In what has become an all-too-familiar story, Jeremy Sullivan found his way to law librarianship by accident. After receiving his BA in history from the University of California, Davis, he struggled to find a job. Unsure of what to do, he remembered he had enjoyed working in a public library, so he decided to apply for a master’s in library science. “As soon as I got accepted into library school, I also received my first job in a law library,” said Sullivan. As a result, he ended up putting library school on the back burner for a few years while he gained real-world work experience. By the time he decided to get his MLS, he was all in on law librarianship.
Sullivan's first job after completing his MLS was as a research librarian. “I had kind of been working as a research librarian at Morrison and Foerster, which was my first firm, and when I got a new job at Wilson Sonsini Goodrich and Rosati, I was a full-fledged reference librarian,” said Sullivan. He earned his MLS from San Jose State University in 2000.

He stayed at Wilson Sonsini from 2000-2004 before moving to Morgan Lewis's Palo Alto office as the solo manager of the library, a position he held until 2006. From there he advanced his career by taking on a position as a research services manager with Greenberg Traurig. He joined DLA Piper (U.S.) in 2010, beginning his career as a research and library services manager. After spending over six years in the role, he transitioned to manager of competitive intelligence and analytics at the firm. In his position, he provided oversight of the competitive intelligence research function at the firm, and routinely utilized, leveraged, and evaluated business and legal research analytics platforms with an eye toward uncovering knowledge and enhancing the firm’s competitive advantage. He recently became the senior manager of competitive intelligence at the firm.

Sullivan has been an American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) member since June 1998. He has been an active member of the Northern California Association of Law Libraries (NOCALL), serving as president from 2022-2023. He also served as a member at large for the Private Law Librarians & Information Professionals Special Interest Section. He is currently a member of the Council of Chapter Presidents. He is also a frequent speaker at conferences, including at the AALL Annual Meeting.

Here, he discusses generative AI, shares how his experience has propelled his career, and presents ideas for recruiting new members into the profession.

What lessons have you learned through the leadership roles you have held?
The thing I have tried to work on the most is emotional intelligence. I’m a research librarian, so when I first started leading, most of my leadership skills were to lead by doing. I would show the rest of the team that I was also going to handle research questions, and I was also going to be a backstop if people needed assistance with their research, or if they needed suggestions for resources. At that point I was kind of a leader among my peers.

For the management side, I think about my team as people first and foremost. The most important thing for me has been trying to figure out how to relate to my team—navigating time zone differences, varying schedules, and maintaining a balance between work-life quality and the firm’s needs.

How has your past work experience benefitted you in your current position?
I have worked for five Am Law 100 firms. The firm I’m at right now is one of the three largest in the country. In each firm I have worked at, I have progressively had more responsibility. I am research born and bred, so I bring my research skills, but then I apply them in a new environment—in a larger environment in most cases—looking to develop other people as well as new skill sets for myself.

I managed the research team at DLA for a while, and then I had the opportunity to manage on the competitive intelligence side. Competitive intelligence was kind of a new beast for me. Having worked in the field for 20 years, it was great to have an opportunity to go in a newish direction, still applying the principles of legal research, but now adding more business research and a better understanding of what is most important to the firm as a business organization. This would not have been possible if I had not been honing, building, and diversifying my skills throughout my career.

Have you integrated generative AI into your work process? Or, has your firm utilized this technology?
My firm brought on an AI team—made up of lawyers who specialize in AI and data scientists—and created an AI practice, which is fairly unique so far. I have been to several presentations about the pluses and minuses of AI. Part of me has been very skeptical, to the extent that I have not dabbled myself. When we got this AI team, I said, “Well, it’s not going away, so I need to get up to speed on how I can leverage it.”

The first thing I did was talk to the team that the firm brought on board and asked them to teach me what I need to know about generative AI. In just that conversation alone, there
Q&A QUICK HITS WITH JEREMY SULLIVAN

If you could meet anyone in the world today, who would you meet?
I would like to have met Bob Marley. I would also like to have met Joe Strummer from The Clash. I did get to meet George Mitchell, who helped broker the peace deal between Northern Ireland and Ireland, which was a big deal for me.

Best book you recently read?
Under the Big Black Sun: A Personal History of L.A. Punk by John Doe and Tom DeSavia. John Doe was one of the principal members of a band called X, and the book talks about the punk rock scene in L.A. in the late ’70s and early ’80s.

What period would you travel to if you were given a time machine?
I would like to go 100 years into the future and see how everything turned out. I have a hunch that I might not like what I see, but would love to go.

What is the greatest risk you have ever taken?
Early on in my career, I worked for five different Am Law 100 firms, and there was a period in my life where I thought I’m just jumping ship. I would go to a new firm for progressively more experience or responsibility, and that felt risky to me because it was coupled with the transition to more of a management role. I started as a library assistant, then I was a reference librarian, then I was able to be a librarian manager, but I managed just an office, not people. Then I moved on to manage a reference team, and now I am managing CI. This felt risky; after all, what if I don’t like it? But it also seemed necessary to keep advancing.

Favorite movie?
Goodfellas

If you could go anywhere in the world for vacation (all expenses paid), where would you go?
I would say Jamaica; I have never been there would love to go.

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What professional development opportunities would you encourage newer law librarians take advantage of?
Participate in associations at the chapter and national level and look into special interest sections. If there is not something at the chapter level, there is likely a small local group you can join to network with other people.

A core reason why I was able to progress in my job was that from an early point in my career I was going to NOCALL meetings and talking to or sitting around people who had been doing the job for 20 years, and now I’m that person. But I wouldn’t have been that person if I did not get those perspectives and insights. Participation in an association, like AALL, and networking with your peers are absolutely essential.

You served as NOCALL Vice President and President from 2021-2023. What made you decide to serve in a leadership position?
I hate to say it, but I kind of felt like there was an inevitability to it. If you stay in the field and in the area long enough, eventually they will call your number and say, “Hey, do you want to do this?” But, when I did get the call, there was...
no question that I wanted to do it. I have benefited for years from being a member of NOCALL, and I have participated in committees and done presentations and things of that nature, but leadership is a different thing, and it is something that I was never going to say no to.

I learned that I didn’t take it seriously enough, that there is important work to be done, and that it is very easy to rely on people who have done the job before. While every chapter is different, I think that in many cases people are trying to codify best practices so that when you do get called upon for a leadership role you are not starting from scratch.

I had some of those things at my disposal, but I also had people that were friends of mine who have been in different leadership roles within NOCALL for years, and it was pretty easy to reach out to them and get their advice. This is important—you are the face of the chapter—and it is important for you to maintain the integrity of the chapter.

What advice would you give to a law librarian in the first 10 years of their career who is looking to move into a management position?

I have worked with so many people who know what they want to be. There are plenty of people who say, “I’m here to do research, and I don’t want the hassle of dealing with budgets or having people report to me.” With my career, I had progressively growing areas of responsibility in each job that I took, and before I knew it, I was kind of on a management path and ended up a manager. Definitely take stock and decide if that role is something you want to do, because there is a lot of value in just putting your head down and working at a reference desk and being the face of research for the firm, or working behind the scenes and making sure that licenses are in place and records that need to be cataloged are cataloged. It is important to look at every career path to see what route you want to go down.

What can law librarians do to recruit more people into the profession?

We could certainly talk about the changes in the proliferation of information today. Consider how Google worked 10 years ago versus how it works now: is it better or worse? I think there’s an argument to be made that it’s worse.

I think we can always entice people by saying, “look, there’s more and more information out there, and it’s becoming harder and harder to determine the good from the bad. It’s particularly hard to do that in a speedy, efficient, and inexpensive way. If those things appeal to you, if you want to be seen as a person who can do that, then this is the career for you.”

If you want to work with generative AI to improve processes for getting at crucial information, this is a career for you. If you care about social justice and you care about the rule of law as a concept, this is the career for you. My first job was in a law library, so at the time I wasn’t necessarily thinking about the law as a concept. But if anything, the last decade has shown us that the rule of law is pretty sacred, and we continue to need people to stand up for it.

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

Having been a member for decades, I’m at the point where the networking is the most important part of my membership. I would say participation in AALL helps you understand that you are not alone, and that you don’t have to figure everything out by yourself when there is no manual. There are ways to do things that are mysterious to you when you first start out, but they don’t have to be, and you are always going to do better if you know people you can reach out to who have the experience and are happy to help. We are a service profession—it’s not just service to our patrons, it’s service to each other. And if you are not a member of AALL, you miss out on those invaluable connections.

What’s the best advice you have ever received?

I think somewhere along the line, someone said that in terms of research, you can get it fast, cheap, or good, but you can’t have all three. This saying resonates with me, particularly on the competitive intelligence side of things, and I find myself using it quite a bit, because the idea is if you want us to glean insights about what’s going on within a particular company, give us the time to do it. We are not going to turn that project around for you in half an hour. And you don’t want us to turn it around for you in half an hour, because it would be superficial and would not tell you anything that you might not already know. The principle of why it’s difficult to deliver something fast, cheap, and good has stuck with me for a long time.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

It’s always different! After twenty-plus years, I didn’t expect to be able to say that. While some tasks are handled in a standardized manner—using a template, filling in required sections, and sending out documents—our team is frequently tasked with exploring industries or aspects of practice areas we have never encountered before. This dynamic keeps the job interesting and engaging.