

Are You Plugged into

Leaders Discuss Benefits of Active Participation in AALL

by **Marcus Hochstetler**



Are you plugged into AALL? — How you answer this crucial question may determine if you are receiving the full weight of AALL benefits and are partaking of the opportunities available to AALL members. Maintaining professional contacts, taking part in professional development activities, gaining access to a broader scope of information and connecting with others who struggle with similar issues are just some of the advantages to becoming more plugged in to AALL.

A number of AALL leaders described how they've benefited from being involved.

What is the best way to obtain immediate personal benefits from AALL?

Barbara Bintliff, AALL president: Probably the first way I benefited was through attendance at my first Annual Meeting, which closely followed on the heels of my joining the Association in 1978. Not only were there professional education programs that were useful in giving me some new knowledge and ways to approach different situations, but there were other law librarians, lots of them! It was so nice being in a group of people who knew what I did, knew it was important, and were so willing to help out a beginner like me. It gave me some self-confidence to do my job (which I badly needed!) and I sometimes think that attending the Annual Meeting so early in my career really cemented my decision to be a law librarian.

Alvin Podboy, AALL Executive Board member: The ability to develop relationships with librarians across library type and geographic spectrum. Many librarians have become close friends and advisers. AALL has helped me to develop new management skills: time, presentation and organizational.

Frank Houdek, editor of *Law Library Journal*: The most immediate personal benefit was

a realization I was a member of a full-fledged "profession," not just a reference librarian at the Los Angeles County Law Library. My limited view of things quickly changed as a result of the national network of librarians that I began to meet through various professional activities. Prior to this, I had basically viewed what I was doing as merely a "job," not necessarily a bad thing mind you, but still, pretty far removed from what I came to see as a much larger enterprise.

What most impressed you about other members of AALL?

Anita Anderson, chair of State, Court and County Law Libraries Special Interest Section: I remember meeting Ken Svengalis during a round-table discussion for SCCLL about controlling library costs. He had been tracking prices and had specific tips for the group about reducing updating costs while still maintaining titles in the collection. When I was back in my library, I took a close look at my collection, surveyed my users and found that I was able to put into practice some of his ideas and cut some of the rapidly increasing costs.

Lori Hedstrom, president of the Minnesota Association of Law Libraries: There have been many occasions when

I have been faced with an unfamiliar area of law or a topic in librarianship that was not my specialty. I learned to ask myself, "Who do I know who would know this?" and overcome my reluctance to "bother" somebody to get that help. In my experience, my fellow members are more than willing to share their knowledge and expertise. This is VERY impressive to people who don't know about librarians' networking!

Bob Oakley, past president of AALL: There have been so many such situations over the years — advice on building a building from people who have been there before; advice on the selection of an integrated online library system; advice on reference questions; help with an inter-library loan. Just today, I called a publisher representative I know largely, but not entirely through AALL, to help me cut through the corporate bureaucracy in dealing with a particularly difficult problem.

Herbert Cihak, president of Southeastern Chapter of AALL: Listservs and e-mail have made a rapid response to a question the norm.

What networking opportunities did you find?

Roger Parent, AALL executive director: Active AALL members have many opportunities to expand their professional horizons, to learn from other members, to stay on top of issues facing them in their work, to gain experiences that they do not necessarily have in their own libraries. Members learn new and important skills and information by serving on committees — especially those committees that deal with issues that they may not face directly in their own jobs. Active members have the chance to meet and interact with the "best and the brightest" law librarians who are the leaders of the profession. I have found a high correlation between active association involvement and successful careers. Most AALL leaders are also successful law librarians and leaders in their own institutions. Active members have the chance to learn new skills — like chairing a committee or speaking at a program — that they may not have opportunities to learn locally.

Ellen Quinn, president of Ohio Regional Association of Law Libraries: The librarians in ORALL are nice people to

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know and very knowledgeable and willing to share. I do not think we can do our jobs effectively in isolation. I have found that no matter the size of the organization I work for, I have always benefited from the opinions and assistance of other law librarians. The greatest advantage is knowing you're not alone and that no matter what problem or issue you face — someone in the organization can help you solve it.

Mary Unruh, president of Western Pacific Association of Law Libraries: We all work hard in our jobs, often with demanding and unrealistic deadlines. AALL gives you an opportunity to work in our profession and have fun, make a difference and create friendships that last forever.

Herbert Cihak: The relationships that I have built and strengthened have easily paid for the price of admission. The opportunity for a new law librarian to have someone serve as a mentor is a privilege that is also extended to our new AALL friends.

How important have the local chapters been in your involvement in the profession?

Barbara Bintliff: The opportunities at the local level are unlimited! There are chapters in many major cities and regional chapters give members in every state the chance to participate. You are honing your leadership abilities in a smaller environment before moving onto the national scene. Continuing educational programs at the local and regional levels can help you improve substantive and management skills, learn how to deal with co-workers and negotiate with bosses, and understand the legal system and your institution's role in it. All this will benefit you and your patrons.

Bob Oakley: Many AALL presidents were first leaders of their local chapters.

Judy Meadows, member of Election Procedures Election Committee: Many local chapters offer no- or low-cost brown bag meetings where a law librarian can learn and network.

Beth Youngdale, Southwestern Association of Law Libraries: AALL members can get involved at the local level by attending meetings or volunteering to be on a committee for the local or regional chapter. It helps improve patron service not only because the connections made at these meetings make for improved cooperation among libraries, but you can also get ideas from other libraries about how they're serving their patrons. Stealing other libraries' ideas is one of the best ways to improve service at your own library!

How has the Annual Meeting helped you grow professionally?

Frank Houdek: If you can possibly get to the national AALL Annual Meeting, do so. The educational programming is great, the networking opportunities are even greater. There is no better way to become a true law library professional than by attending — and actively participating in — this meeting.

Judy Meadows: I encourage all law librarians to attend the AALL Annual Meeting. If they work for an employer that will fund only one educational offering, they should look to grants available from AALL and its chapters and other state organizations that fund such activities. We also should look to ourselves, as I believe that law librarians should invest in their own professional development. More law librarians need to advocate for their educational needs to their employers. ... They need to be shown AALL and chapter program announcements, which explain our learning outcomes, and show that we meet and learn from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m. every day and night. Law librarians need to work with their employers on determining how they can best attain and

hone the competencies needed for their current and future work.

Herbert Cihak: It is harder to find the time and money to attend our regional and national conferences. Commitment to our profession, however, demands that we participate. We give and we reap a huge return. It boils down to a matter of priorities.

Has involvement in AALL helped you overcome the stresses of a tight schedule?

Roger Parent: Spending time working in the Association is really an investment in oneself. I would say that professionals need to find the time and provide themselves regularly with opportunities to learn and to grow. Chapter and AALL involvement provide such opportunities.

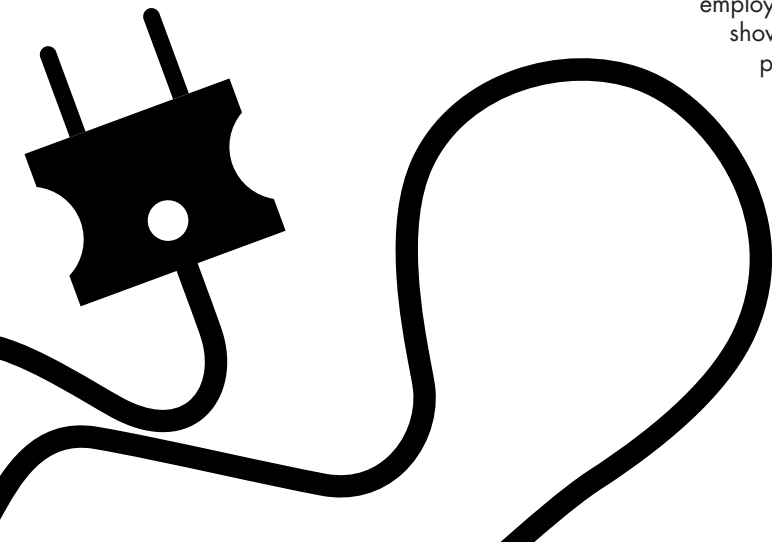
Anita Anderson: In whatever capacity you volunteer for AALL, you will find that other members provide great support. You will not be approaching a project alone, other members will be there to help. If you chair a committee, you will have committee members who will pitch in. As incoming chair of SCCLL SIS, I filled a simple raffle bowl with volunteer forms from willing members. Our members recognize the value of giving to the organization because they receive so much in return.

Frank Houdek: The daily grind of work — especially if your job is one with a fair amount of repetition — can be disheartening at times. I have always found that squeezing in a professional activity into my schedule, no matter how tight it may seem, has been a great way of overcoming that feeling of "get me outta here" that occasionally overtakes us all. ... You might be surprised at what a little nonjob-related work can do to your professional quality of life.

How can the average member contribute to AALL?

Roger Parent: AALL leaders always keep the average member in mind when planning new programs and services. The new strategic plan emphasizes four directions that are important to the average member. The expected "outcomes" were written and conceived with the idea of AALL "making a difference in the lives

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of members." That phrase was used throughout the planning process. Reading the strategic plan shows that AALL is committed to addressing a wide range of issues that are important and crucial to our "average" members. (Go to http://www.aallnet.org/about/strategic_plan.asp if you'd like to read the plan.)

Alvin Podboy: The average member is the future of the Association and the profession. The needs of the membership will guide where it goes in the future. Librarianship is not what it was 10 years ago and will probably change just as radically in the next 10, but it will be here to serve our clients. As long as we keep evolving individually and as a profession, the mission of service will be accomplished.

Bob Oakley: Every member is important to AALL. Each member can benefit from AALL, and each member can contribute. The biggest challenge is to make sure that AALL meets the needs of its members in a time of very rapid change. AALL works hard at listening to its members and developing its programs in response to those concerns. There are many potential changes on the horizon, but which of those become reality depend to a large extent on the needs and interests of the members.

What if I want to contribute, but don't want to be a leader?

Barbara Bintliff: For folks who enjoy contributing and participating but don't want the spotlight, I'd suggest they consider committee work! The opportunity for making a splash exists, but most of the time the work is done calmly, competently and quietly.

Frank Houdek: As editor of *Law Library Journal*, I have to put in a plug to the importance of contributing to the professional literature. Many people think they don't have time for serving on a national committee or working as an officer for an SIS or chapter. Perhaps this is true, but that doesn't mean they can't serve their profession by writing for one or more of our publications. Both *LLJ* and *AALL Spectrum* are obvious venues — and always looking for interesting, thoughtful, provocative and well-written manuscripts — but there is also the AALL Publications Series for those interested in book-length publication or chapter and SIS newsletters. We all struggle to keep up with the changes in our profession and the world of legal information, and an important way we do this is by looking to our literature for assistance. But that literature depends on contributions from law librarians, so keep in

mind that writing is just as valuable a way of participating as committee service, etc.

Ellen Quinn: Volunteering is not a real high-profile thing, but it is very satisfying. Something I think folks may not realize is that at the local level they can make their mark, learn a lot and have fun.

What about other ways to get involved?

Roger Parent: The SISs provide more opportunities than committees that are limited in number and appointed by the president each year. It's harder for a member to become active initially on committees because there is keen competition for membership on committees. SISs on the other hand provide more opportunities to volunteer and to become involved with other law librarians who share the same or similar special interests. I find that SISs are the grassroots for developing leaders in AALL. All board members are proud of their previous activities in SISs and recognize their value in helping them to rise in the Association.

Anita Anderson: My advice would be to join at least one of the Special Interest Sections of AALL. You will make friendships and professional bonds that will stay with you through your career. One of the best ways to actively volunteer is to offer to be a committee member for the SIS. You don't need to attend the Annual Meeting to be active. Most committee work for SCCLL SIS is carried out through e-mail and telephone conferencing. So it is easy to be an active member from any locality.

Herbert Cihak: Generally, the smaller SIS requires more of a commitment. What's great about AALL and its SIS structure is that there is a place for everyone. Chapter membership at the regional or local level requires active members in order to remain viable, but that is the beauty of library professional development — there is always a "help wanted" sign posted.

What if my employer doesn't support my involvement in AALL?

Lori Hedstrom: As soon as possible, even in an initial interview, I would let the employer know that in this profession members are expected to participate in Association activities. Not all employers will support this to the same extent but it is important to let them know that librarians should attend outside meetings and educational programs. Obviously financial support is desirable, but it is also important that they understand that not just anybody

can do your job and you need to keep up with the field and contribute to it. The employer benefits from having an employee who can call upon 5,000 colleagues nationwide for advice, research assistance and sources of information. A frequent lament among law librarians is that other people "don't understand what we do." It is our job to educate our employers to the benefits of Association participation.

Barbara Bintliff: [A message to the employer] Every professional needs continuing education to perform his or her job at the highest level. Like a judge, attorney or professor, a law librarian needs to know the advances in the field to deliver the best services possible. Your law librarian must have an opportunity to learn about advances in information technology, the impact on you of changes in the copyright laws, and the newest resources in international and foreign law, to provide the service you deserve. In addition, you need a law librarian who is skilled in management issues and can use time wisely. There is no way that your law librarian can achieve the level of excellence you seek without participating in continuing professional education. AALL, the largest association of law librarians in the world, is uniquely positioned to provide it. Your institution benefits more each time your law librarian improves his or her skills by attending an AALL Annual Meeting or other training.

Connection with others in AALL became all the more poignant in the wake of the events of Sept. 11. Immediate concerns for family and friends prompted many to contact them to assess their well being. Next on our minds and still close to our thoughts were those whom we have come to know through AALL. As with all Americans, we tried to reach out in whatever way we could to provide support to all those affected by the tragedy. Contacting our colleagues to check on their safety became a priority. The colleagues with whom we spoke were more than people we knew professionally through AALL. They were and are friends who we have come to know from becoming active in AALL. These types of connections are easily made in AALL and are symbolic of the true lasting benefit to us as we consider getting more involved in AALL.

Information on AALL's Annual Meeting, chapters, committees and SISs is located on AALL's Web site at <http://www.aallnet.org>.

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