Jean L. Willis found her career in librarianship the same way most people in this profession do: purely by accident. During library school at the University of Denver, the director of the law school library at the time, Al Coco, taught a number of classes that piqued her interest. “Al was a student of Marian Gould Gallagher and a great advocate for a career as a professional law librarian,” said Willis. “Back in the day, private law firm librarianship was just taking off, and Al encouraged me to pursue this avenue of employment. I can honestly say, I never looked back.”
W illis received her MLS from the University of Denver and began her career as a law librarian while still attending library school. “I was fortunate enough to participate in an internship at the University of Denver Law School Library under the tutelage of Al Coco and the then-assistant director, Sue Weinstein,” said Willis. “It was an extremely beneficial experience.” Willis learned a lot and both Coco and Weinstein were outspoken about the value of joining the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) and getting involved with local and regional chapters.

Following her graduation from library school, she was hired as one of two law librarians at Holland & Hart in Denver.

Willis was lucky in that Holland & Hart was quite technologically forward thinking. Not only were they in the vanguard with automating document production, but they were a very early adopter of utilizing Lexis. “This was so long ago that there was not a lot of content in Lexis, but for some reason, they had uploaded not only federal materials but Colorado state materials as well,” recalls Willis. “This was truly Ye Olden Days of acoustic couplers (look it up) and giant machines to access the Lexis database. However, it was truly also a brave new world and quite exciting to be somewhat in on the ground floor.” Willis notes that the experience enhanced her technological expertise, as well as gave her foundational proficiency in using technology in a library setting.

Willis didn’t join AALL right away. Instead, she started with the Southwestern Association of Law Libraries (SWALL), the closest local chapter to her at the time. “There was a group of us that started what was the precursor to the Colorado Association of Law Libraries,” said Willis. “We started meeting in Denver and Boulder, way back in the ’70s. So, I was really involved at the regional level, but not much at the national level at that time.”

Not long after her first job, Willis made a major move to Australia and eventually landed a job as a law librarian at the University of Sydney. She developed and taught the law school’s first legal research class, which required Willis to educate herself about Australia’s legal system so she could teach it to the students. In her position she had to learn about Australian federal law and the New South Wales state laws. Later, Willis was appointed as a long-term temporary director of the Law Courts Library in Sydney, which serves the New South Wales Supreme Court and the Australian Federal Court.

After working in Australia for eight years, Willis moved back to the United States. She worked at a law firm library in Philadelphia, and then as director of the U.S. Third Circuit Court of Appeals Law Library. A few years later, Willis moved to California, where she was employed as the IT director at a law firm in Fresno. She then became the IT and special projects manager at the San Diego Law Library. Since 2004, she has worked at the Sacramento County Public Law Library, serving as the assistant director for support services. She retired at the end of 2022.

Willis became a member of AALL in April of 1991, and has since served in several capacities, including as chair of the Council of Chapter Presidents, as a member of the Awards Committee, the Finance & Budget Committee, and as Executive Board Treasurer from 2016-2019, to name a few. In addition, she served as president of the Northern California Association of Law Libraries (NOCALL), and as a member at large and treasurer of the Legal Innovation & Technology Special Interest Section (SIS).

Here, she discusses the future of the profession and how AALL helped her succeed in her career.

How are law librarians uniquely positioned to make a difference when it comes to advocacy issues and access to justice?

Public law libraries are all about free access to legal information, and they have a mission of providing access to justice for their patrons. Close to 80 percent of public law library users are self-represented litigants. Often their ability to handle their own legal matters for free is their only means of resolving their legal issues.

Increasingly, the courts and the legal profession are supportive of public law libraries, as well as other types of legal self-help organizations, because there is a clear recognition that most self-help/pro se patrons do not have the means or ability to hire an attorney. Many matters can be handled by those without legal training if they are willing to spend some time doing the research and work required. Public law libraries are often the only resource that many citizens have.

Law librarians must keep up with all the changes happening in local, state, and federal laws. Because of our familiarity with the law, we are in a unique position to understand what issues require advocacy efforts. Many advocacy efforts made by AALL, the chapters, and other law librarians have to do with funding for law libraries, but we are also advocating for a range of other legal issues, such as copyright, freedom of information, free access to PACER, and so forth. AALL is to be congratulated for all its advocacy efforts.

You served as AALL Treasurer from 2016-2019, what was your favorite thing about being on the Executive Board?

I was honored to be elected, and it was my pleasure to serve our members and the Association. I grew a lot professionally by serving on the Board, but my favorite thing was meeting and working with many other law
Jeffrey Lande

Quick Hits with Jean L. Willis

Words to live by? Take a chance! Live fearlessly.

Best book you recently read? Three books, actually. Hilary Mantel’s trilogy about (loosely) Tudor England: Wolf Hall; Bring Up the Bodies; and The Mirror and the Light. Such a time of epic change in the European world, not just in England. I started reading these during the pandemic, and they led me to other books, movies, and TV series about that era.

Favorite way to unwind after a long day? Something physical, such as a gym workout, a long walk (especially with good friends), or yoga. Exercise provides a great way to get my mind out of work mode.

Favorite movie? Perhaps Nicolas Roeg’s Performance.

Favorite thing about where you live? I live in California! It’s a great state, but mostly it’s about easy access to outdoor activities, especially hiking. I have great access to the mountains, to the beach, to the city, and beyond. I love it here!

What is the best career advice you received during your time as a law librarian?

Don’t be afraid to take calculated risks while building and growing in your career. What this meant to me was choosing to work in certain jobs that may have been a big step up for me at the time and a real stretch. This also ties into don’t be afraid to fail. While none of us wants to fail, sometimes making mistakes and having to face the consequences can be the best means of learning something new, getting to know yourself better, and finding the means to improve and grow. Most of my mistakes were rectifiable right away. Some mistakes led me to make career-changing decisions, and I’m glad that I had that experience.

It’s not always easy to make changes, but sometimes we all need a push. That kind of “push” can happen in different ways. My father always told me to “roll with the punches.” It sounds trite, but that notion served me well enough even when I thought I had made a mistake from which I could never recover. Guess what? I always recovered, and I can say that every single time I grew, I improved, and I moved on to something better. Another trite but true aphorism applies here: when one door closes, another one opens. Take a calculated risk. It’s worth it.

What professional development opportunities would you suggest to law librarians just starting out in their careers?

First and foremost, join AALL and a local/regional chapter and get involved. Really, the most beneficial aspect in the development of my career was engagement and involvement with other professional law librarians. I could go on at length about this, but suffice it to say, you will learn so much from your professional colleagues, and the easiest way to do it is to be engaged and involved in professional associations.

Another important aspect of belonging to associations is the possibility of becoming a mentee. Due to my involvement at the local and national level of law library associations both here and in Australia, I have been extremely fortunate to have had three very influential and helpful mentors, who also became good friends. AALL, many of the SIS’s, and several chapters all offer formal mentorship programs. Do take advantage of these. You won’t regret it.

And of course, volunteer! Don’t hold back and wait for the perfect moment or feel that you need to know more before working on a committee. Recently, I was able to thank Sue Weinsten (via a friend) for her gently pushing me to become the Local Arrangements chair for the Southwestern Association of Law Librarians/Western Pacific Chapter of the American Association of Law Libraries (SWALL/WestPac) meeting in Denver many years ago. I was a newbie law librarian and felt I didn’t know enough to handle this task. I learned and grew so much from leading this effort. This one step played a huge role in developing my leadership skills. It is never too soon to take on a leadership role like this.

Finally, do try to attend meetings in person, when feasible. I’m aware that those younger than me
do not always see the value of in-person meetings and events. While I value online meetings, getting together face to face adds a fuller dimension to all our professional relationships. You will be glad if you do this regularly.

What role has AALL played in your career?
A big one! Al Coco, my earliest law librarianship teacher and mentor, stressed the value and importance of joining professional library associations and chapters. I don’t know what I would or could have done without these resources. First and foremost, I immediately had a group of colleagues to whom I could turn to with questions of all types. I don’t know how anyone can start out as a law librarian without this professional support network.

Secondly, AALL and the chapters provide the easiest method for continuing education and professional development. Nowadays, it is so easy to access a wealth of training opportunities online from a variety of sources. We are so fortunate to have them readily available. Even in the “olden days,” AALL and the chapters provided similar educational opportunities that have been invaluable to my personal and professional development. Take advantage of these!

AALL has long been an advocate for our profession. My personal experience has been one where the library profession was not always held in such high esteem. The professional associations have done a lot of work to improve our standing as professionals deserving of salaries reflecting what we do and the skills that it takes to do them well. Even now, as we see libraries under attack in some parts of the U.S., the library associations are stepping up to defend what we do, why we collect what we do, and why it’s important to have librarians upholding the decisions of what is contained in our collections, along with freedom of speech/freedom to read issues.

What lessons have you learned from the leadership positions you have held in AALL?
One thing that really stands out is that, as a leader in an organization like AALL, one is really called upon to negotiate and compromise much more than one does as a leader at work. As leaders in an organization, we are working with peers, not subordinates. We cannot simply tell others what to do. We must find ways to work together toward the achievement of goals and outcomes. It’s not always easy, but for me, this type of collaborative work has enhanced and improved my leadership abilities at work. Most of us respond better to being included in the decision-making process and having our ideas at least heard, if not included, as part of an overall plan.

Sometimes a supervisor on the job has to make final decisions to make sure that work is accomplished accordingly. If we can create a more collaborative and communicative work environment, it’s to everyone’s benefit.

What do you think the future of the profession will look like?
The perennial question! It’s clear that, whether we like it or not, more and more materials will be available online only. Law firms are mostly there already, and it’s probably working out fine for them, given who their users are and what they’re doing. I think academic librarians utilizing online materials will become a stronger trend. Government libraries are going to be more digital, which will impact what staffing we have, how we do our outreach, how we set up our websites, etc. It is a certainty that print collections will shrink, and we are already experiencing changing job titles and job descriptions to fit the needs of providing services online, rather than in person.

Another important change is that libraries of all types are offering different services. For example, many public law libraries now serve as Passport Acceptance Facilities. This enables us to make some much needed money, while also attracting a different user population to our libraries. Law firm librarians have been on the forefront of offering a range of services not typically associated with library work. I think all of us will be developing new services to offer our user populations.

What do you enjoy most about the AALL Annual Meeting?
Networking and seeing librarians who I otherwise would never see. I have invaluable and lifelong friendships forged from attending the AALL Annual Meeting. Not only has this enhanced my life, in general, but it has also enabled me to be a better law librarian. I now have colleagues who I can call at any time to ask questions, obtain materials that I might not otherwise be able to find, and endlessly learn from. Plus, it’s just fun to see everyone! I know the Annual Meeting can be a bit overwhelming, especially for someone new and/or introverted, but even so, everyone has friends and it’s always good to see them.

Secondly, and equally as important, is the continuing education I receive. The programs get better with each passing year. I always learn something new that I likely would not have learned elsewhere. I come back to my library renewed and refreshed with lots of great ideas that I might be able to implement at home.

Finally, it’s helpful to interact directly with the vendors. Often difficult problems can be unraveled by a good conversation in the exhibit hall.