LEADERSHIP

LEADER PROFILE

TAKING THE NONTRADITIONAL PATH LED TO FINDING THE PERFECT FIT
Like most in the profession, law librarianship was not on Marcia Burris’s career radar. In fact, she was planning to become a teacher. However, after working for a library filing service company and finishing up her degree, she realized the law firm library world was a great fit. “Instead of teaching, I actually started my own library service company,” said Burris. “Six months before I graduated, I decided to change my path. The people around me encouraged me to get an MBA since I was planning to have my own business, but the more I thought about it, I decided I would rather get my MLIS.” Burris received her MLIS from the University of California, Berkeley, and grew her library staffing and consulting business in San Francisco. “I started my business by providing library filing and library technician-type services, and then when I got my credentials and more experience, I expanded into library management, and basically freelance librarian work,” said Burris. “I had a team as well, which I grew over the years. It was not a traditional path!”

After owning her business for 10 years, she decided to sell it and move cross-country, where she received her first “official” job, working in South Carolina for Ogletree Deakins, which was, at the time, a smaller regional law firm. She was initially hired to fill a research opening in the department, but due to reorganization, she was made the manager within six months. “When I owned my business, my clients ranged from very small to very large firms, plus government libraries, so it wasn’t too big of a leap to jump into managing what at that time was a much smaller library team,” said Burris. “It was a good fit.”

After leaving Olgetree, she moved on to HBR Consulting as senior manager, research and information solutions, where she stayed for two years before being recruited to Nexsen Pruet in Greenville, South Carolina, where she serves as the director of research and knowledge management, a position she has held for four years. “I was brought into Nexsen to form their KM department and oversee the library and many other functions,” said Burris. In her role, she directs the firm’s internal and client-facing research and knowledge management solutions, including their client portal NP ClientSight, and oversees all Nexsen Pruet’s library, research, and knowledge services needs. With more than 30 years’ experience, she works closely with the firm’s administrative and practice teams to provide solutions that streamline processes to increase efficiency and enhance the delivery of legal services.

Burris became a member of the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) in August 2001. Since that time, she has volunteered in several capacities, including chairing the Private Law Librarians & Information Professionals Special Interest Section (PLLIP-SIS) from 2021-2022. She was also a member of the Council of SIS Chairs and a member of the AALL Consulting Services Advisory Group. She is a past team leader for the Annual Meeting Program Committee and is a frequent speaker and author on issues related to legal information and knowledge services.

Here, she shares how she balances day-to-day needs with strategic planning, how law librarians can showcase their contributions, and what she loves most about her job.

**How do you assess whether a product is a good fit for your firm?**

There are a lot of options. I think the number one question is, does the product fill a need that we actually have? There are lots of fantastic products out there, but that doesn’t mean we need all of them. So, we have to be selective. If it’s a product that will meet a need, then the next question in my mind is, that’s great, but will our users actually use it? Further, how will it fit into their workflow? Sometimes people choose to do without, even when there’s an option available. Finally, does it fit into our budget? Is there a good return on investment for the product?
My firm recently made a decision to add a software program that automates our closing binders for our transactional group. This led to an evaluation scenario that entailed comparing products ranging from those having all the bells and whistles to those with more simplified options. Ultimately, the deciding factor was, what will our users actually use? What’s the best outcome for our attorneys and for our clients? Those are some of the criteria that we think about.

As a leader, how do you balance tending to immediate needs with strategic planning?
You always have to start with your strategic planning and direction. Where are you going? Everything you do needs to align with that. But there may be a lot of micro-corrections along the way. In the day-to-day, when you are dealing with competing interests and obligations, it is hard to carve out time to think. For me, a lot of that strategic planning sometimes happens outside of work. I’m a swimmer, and so, a lot of my planning and organizing my thoughts happens in the water. For me, stepping away from all those devices is where it all comes together.

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?
Well, the last few years have certainly been interesting. AALL has always been a very welcoming organization, and the profession has been, in my experience, very

Words to live by?
Be excellent to each other.

Best book you recently read?
I just finished Belle Greene, by Alexandra Lapierre. The book is about the woman who served as J. P. Morgan’s personal librarian for his rare book collection. She had to pass as white to work, so it’s just an amazing personal story. Another book that I read that’s more business-focused is Mindset: The New Psychology of Success by Carol Dweck.

Favorite way to unwind after a long day?
I get my workout in early in my day, so my evening would be just dinner with my husband and a nice long walk.

Favorite movie?
The Princess Bride.

Favorite thing about where you live?
This is a beautiful area. If I had to choose, I would say the abundance of beautiful hiking areas that are so close by. We have Paris Mountain State Park, which is only 15 minutes from downtown.

Song or musician that always lifts your spirits?
I’m an ’80s girl, so ’80s and ’90s alternative. In fact, when I was in high school, I had the whole asymmetrical haircut thing going on. Outside of that genre, one of the songs that always does it for me is “Somewhere Over the Rainbow/What a Wonderful World” by Israel Kamakawiwo’ole.

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You served as an Annual Meeting Program Committee (AMPC) Team Leader. In your experience, what makes a solid proposal?
The Annual Meeting is such a great opportunity for people. It’s a great place for legal information professionals to come together and learn from each other, and I believe some of the best programs are the ones that are presented by people who are really passionate about the topic. A good program has to, in my opinion, impart some kind of useful information that people can really take away. The proposal itself needs to really demonstrate the value of the program. It has to be very clearly written and organized. I think as part of that program evaluation process, the proposer has to demonstrate that they can organize their thoughts and content in a compelling way. Having a really strong, well-drafted proposal is crucial to that acceptance.

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welcoming and inclusive. One thing that I have appreciated in recent years is more openness and freedom that people have to express themselves. You see that in a lot of ways, but I think people are having more difficult conversations, being more open, and sharing who they are. And that’s to everyone’s benefit. I have to give a little kudos to the PLLIP-SIS and the Black Law Librarians SIS (BLL-SIS) for putting together the Diversity Summit. That’s been a great platform for us to share with each other. We have heard from colleagues and peers about their experiences, as well as some eye-opening things that they have been able to share in a safe place, among friends. It’s exciting to see that happening.

I also think the pandemic changed our perception of dress codes and professionalism, in a good way. People feel a little bit freer to be who they actually are. They are now bringing their whole selves to work.

How do you stay on top of developments in legal technology?
I subscribe to a lot of lists in the International Legal Technology Association, and in AALL, of course. One of the ways that I learn about things is through collaborating with other departments within the firm. I learn things from not only our IT and training departments, but sometimes even from finance—I hear about tools that people are using in different practice areas. I also think it’s good to keep your eyes open to the non-legal world. I learn a lot from my kids, who are young adults now, about the technology that they are using in different environments.

Within the legal information profession, who do you admire most?
There are a lot of people I admire in the legal profession. Within legal information, I really admire the people who are willing to form an opinion and express it publicly for the good of the group. Specifically people like Jean O’Grady, Greg Lambert, Marlene Gebauer, and Bob Ambrogi. These people are all extremely passionate about legal information and the industry and are willing to go out there and share their thoughts with everybody, and that’s incredibly valuable.

How do you stay engaged and passionate about your work?
For me, it’s the combination of learning new things and being able to solve problems. I enjoy engaging my brain with new things. I just read an article that talked about how little successes can create a positive feedback loop, so the more engaged you are and the more you learn, the more opportunities will come your way. That has been my experience in my roles—one thing leads to another. It’s always something new.

What advice would you give to newer law librarians just entering the profession?
Get involved in AALL, volunteer and get to know others in the profession. Try to get exposed to as many different things as you can. Law librarianship is such a broad profession. There are all types of different organizations. The roles are so wide-ranging, and there is opportunity for people to dive deep into certain specialties, or to go very broad and learn about a lot of different things and contribute that way. I think the more you know, the more opportunities you will have. It’s also important to take care of yourself. As you are trying to learn all these new things, practice self-care, as well. Don’t allow yourself to burn out.

What can law librarians do to showcase their contributions and accomplishments?
A lot of people struggle with self-promotion, but I have a couple of different directions to go with this. One is to promote the accomplishments of your team, rather than just reporting on your own accomplishments. It can also help sometimes to have a buddy. If you are one of those people who shies away from self-promotion, especially from within your organization, champion someone else on your team and they can champion you. That’s an example that I have learned as sort of a marketing trick that some female attorneys elect to use when they are doing client pitches. Let me introduce you to my colleague, who is fabulous. That way you can sing that other person’s praises, and then they do the same for you. It’s a clever way to stay within your comfort zone.

Another thing you can do is just stay active on social media and post about what you are doing. It doesn’t have to be continual. Share your knowledge. Lastly, you can really show what you are capable of by just volunteering to help. Whether it’s within or outside your organization, the more you help or volunteer, the more people will be aware of what you can do.

What do you enjoy most about your job?
I love the variety. I love solving problems. My focus is on helping the firm do good work for our clients, whether that’s through accessed information, technology, or streamlined workflows. In the last four years with the firm, I have had the opportunity to be involved in a new intranet; new client portals; document automation; rolling out a new matter-intake system; adding the closing binder software; and practice group process improvement and project management. These opportunities have enabled me to just touch so many different practice groups, and I have learned so much.