

# Images from a Library

*Reflections on a photo and a profession*

by Tina S. Ching

It was spring 2004. I was finishing my final term of law school. I recalled that when I was a struggling, sleep-deprived first year, my older, wiser classmates repeatedly told me that my third year would be a piece of cake compared to “one-hell.” I tried to see the irony in this, as I was taking 16 credits, volunteering at the local public library, trying to raise a second-hand schizophrenic puppy, and working part time as a barista to help pay off my credit cards full of vet bills.

*Tina Ching shelves books at the Arizona State University Ross-Blakley Law Library.*



One day I came home, sifted through my mail, and found the new issue of *Bust*, a magazine “for women with something to get off their chests,” one of the few non-essentials I allowed myself to purchase at the time. On the cover was Tina Fey, head writer of “Saturday Night Live.” To her left, the last feature story listed was “Baby Got Book: Librarians—could they be the new ‘it’ girls?”

I unloaded my laptop and dirty work apron from my backpack, took off my bike helmet, smiled at the scantily-clad cover girl and said, “Tina Fey, I am finally going to be an ‘it’ girl.” She laughed at me and said, “Tina Ching, it’s just another stereotype to add to your list.”

I knew she was right. I already have a long list of stereotypes that I have encountered in my life. We have all encountered our own versions of stereotypes. As rational adults, even though we know no one perfectly fits into a stereotype, we all use them. Some stereotypes help us every day. Some are so ridiculous that comedians have built their careers around them.

The full-page *Bust* illustration at the beginning of the article plays on a lot of the stereotypes of librarians. The artwork is of a voluptuous female, seductively looking over the top of her glasses, wearing a cardigan unbuttoned enough to reveal the top of her bra. She intensely grasps at the book she has just date stamped. On the desk in front of her is a sign that loudly proclaims, “Quiet—please.” The photo is appropriately paired with an article about librarians breaking the old stereotypes. It discusses the history, future, and essence of librarianship.

I knew I was about to enter a profession whose basic premise is to help others. The fundamental nature of librarianship is about helping people find information they seek and helping them find it in the most effective and efficient way. The *Bust* article only helped confirm my decision to go to library school. I would soon be surrounded

by intelligent, open-minded, life-long learners with a sense of humor. The “A Day in the Life of the Law Library Community” photo contest, planned by the AALL Public Relations Committee, was an excellent forum to display all of the above attributes.

Last year, law librarians across the country were asked to capture “the range of skills and tasks involved in law librarianship and provid[e] a behind-the-scenes look at our profession today” through the lens of their cameras. Each of the photos that were chosen as finalists by the Public Relations Committee were excellent depictions of what law librarianship is about today. Each photo demonstrates the diversity of our positions and functions we have as law librarians. The photo collection as a whole fulfills the purpose of the contest. The Best Overall photograph from the “Day in the Life” contest is no exception. I should know. I took the photo.

## What We Did at the King County Law Library

At the time the contest was announced, I was an intern at the King County Law Library (I was also still going to school full time, still raising the same crazy dog, and still working part time as a barista, except this time I was almost 300 miles further north). Stina McClintock, a technician at King County (then also working two jobs and saving up for library school), and I talked about entering the “Day in the Life” contest after seeing the advertisement in the December 2004 issue of *AALL Spectrum*. We brought up our idea to submit photos to Jean Holcomb, then director of the library. We became very excited about the project when we not only got her support, but also got her permission to be in some of the photos. In fact, the entire library staff was also very supportive and encouraging.

McClintock and I proceeded to discuss ideas for the photographs. She recalls the conversation as going something like this:

Stina: Should we do campy?

Tina: That is an idea. But don’t you think other libraries will think of that?

Stina: True. And maybe it won’t be appreciated by the committee. Or Jean.

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Tina: What about arty? Black and white.  
Stina: Done.

I'm not sure that's exactly how the conversation went, but in any case, we decided on artistic black and whites. We also decided to frame the photos to mask the faces of the subjects of the photos. We wanted it to appear as if the photos could have been from any law library and of any person working in the law library. This decision proved to be very helpful in convincing all of the staff to allow us to take photos of them.

I went about taking photos at different times of the day whenever I was not on the reference desk. Not being an art major or having taken a photography class, I was surprised these photos even came out, since I don't take photos that often. In fact, everything I know about photography I learned from "Six Feet Under." For example, "... over coffee" was a fluke. It just happened to be at the right time of day to have the light softly lay over Holcomb and Rita Dermody, collection access services librarian.

The day McClintock and I took "Shelving in Silhouette" we decided we should have a photo of her shelving, since it is one of her daily tasks (also one of mine, but as evidenced by the photo, she obviously looks better shelving than I do). It was like magic. The sun was set at just the right spot for the light to perfectly glimmer off the reporters. McClintock turned her head and I pressed the button. Yes, the leg went up. Similar to the librarian action figure, you push a button and the arm pops up in a shushing motion. With McClintock, the leg popped back. We took a look at the image, laughed, and continued to take more photos.

We only submitted two photos in color. "Shelving in Silhouette" was one of them. There was already so little color, and the light was perfect with the earthy tones of the reporters complementing the color in the walls and the carpet that I could not bear to strip the colors out. We organized and submitted some of the photos we took and waited for the results.

In the meantime, I finished library school, moved about 1,500 miles southeast,

and began working as a full-time reference librarian. When we saw the finalists for the contest, we were excited to find that two of our photos had made it to the polls. We also realized that the competition was stiff, especially for the photos that were in the same categories as our photos. One October day McClintock called me at work and told me to check out the Public Relations Web site. I was very surprised and excited to find that our photos had won!

### **The Controversy: The Shoes Don't Make the Librarian**

Some members of the law library community have expressed disappointment that the voting AALL members selected "Shelving in Silhouette" as the overall winning photo. I was even more shocked to hear what was actually said to the staff at King County. While most people who were unhappy with the photo commented about its chauvinist and sexist nature, my favorite comments are the ones about the shoes.

McClintock shares this sentiment. "I think one of the funniest parts of the controversy is this outrage over sexy stiletto shoes," she says. "Who knew that I am so sexy because of my shoes?"

McClintock told me of one woman who commented about how nobody wears shoes like that to work and that the photo was obviously posed. McClintock instantly responded by holding up her foot to show her that she was wearing the same shoes as she was wearing in the photo.

To be honest, I never thought much about the shoes. She was wearing those shoes to work. And according to McClintock, "I am fairly sure I wore the same shoes three times that week because I was too lazy to take them out of my bag." In fact, I cannot recall a time I have not seen her in heels. And all of this time I thought the leg going up was going to be the issue.

The controversy reminds me of a mini version of what the entire library community went through a little more than two years ago when the Nancy Pearl librarian action figure was released to the world (not as widespread with major press coverage, but surprisingly still international). There were



complaints about the doll being a stereotypical, antiquated view of librarians.

*The Seattle Times* reported that "Pearl predicts that the shushing motion—triggered by a button on the doll's back—will determine 'which librarians have a sense of humor.' She likes to believe that today's librarians are secure enough in their work that they won't take offense at the old cliché." Yet, the action figure was and still is a huge success (a new deluxe version features Nancy in shocking red), promoting librarians and libraries all over the world. So Archie McPhee and Company, if you are reading this, I think we may have a new librarian action figure in the making.

### **The Photo Lives on ... Even Though the Shoes are Gone**

Despite the controversy, the contest was a huge hit for the library. We not only got all of the librarians and staff involved, we had a lot of fun with the photos, and everyone enjoyed seeing the results. I also felt a lot more connected to the library by seeing it in a way that not even the photos can show.

Since I am new to the field and do not have much to show as far as contribution to the profession or scholarship that will outlive me, it is odd to think that this photo will exist for future generations of law librarians (as suggested by one of the purposes of the contest). However, I sadly report that the infamous shoes in the photo did not even make it to the end of the year. They took their last steps this fall. With or without the shoes, I hope that people now and in the future will be able to see beyond the surface of the photo and see how it does depict a snapshot of librarianship today.

Each profession must overcome its respective stereotypes, and librarianship is definitely no exception. The antiquated, traditional view of librarians is being

(continued on pg. 35)

overcome every day that we provide excellent services to our patrons, whether we dress like the Nancy Pearl doll or Stina McClintock. While we still provide the same essential services we did 100 years ago, we provide them in a different way. Some criticized the photo for focusing on books. Books are still everywhere, whether we like it or not, and I do not know of many libraries today that do not have people shelving books. I would argue that the focus of most of the photos was not on books (though most of the photos did include books). The focus is on the librarians and library staff and our many functions and services to our patrons.

Perhaps the most significant issue that can be derived from the photo is the entrance of a new generation of law librarians. In the photo, the person shelving is looking forward, not back at the camera as is most common in photos. What is she looking at? Being Seattle, she was most likely looking at the fog or rain, but it can be interpreted as her looking to the future. According to the AALL Gen X Gen Y Task Force *Members' Briefing* from December 2004, both McClintock and I are members of the generation known as Gen Y (born after 1977). I will not go into a discussion of generation issues here (best tackled in its own article); I will simply say that believe it or not, Gen Y has already entered the profession.

Finally, I hope the photo at least shows that the law library is not only a place where people can come to get legal information, but it can also be a place where real people enjoy their work and can laugh at themselves every once in a while. ■

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