Catherine Lemann served as a paralegal for two and half years before deciding to go to law school. “I went for all the wrong reasons,” recalls Lemann. “I didn’t like working at the law firm I was at, and it was easier to go to school than to tell the firm I was unhappy.” It was a choice that ultimately led Lemann into the law library profession and to becoming a member of the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) early on in her career, in 1989. When she was inducted into the AALL Hall of Fame in 2017, she was described as “the embodiment of AALL ... constantly thinking of how she can make AALL a better organization.” Even now in retirement, she continues to make great contributions to AALL and to the profession as a whole.
After earning her JD from Tulane University School of Law in 1980, she briefly returned to the same law firm before attending Louisiana State University part-time to earn her MLIS, which she received in 1991. “I was fortunate enough to get my very first job at the Law Library of Louisiana,” said Lemann. “Carol Billings, who was the director at the time, had just gotten approval to hire a new, second reference librarian, and I was lucky enough to get the position. I stayed for 15 years, and then Hurricane Katrina happened in 2005, and I found New Orleans a very difficult place to live at that time, so I applied for jobs outside the state.” Lemann was hired by the Alaska Court System as the State Law Librarian and moved there in 2006. “I didn’t know anyone. I went by myself, and it was the best thing I’ve ever done,” said Lemann.

After spending a few years in Alaska, Lemann made another cross-county move, this time becoming the circuit librarian for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit in Richmond, Virginia. She retired from her position in 2013 and moved back to New Orleans, working part-time as a research librarian for the Law Library of Louisiana. She officially retired from the profession in 2019.

Lemann has an impressive resume of service to AALL. In addition to serving as president of the AALL Executive Board from 2009-2010, she also previously served as secretary from 2002-2005. At the national level, Lemann has served as the chair of several AALL committees, including the Nominations Committee and more recently the Awards Committee. She has also served as chair of the Council of Special Interest Section (SIS) Chairs, and as chair of the Government Law Libraries SIS. At the regional level, she served as president of both the New Orleans Association of Law Librarians and the Southeastern Chapter of the American Association of Law Libraries (SEAALL). She remains active in committee service as a member of the Volunteer Service Award Jury. Lemann’s previous contributions to the profession have not gone unnoticed. In 2001, she received both the Roy M. Mersky Spirit of Law Librarianship Award (for work with AIDS Law of Louisiana) and the Government Law Libraries (GLL-SIS) O. James Werner Award for Distinctive Service to People with Disabilities. In addition to her commitment to law librarianship, Lemann also served on the board of directors for AIDS Law of Louisiana, Inc., which lead to her receiving the 2004 Pro Bono Publico Award. More recently, she was inducted into the AALL Hall of Fame in 2017, received the Service to SEAALL Award in 2020, and the GLL-SIS Bethany J. Ochal Award in 2021. She is also a 2021 Marian Gould Gallagher Distinguished Service Award winner (read her award bio on page 38).

Here, Lemann discusses the value of being an AALL member—even into retirement—requirements that make up a leader, and offers advice to newer law librarians.

“Don’t be afraid to ask questions. Look for someone who is farther along in their career and ask them questions about how to do things, how to approach a problem, and how to take advantage of membership in the Association. Also, ask to be mentored, and listen.”

– Catherine Lemann

CATHERINE LEMANN
- RETIRED
- NEW ORLEANS, LA
What’s the value of being an AALL member?
I think, as so many members know, it’s the relationships you make—we’re all law librarians but don’t have the same skill sets and experience. I have been a member of AALL for 31 years, and we’re really a great group of people, and making those connections is what makes membership so fulfilling. We’re all different and do different things, and it’s always interesting to share different perspectives and learn about what different people do every day. The Association is much more collaborative and collegial than certainly practicing law would ever be.

What role has AALL played in your career?
I was fortunate to work for Carol Billings, a real mentor in that she was not only consistent on everyone on the staff taking part in AALL, but also participating in what is now the Government Law Libraries SIS and chapters. She really saw the value of Association work. And so, I’ve learned to work on committees, and I’ve learned to work with people across the country, which is always interesting. The educational programming has always been good. I’ve put on programs, which I never thought I would have done. I think a lot of us are introverts, and doing the programs has helped me, as another benefit of just being able to do some public speaking, to be less worried about how it’s going to all turn out. It all turns out pretty well. People don’t know if you screw up, right?

What lessons have you learned from the leadership roles you’ve held in AALL?
Serving on the Executive Board taught me a lot about leadership styles. I was secretary and then vice-president and president. I was also SIS Council Chair, so I attended a lot of board meetings, with many different presidents. I think it really taught me a lot in terms of how to manage meetings, how to think and get things done in a group, and how to listen to other points of view, as well as sometimes having to persuade other people to your point of view. And again, the leadership roles, some of that also involved public speaking, which I would never have said was one of my strong suits, but I’m less afraid of it than I used to be.

For individuals who are approaching or having reached the retirement milestone, what benefit do you see for them in continuing their AALL membership and their involvement in activities with the Association?
AALL’s Encore Caucus continues to try to keep people connected, and I really appreciate that. Sally Holterhoff and her core group have done a great job on that effort. I think the value in staying connected and staying a member is the educational opportunities, particularly now with the rise in diversity, equity, and inclusion—these are important conversations taking place that are relevant no matter what stage of life you are in. Not everything has to be related to your work, and to be able to attend a webinar and spend 45 minutes and get yourself thinking about something different than your day-to-day life, is really helpful. I also enjoy the connections I have made with fellow members, who are my friends. When I travel, I have people I can visit. I’ve had people who’ve gone to Alaska ask me for recommendations. I just watched part of the
What is the best career advice you received during your 28 years as a law librarian?
The very first committee I was on was the Research Committee, chaired by Dick Danner. The Committee met in Chicago. I had been a law librarian for maybe a year at the time of the meeting, and so I didn’t know the other members of the Committee. When the others went out to dinner, Dick and I had dinner together. The thing he told me was, to be successful, you need to be able to move, physically. Location-wise, geographically. I think that was one of the reasons I really considered moving to Alaska. I would say that even if you don’t move too far geographically, even if you move across town, the value in changing environments and seeing different ways of doing things, was really invaluable to me. Alaska has a unified court system, as opposed to Louisiana, which does not, which means there’s one state court administrator for all of the courts in Alaska. I learned so much about management skills that I was able to bring back later on, in other environments that I was in. Being willing to challenge yourself and pursue different opportunities when they present themselves was really good advice for me. I don’t think I ever told Dick how much I appreciated it.

What advice would you give to a colleague in the earlier stages of their career?
Don’t be afraid to ask questions. Look for someone who is farther along in their career and ask them questions about how to do things, how to approach a problem, and how to take advantage of membership in the Association. Also, ask to be mentored, and listen. The profession of law librarianship has changed so dramatically that sometimes we do things now and don’t realize that it’s today’s version of something we tried to do years ago. You need some historical perspective, and you also need to be able to look at the big picture.

What advice would you give to someone who recently took on a leadership role?
Listen. Talk to your predecessor in that role and ask if they will be available to continue to answer questions. Karl Gruben preceded me as AALL Secretary and helped me understand the duties. I firmly believe in having mentors in leadership roles. I have been on the Board of Trustees of Earlham College for two years. I was thrown into it, with the only advice being that you’re not going to understand what’s going on for three years. That’s the cycle of some of the leadership roles that we have in the Association. But that’s why I say you need to listen for a while and not come in and try to make immediate changes without understanding the organization as a whole and your role within that organization.

How do you define success as a leader?
I think a leader is someone who has a defined goal and the ability to express their vision to others in order to involve them in their plan. But they also need to be able to, again, listen to other points of view and be flexible enough to reconsider and at times, revise, their original plans or goals. Leaders are typically representative of a larger group, and they need to be responsible to that larger group and not just promote themselves and their own goals.

You have served on the AALL Awards Committee since 2017, serving as chair from 2019-2020. From your experience, what traits make up a leader?
There are many different types of leaders. One of the things that is really important is that leaders have the ability and passion to help others. I never knew as much about Yvonne Chandler and her mentoring and the help that she provided to so many minority law librarians over the years until I read her Gallagher nomination. I was so impressed. There are other leaders who work to improve the lives of law librarians or to improve access to justice or copyright. It’s the ability to see the big picture and to find their role. The people that get recognized, particularly for awards such as the Marian Gould Gallagher Distinguished Service Award, are people who made a difference in other people’s lives.

I was on the AALL Executive Board when the new awards were created, when James Duggan was president. One of his reasons for implementing all the new awards was that people like to get awards. It’s really great that we came up with different ways to recognize people, especially at different stages in their careers, and for the different strengths that they have.

I learned so much about our members by serving on the Awards Committee. It was really impressive to read recommendation letters. A nominee’s colleagues described the impact they had made on students, co-workers, AALL, or external groups. The letters of support educate the committee about a nominee and their accomplishments.