and I don’t want to talk about something that is completely outdated or that’s been sort of tossed aside. But I’m on a lot of lists. So, I get the ABA Journal Weekly, I’m part of AALL’s Legal Innovation & Technology SIS, which is a great group that shares all kinds of information. When I can, I go to the ABA Techshow. I also read lots of blogs and articles from various places, such as Dewey B Strategic and Greg Lambert’s 3 Geeks. I also read AALL’s KnowItAALL. Even if I don’t get to read things, I’ll grab links and stick them all in a folder for when I do have time, so I can go back and see if there’s something there that I need to know about.

What career advice would you give to newer law librarians just entering the profession?
Be interested in meeting the rest of your profession—the people and the different jobs available within the profession. There’s a lot of different people doing a lot of different things, all under the umbrella term of legal information professionals or law librarians. We need to work together. I also would say, find the parts of the job that you think are fun, and make sure that you get to do those whenever possible. These “fun” things can include conferences or belonging to specific groups such as a special interest section or a local chapter. Do those fun things whenever you can, and you’ll reap the benefits. We’re sort of a fascinating group of people. And so, I think those two things are important.

My other career advice is to volunteer and do things on a national, local, semi-local, or regional platform. There are a lot of opportunities to work for our profession, and to make them your own. I think, that’s been a big part of my career, so far. I was very enthusiastic about joining everything I could, and taking on lots of responsibilities, whenever I could, and I think that’s been very helpful.

What’s the value of attending the AALL Annual Meeting?
For me, it’s the only time that I get to reconnect with some of my colleagues that I really care about and admire and want to talk to. Sometimes, the AALL Annual Meeting is the only time I actually get to see them and talk to them. It’s priceless. I can’t put a value on it. It would be horrible if I ever had to miss one—I would have to be on a fantastic freakin’ vacation to miss the Annual Meeting.

In the virtual space, it’s a different experience. When you’re in person, there are so many things happening all at the same time, you have to really work to make sure you catch up with everybody, and that you see and learn everything that you need to. So, virtually, at least you’re not running across a new city—you can just meet up and chat across Zoom.

What do you wish everyone knew about law librarians?
Lots of people have the old stereotype of librarians, this idea that we just shelf books. So, I wish everybody knew that law librarians are jacks-of-all-trades. We’re techies, we have encyclopedic knowledge of all kinds of things outside of what you might traditionally think of as the law. We’re problem solvers. You can come to us, and there’s not very much that we probably can’t help you with.

What do you enjoy most about your job?
I like teaching. I like seeing when the lights go on in my students’ eyes, and they finally realize something that I’ve been trying to get across, or when they make connections in learning. I like when students come back, so I can see how much they have grown.

Another thing that I love about my job is that I always meet lots of really smart and fascinating people, and that’s really been a part of the profession that I like. There are always people who are smarter than I am and that know about things that I sometimes wouldn’t have even thought would be interesting, or even thought to explore.