LEADER PROFILE
FROM TRIAL ATTORNEY TO LAW LIBRARIAN

SABRINA SONDHI
- DIRECTOR OF THE LAW LIBRARY
- PENN STATE DICKINSON LAW
- CARLISLE, PA
While most law students spend their time simply studying at the law school library, Sabrina Sondhi spent time making friends with the law librarians—discussing their jobs, and asking them research questions. These interactions eventually led to her becoming a student worker in the library, where she was assigned to write a research guide and website content on federal legislative history and how to find it (literally, as the multiple floors of the Cornell Library are notoriously difficult to navigate). After being encouraged to look into law librarianship as a career, she initially declined, opting instead to be a litigator saving the world, one client at a time. And that’s exactly what she did . . . until fate reintroduced her to law librarianship years later.

After earning her JD from Cornell Law School, Sondhi clerked for a federal magistrate judge in Ohio before practicing law in California, including working as a trial attorney for Safeco Insurance Company. After six years, sensing that her CEO was planning for a buyout, along with feeling burned out and stressed, she decided to attend graduate school at the University of Washington and pursue a library degree—with no actual intention of using her degree. However, halfway through, she began to realize law librarianship might be a good career fit after all.

She received her MLIS in 2008 and spent the next 10 years working at the Diamond Law Library at Columbia Law School as the special collections and services librarian. When she originally applied for the position, the school wanted someone who was dual degreed, but also proficient in several languages, including Latin, which she was not. “It sounded like such a cool job, managing rare books and archives, and working with both the Columbia community as well as the worldwide community, so I thought, what the heck? I’ll apply anyway,” said Sondhi. During her spring break, she received a call from the director, who wanted to meet with her to talk about the job, and that conversation turned into an all-day interview. They made a point to say they needed someone with cataloging experience, so Sondhi added cataloging to her spring courseload and kept in touch with the director. A few months later, she was hired for the position, later learning that her willingness to learn and acquire new skills made her stand out.

During her time at Columbia, she managed their revenue-generating law firm subscription services, digitization initiatives, an extensive collection of rare books and archives, and taught legal research. She then moved on to Cornell Law Library to serve as their director for administrative services and as an adjunct professor of law.

Sondhi is currently the director of the H. Laddie Montague, Jr. Law Library at Penn State Dickinson Law. In addition to her library administrator responsibilities, she teaches first-year legal research. Her research interests include algorithmic bias, legal history, and legal research pedagogy.

Sondhi became an AALL member in December 2007. Since joining, she has been active on several committees, including serving as a team leader for the Annual Meeting Program Committee (2018-2019), a member of the Council of SIS Chairs, and most recently as a member of the George A. Strait Scholarship & Fellows Committee (2022-2024). She has also served in several leadership positions on special interest sections (SISs), including as chair of the Legal History & Rare Books SIS (2014-2015), as secretary/treasurer for the Foreign, Comparative & International Law SIS (2017-2019), and as chair of the Academic Law Libraries SIS (2020-2021).

Here, she provides advice for those looking to advocate for their libraries, shares lessons learned, and discusses the value of AALL membership.

How are law librarians uniquely positioned to make a difference in their law schools?

We are positioned to have access to all groups—students, staff, faculty, the public (if your library takes in public patrons), and alumni. We are one of the few departments that is intended to serve all groups. I think that’s a huge access point. It’s limiting, too, because we cannot hone in on one group and make sure that they find us absolutely necessary. We have to spread our resources out. But it does give us that opportunity to affect the general culture of the law school and to have influence. If your library, for example, really prizes access and availability, then that is something that reverberates outward through the law school. It can make the law school feel more inviting if a big public-facing portion of it is emphasizing that quality.
If you could meet anyone in this world today, who would you meet?
Honesty, I love meeting people, but they are not people that I pre-arrange to meet most of the time. Usually, I’m meeting people day to day, and I’m finding interesting and cool people all the time. I like that kind of organic broadening of horizons and networks. I think that’s the reason why you meet people—you get something back from it, even if it’s transitory.

Best book you recently read?
Everyone is probably familiar with the movie Sense and Sensibility that Emma Thompson starred in. But not everyone is aware that she is the one who wrote the screenplay and got an award for it. She published the screenplay with the related filming diaries from her experience working on that movie, and it is hilarious. She is such a funny person and worked so hard on that film. It was fun reading through it and seeing all her sides of why she put certain pieces in, why she excluded certain scenes from the book, and why she combined certain pieces. It’s a fun, behind-the-scenes look at a movie that I had already seen, admired, and enjoyed.

What period would you travel to if you were given a time machine?
This one is a non-answer, because honestly, I would be terrified that I would screw it up. My favorite book is Connie Willis’s To Say Nothing of the Dog, which is all about time-traveling historians. Time travel would probably be amazing, but I would not do it nearly as elegantly or solve the problems as well as the book’s characters do. I think that I would probably be so anxious the whole time, I wouldn’t have enough fun.

What is the greatest risk you have ever taken?
The biggest risk I took career-wise was leaving Columbia to go to Cornell. I had a very comfortable position at Columbia, and the University has a lot of people who have been there for 20 or 30 years. At 10 years, I was still a relative newcomer. I went to Cornell to take on a higher management position, knowing that Femi Cadmus, who was the director at the time and had made me the offer, was going to leave three months after I started. I did not know who the new director was going to be, or what the situation would look like. That was a big risk for me.

Favorite movie?
The way that a book or movie becomes a favorite of mine is that I can’t predict the outcome. I don’t know what’s going to happen halfway through, and it keeps me guessing. Probably one of the best movies that I watched in recent years is Knives Out. I did not see that ending coming. Even though they tell you from the beginning what’s happened, I could not predict how it was going to unwind, and I loved that.

Who is your all-time favorite Disney, Marvel, or other fictional character, or nonfictional character, from a book or movie?
As stated above, my favorite novel of all time is Connie Willis’s To Say Nothing of the Dog. Partly because it’s about time travel—they are back in the Victorian era for most of the book. The main character is Ned Henry, who is my favorite because, honestly, he’s very tired the whole book. He’s got extreme time-jump lag, and lots of mishaps are occurring left and right, but he’s trying very, very hard to make things work out.
need to sell law librarianship as a good job. What do I think that law librarians could be doing? I think we need to be focusing more on the library schools and law schools through advertising and by creating more specific outcomes. More and more library schools are cutting their law library-related curriculums. We need to make sure that library students have some kind of legal research course available to them while in school. And we need to make it clear to students without a law degree that law librarian-ship is still a pathway for them.

I think that in law schools, we are not doing a lot of outreach, and that more outreach could result in a lot more law librarians. Advertising in law school-focused publications or on websites that law students go to would be a good start. We could also do more outreach to the American Association of Law Schools, where there are subgroups for career offi- cers and advising. Our presence there shouldn’t be just as the law library, it should be, “hey this is a career opportunity for your law school graduates.” If we can bring more people in, then more minority students will also come in as a result.

**How would you describe the value of AALL membership to a nonmember?**

When people tell me that they are interested in being a law librarian, I tell them to go and become a student member of AALL, because AALL’s biggest strength is its community. Some of the listservs are more active than others, but those listservs are a great way to get to know other people and see what they are interested in. If you are brave enough, you can put your own questions out there and get freely available answers. In my experience, law librarians are a communal, giving, and open bunch of people who want to help each other with their questions and provide answers. So why would you deliberately not take advantage of that? Why not be a member and give yourself access to a group of great people? The networking and community are two of the primary benefits of being an AALL member.

AALL also does great work behind the scenes with advocacy, building up the pipeline, online trainings, and making resources and information available. But I think the biggest reason that’s most accessible to people who are contemplating if they should be a member, is to connect with other people with similar interests and goals who are pursuing the career that you are considering. Once they become a member, they are pleasantly surprised to see all the other stuff that AALL is doing.

**What lessons have you gained through the leadership roles you have held?**

That it’s really important to listen. When I come into a new place or take on a new manage- ment role, one of the things that I’m always trying to make sure I do is spend a lot of time for the first few weeks or months listening and asking questions. Even if I am supervising someone, that person has worked at this organization longer and is an expert on what their job is. It’s important to know and respect that before going in and suggesting changes, or picking apart what it is that’s being done. You have to have your own level of understanding.

The other thing is that when I get stressed or frustrated, I get impatient. So, the biggest lesson I have learned from managing is that when I’m managing and I’m frustrated or stressed, it’s important for me to be self-aware and take a step back. Even if it means that there are going to be delays in the task or the project. Because being frustrated and impatient will most likely not yield a faster, successful result. So, if I’m feeling stressed, impatient, and frus-trated with something, rather than push that onto someone else, I try to build in time to step back and say to myself, it’s OK if this takes longer. We are going to get it done eventually, and for now, my impatience is not some-one else’s problem.

**What’s the best advice you have ever received?**

To look at a future timeline. Next week, next month, in five years, or in 10 years from now, what will you be glad that you did now? That can be small things, such as thinking, “Hey, I’m really glad that I prepped lunches for this week and looked out for future me.” But it can also be things like, 10 years from now, I will be glad that I spent that time with my family rather than spending extra hours getting that extra article written, or that extra process streamlined three months earlier than it would have otherwise been. It’s thinking, what would my future regrets be? How can I try to minimize those, where possible? So basically, figuring out what future things you will be glad that you did now and, when you can, making them happen.

**What do you enjoy most about your job?**

There is nothing quite as rewarding as connecting people to the information they need, in the moment, and knowing that you made that happen. Now that my job has lots of other pieces to it, I get to do that favorite part less often. But it’s still the most rewarding thing I do.