As the first member of his family to attend college, Ramon Barajas Jr.’s educational journey began at Bakersfield Community College. “I didn’t really know what my career path was going to be,” said Barajas. “I was sort of leaning toward computer science and maybe business, or business administration. But I got a job at the public library, and that sort of shaped my future.” Following the encouragement of the technical services/head librarian who encouraged Barajas to go into librarianship, he enrolled at California State University, Bakersfield, and selected English literature as his major, with the intention of eventually going to library school. From there, Barajas’s journey continued to evolve, and he has spent over 15 years as a law librarian working exclusively in law firms.
Ramon Barajas Jr. earned his BA in English in 1997. He earned his MLIS from San Jose State University in 2002. “My intentional goal was to go back to public libraries,” recalls Barajas. “I was going to get my MLS degree and become a librarian, but when I got to library school, I was placed in a law firm, at O’Melveny & Myers, as a library research assistant, and that opened my eyes to a whole new industry that I had no idea existed. And so, after I received my MLIS, I decided I wanted to stay in law firms.”

Prior to joining the world of big law, Barajas served as a branch manager of Kern County Library, a small rural public library in Central California where he worked primarily with public outreach and children’s services. Following his time at O’Melveny & Myers, he served as a reference librarian at Munger, Tolles & Olson, before accepting a library manager role at Alston & Bird in Los Angeles in 2016. He was recently promoted to director of library services at Alston & Bird.

Barajas has been an active member of the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) since August 2001. He is also an active member of the Southern California Association of Law Libraries (SCALL) and served as SCALL chapter president from 2017-2018. Additionally, he is a member of the Private Law Librarians & Information Professionals Special Interest Section (PLLIP-SIS).

Here, Barajas discusses process changes his firm has made in response to the pandemic, the positive changes both his firm and the law library profession have made in terms of diversity and inclusion, and how AALL has impacted his career as a leader.

What new resources/processes has your law firm implemented as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Alston & Bird, from a technology standpoint, was ready to pivot to the limbo environment the moment the shelter-at-home orders were given. Before the pandemic, we had the flexibility to work from home, one day a week, and as necessary. So, we had the technology in place. We had a software program called Jabber that funneled phone calls to our computers. From the library standpoint, we, unfortunately had to significantly reduce our print resources, especially after a few months of realizing that the pandemic was not going to end after two weeks, like many had promised.
We were fortunate that our LMA contract expired in the middle of 2020, so that allowed us to cut a lot of our West print resources, and we were able to negotiate an expanded Westlaw contract to include a lot of the secondary sources, which we did not previously have. So, I think the big pivot was from print to electronic. We were already slowly heading in that direction; the pandemic gave us the nudge to go over the edge.

The other resource that we really utilized is Manzama, just for staying abreast of current awareness. A lot of our law firm groups were actively interested in all the government orders regarding closings, re-openings, mask mandates, and things like that. So, those were especially hard to keep track of on Westlaw/Lexis, but we had flagged those categories within Manzama, creating an RSS to track the local governments and keep our attorneys in tune with what was going on.

**How has the law library profession evolved over the years?**
Without question, of course, innovation and technology in the industry have been the big boom of the last 15 years. The advent of analytics has been a big game changer in litigation research, especially when researching judicial trends and opinions and researching opposing law firms and litigants. Also, the shift I indicated earlier, the shift from print to electronic, was another big change. I know when I started in law libraries, every firm had a big library floor plan or big library spaces. And now when you talk to people, most firms have reduced their physical libraries to just a few shelves of books. I know that 15-20 years ago, we probably couldn’t have imagined a library without physical books, but here we are. The way in which we think about books has changed.

**You were recently promoted to director of library services in August 2021. What resources have you used to adjust to your new position?**
I have only been on the job for a little over two months now. So, the best resources that I have are my current staff, other colleagues at the firm, and my fellow law librarian colleagues outside of the firm. I’m still leaning heavily on all of them while I go through my own growing pains trying to lay out my plans and my vision for the department.

**Diversity and inclusion continue to be important topics in law librarianship. What positive changes have you seen within the profession and in your own firm toward diversity and inclusion?**
Diversity and inclusion are more openly discussed now than they used to be. Socioeconomic and racial barriers are now being recognized as real barriers to success. Before, we thought of these things in the abstract, whereas now we recognize them as real barriers. The formation of more D&I committees at my firm—and within the law library industry in general—will lead, or will help lead, us to some actionable change. What changes will come are still to be determined, but at least people are forward-thinking, and committees are being formed to examine issues and reflect interest. I feel like the law library industry has always welcomed diversity, at least in my own personal encounters. I can think back to when I first joined law librarianship. Even though people of color were underrepresented in numbers, I think we have always been made to feel very welcome. And it is encouraging to see those diverse members slowly increase within the industry.
Do you have suggestions for how diversity and inclusion efforts could be improved in law librarianship?

What I hear and what I have been touting recently is that we should make more entry-level positions available to allied professionals (non-MLS candidates). Not just in technical services positions, but research divisions, as well. There needs to be more outreach to undergrads, to educate them on the possible careers in law librarianship. I think that many people of color just don’t know that this career path exists. And I think a lot of our efforts now are directed toward library school students, but we need to reach further back and start targeting undergrads.

How do you stay abreast of the latest changes in the profession?

I keep up with all the literature, including *AALL Spectrum* and *Law Library Journal*, and I attend conferences to stay abreast of current changes. In the last 12 months I have attended several conferences, including the AALL Virtual Conference, the Private Law Librarians & Information Professionals (PLLIP) Summit, the ARK Conference on Innovation, as well as some of the chapter institutes.

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

AALL has impacted my career tremendously. Coming from a public library background, I really understood the value of being part of a larger group. My public library had monthly meetings with all the branch heads and all the department heads. So, that would be a large group of between 30 and 50 librarians, meeting monthly for four hours. That meeting had a real tangible feeling of community and togetherness. With the exception of large law firm headquarter locations, many law firm librarians work in really small-staffed libraries, or they are even solo. I think that can contribute to a feeling of isolation. AALL and the chapters give law librarians the opportunity to connect with other law librarians.

In 2002, I won the Southern California Association of Law Libraries (SCALL) Grant to attend the AALL Annual Meeting & Conference in Orlando. Ever since then, I have been an active member of SCALL, and I think the networking opportunities provided by volunteering in SCALL have been invaluable. In 2017, I served as the SCALL Chapter President. That experience really grooms you for leadership. It’s just an awesome sense of responsibility when you are put in charge of overseeing an entire chapter and being surrounded by other SCALL leaders.

What advice would you offer to newer law librarians just starting out?

I would advise newer law librarians to become active in either AALL or in their local chapter. I would also advise them not to be afraid to make mistakes and to learn from their mistakes. If you are just starting out as a law librarian, I know it can be very intimidating. You get a lot of stressors from a lot of different points, but it’s OK to say you don’t know, and it’s OK to make mistakes, as long as you are learning from your mistakes.

On a professional level, get involved with AALL committees/awards juries or volunteer for your SIS or chapter. These opportunities provide great networking opportunities and allow you to continue to learn new things.

How do you stay engaged in and passionate about your work?

When you love what you do, it’s easy. It’s a job, sure, but it also doesn’t feel like work when you’re answering your calling. And it’s a quest to keep learning. Every day you come to work and there’s something new, something interesting. So, that really drives me to stay passionate.

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

When I was in library school, I had a professor who had a heart-to-heart with his class. He told us there’s going to come a time when you have to toot your own horn. I always remembered that. I think that’s just the best way to do it—if you have to report to leadership, whether through written reports or emails, you have to toot your own horn. You need to showcase your contributions and your accomplishments. It’s rare for people to ask you what you have done to bring value to your organization, so you have tell people about the value you bring on your own, and you need to show that value to them.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

I enjoy that every day is an adventure, and there is always something new. Before we started getting email on our phones, we would have to wait until we had logged into the computer in the morning to open email. I would always say, I wonder what surprises await today, because you never knew what kind of wacky research request was going to be there, or what kind of emergency request was going to be there. One of the things I like the most is just the unknown.