

Judging the 1999 Annual Meeting:

State Justice Institute Participants Rate Their Experience

by Carol D. Billings

"It's clear these law librarians know their onions and are bent on finding effective ways to share what they know with those who want to know it." Thus wrote Maricopa County, Arizona, court administrator **Sarah Shew** in her report submitted to the magazine of the National Association for Court Management following her visit to our Annual Meeting in Washington as a State Justice Institute grant recipient. Going beyond the SJI call of duty to evaluate her experience attending the educational programs and informal networking opportunities, Shew recorded her impressions in a detailed diary that includes many compliments and some very useful suggestions for improvements. She was one of the group of 14 state court judges, clerks, administrators, and judicial educators whose attendance at the Washington meeting was funded by a \$15,000 grant sought by the State, Court, and County SIS from the State Justice Institute. Each visitor was assigned an SCCLL host or hostess to shepherd him or her through the Meeting and to make them feel welcome. The group attended the SCCLL-sponsored program on "A National Action Plan to Improve Public Trust and Confidence in the Justice System: Defining a Role for Law Librarians," and then joined members in small-group discussions afterwards. They were also participants in the "Strategic Initiatives Sessions," convened by Jim Heller and Tim Coggins on Monday afternoon.

The evaluation forms and informal letters submitted by the SJI grantees reveal that quite a few were surprised by the size and strength of AALL and the quality of our educational offerings. "I went hoping to make a small contribution here and there and came home enriched and energized by the strong flow of ideas emanating from the sessions and from the contacts with your members," wrote **Judge John N. Kirkendall**, of the Washtenaw County (Michigan) Trial Court, who chairs the Technology Cross Conference Committee of the ABA's Judicial Division. Judge Kirkendall sang the praises of his "shepherd" Anita Shew, whom he asked to write an article for the Judicial Division newsletter. "I intend to implement some of the things I learned in my curriculum at the National Judicial College and in our programs in the Judicial Division,"

he continued. "All in all, it was an exhilarating experience."

A primary goal of the SCCLL-SIS in seeking funding for the SJI project was to make judges and court officials more aware of the legal information issues facing our profession. The letter sent by **Judge Patricia H. Clark** of the King County Superior Court in Washington confirms that our purpose was accomplished.

"I must confess that prior to attending the conference, I was fairly ignorant of the potential interface between public law libraries and the courts," wrote Judge Clark. "Since the conference, we have begun working within our court and with our law library to increase the library's visibility to the judges. Hopefully our efforts will continue and bear fruit. When your conference convenes next, King County courts and library hope to report that progress is being made in building bridges between them."

AALL members commented that having judicial officials—both SJI visitors and speakers from other programs—as fellow audience members enriched the question-and-answer periods following formal programs. Having different points of view expressed sometimes sparked stimulating arguments and challenged program speakers. Topics that have become commonplace to law librarians turned out to be unexplored territory for the judges. **Judge Michael G. Harrison** (the Circuit Court in Mason, Michigan) commenting upon the session he attended on AALL's new *Universal Citation Guide*, confessed, "Very interesting. I did not even know this was an issue. What is on the horizon?" Harrison also praised the program on "Computer Technology—Constructing Access Lanes to Court Information." "Very timely. This would be a good article for *The Judges' Journal*."

Reaching institutions devoted to judicial education was another important goal of the grant program. **Dr. Maureen Conner**, Director of the JERITT Project (The Judicial Education Reference, Information and Technical Transfer Project) at Michigan State University wrote, "I learned a great deal. However, as with most conferences, I learned more from conversations with other attendees than from the formal

presentations. What I did learn from the presenters were new terminology and definitions that will better allow me to converse with law librarians around the country. In my work at the JERITT Project, having this new knowledge is very important." Dr. Conner rated her shepherd, Michele Finerty (Orange County, California Law Library) "fabulous." "I feel I have made new friends."

Honolulu lawyer **Lawrence S. Okinaga** (President of the American Judicature Society) was a particularly valuable participant in the Strategic Initiatives Discussions arranged for small groups of AALL members and non-librarian participants by President Jim Heller and Program Chair Tim Coggins. A strong advocate for legal service to pro se litigants, Okinaga reckoned that law librarians have an important role to play in providing that service. "Our organizations have a lot in common, and, hopefully, we will be able to develop a closer relationship in the future. I hope that, as a start, a few AALL leaders will be invited to and will attend the National Pro Se Conference."

The SJI participants' evaluations are a strong indication that our mission to promote access to legal information as "a necessary requirement for a just and democratic society," made a strong impression. Idaho District Court **Judge William H. Woodland** concluded that "learning of all that you have to offer our small state in support will be valuable in the future." Diarist Sarah Shew, pondering the important subject of the need to develop public confidence in the justice system, wrote, "Thinking about this subject from the law librarian perspective is an eye-opener. Law librarians have a big part to pay in shaping public perception of courts in that they're often the point of contact for people who want to find their way through the justice system without a lawyer. The better the tools and service provided by the law librarians, the better the access to justice. Simple."

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