



photo by Brant Bender

Sophomore Slump or Opportunity Knocking

Reflecting on my second AALL Annual Meeting and Conference

by Ryan Saltz

A ALL has now had 101 Annual Meetings. I have only had the pleasure of attending the past two conferences, both of which were unique in their own right. Just as New Orleans has its own ambiance centered on its unique culture, food, music, and rich history, Portland has a distinctive Northwest attitude, priding itself on being environmentally friendly and boasting 28 breweries—more than any other city in the country.

Each host city contributed its distinct personality to the AALL Conference experience. One difference: in New Orleans, the hotels were in easy walking distance to and from the conference center, while in Portland there were only a few hotels near the conference location and most were across a river, requiring a ride on the light rail. I chose to make both of my experiences the best they could be in conjunction with the intricacies of the cities.

The 101st meeting in Portland was a good conference, though I only have two examples to judge. My first AALL Conference, the 100th Annual Meeting in New Orleans, was such a great experience that I had to force myself not to expect too much from the Portland meeting. In New Orleans, I took part in the Conference of Newer Law Librarians (CONELL), which allowed me to interact and have immediate common ground with about 100 first-time AALL attendees.

Even though I kept up with a few of the people I met the previous year, I felt as if I did not know anyone upon arriving in Portland this year. When I spoke to a colleague from my CONELL group, she commented that she felt like she only knew about four people at this year's conference. As I am sure she knows more than four attendees, my question is this: are exaggerated expectations following an enjoyable first conference and a diminished initial social sphere part of a sophomore slump? Instead of this "glass half-empty" approach, I preferred a "glass half-full" attitude: these seemingly negative situations offered me the opportunity to shape my own conference.

Networking Opportunities

In Portland, I made time to continue building relationships from the previous year while at the same time fostering new ones. One way I accomplished this was to invite a new friend and an old friend out to the same lunch, dinner, or after-hours excursion. This is a great way to build one's network and introduce other people to new networks.

Even though Portland was a comparatively spread-out site, I still managed to run into people and take part in network-building

conversations. Rather than taking place on the walk back to a hotel across the street from the convention center as at other conferences I have attended, networking occurred while waiting for the train.

If you took the 5 p.m. train to downtown Portland from the Oregon Convention Center, you got very close to other attendees very quickly, as the train was incredibly full. For those able to get away from the busy schedule for a lunch, both the train ride and lunch made for good conversation.

Volunteering for a Committee

The next opportunity I made for myself was to join a committee. Through being involved in a committee, I am able to become more attached to the Association and the profession. At the

committee meeting, I was able to continue to meet others who are in various stages of their careers and willing to share their experiences.

I also volunteered to take over as Webmaster for the committee, as the current Webmaster was on her way to other involvement activities.

And since I am just beginning my tenure with the committee, it will allow for at least a couple of years of consistency. This position will also give me the ability to use some of my information technology skills that I do not always get to exercise.

I turned joining a committee into both an opportunity to meet and learn from other people and a way to gain and practice useful skills. Another opportunity that accompanies joining a committee is the fact that one shares common interests with fellow members—a great stepping stone for getting to know people.

Getting Ribbons

When attending CONELL my first year, I had two ribbons on my badge: one for CONELL and the other for being a first-time attendee. These ribbons allowed me to stand out, and other attendees were more than happy to stop and talk to me and make sure I was enjoying the conference and not excessively overwhelmed. During the CONELL program, we were told by an AALL Executive Board

member to "get some ribbons" at future conferences, as getting ribbons—in other words, getting involved—will enhance our conference experience.

At my second Annual Meeting, I did not have the bull's eye that is the first-time attendee ribbon that screams, "I need to network; I'm new!" I did, however, wear a green ribbon that identified me as a volunteer; this ribbon stood out more than the white first-time ribbons.

I volunteered to take tickets at the Opening Event—primarily because I did not want to feel left out by not having at least one ribbon on my badge. I also figured that taking tickets at the Opening Event would be the best way to run into attendees I had met the previous year. The group of volunteers I worked with at the Opening Event had such a good time that we have talked about doing it again next year.

The biggest payoff was when people would notice my ribbon and thank me for volunteering. Being a volunteer was yet another way I was able to create my own opportunities in Portland.

Opportunity is All Around

When you attend your first AALL Annual Meeting and take part in CONELL, which I highly recommend, you show up and immediately have a shared commonality with a group of attendees. You all work and learn together for the entire conference. The second year, however, requires some individual effort. My advice? Keep in touch with the people you meet each year. Join a committee or a special interest section in an area that interests you. Volunteer. Stop and talk to someone carrying the same tote bag as you; odds are they are a librarian.

By making these efforts, you will not only continue to meet new people and expand your network, you will also be able to take part in more of what AALL has to offer and make your conference-going experience just as good as the first one, year after year. Opportunity is all around, and if you take the initiative, you will enjoy the payoffs—even if you have to take a train instead of strolling across the street. ■

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