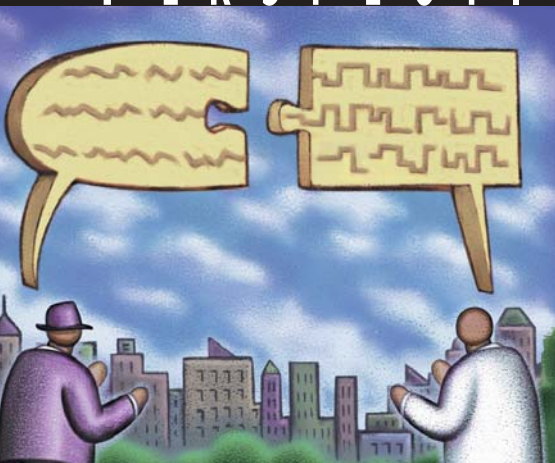


PERSPECTIVES: A Members' Forum



"Perspectives" serves as a members' forum and features articles on issues of concern to the profession.

At Home on the Edge of a Profession

by Travis McDade

There is nothing quite like the law library at the Supreme Court of the United States. Immediately arresting and even better the longer you linger, the library makes you feel like you're standing on the shoulders of giants just by being there. It's like a lot of things in Washington, D.C. in that respect: The outward beauty of the façade merely suggests the important things which rest within.

I found myself in that law library one day last winter completely by good luck. While type-A personalities may explain away happenstance by pointing to preparation, those of us who have been knocked about once too often by the fickle hand of fortune learn to appreciate good luck when we see it. It was lucky that, in my third year of law school, a former professor invited me to a constitutional law conference at the Supreme Court. It was lucky that, by hook and by crook, I managed to make it. And it was lucky that I happened to be standing in the right group of five people at that august institution the first evening when the law librarian offered to give us a quick tour.

Still, all of those things may have amounted to nothing more than a nice peek behind the curtain of Oz but for one other happy coincidence: I had just read an essay by Victor Zaslavsky, a former Soviet librarian, about the almost life-threatening hassle required for a scholar to get a look at a non-Soviet-published book in the U.S.S.R. The role of the librarian in the Soviet system seemed to me akin to the role of firemen in *Fahrenheit 451*. In that book, firemen didn't put out fires, they started them. In the Soviet system, librarians weren't there to help find information but to keep people from it.

This difference was brought into sharp focus as I stood ensconced in a room that, while unique in many ways, was similar to a thousand others around the nation: aisles of books stretching from floor to ceiling, rows of tables with green lamps, and carved wood that reminded me of old English studies. It was beautiful on its face, but that was just the veneer. This place worked. The librarian wasn't a gatekeeper or a curator. These books were being used, and there were people sitting at these tables. There are probably a thousand differences between a healthy society and an ailing one, but none so stark as this: A healthy society shines a light on its laws. A truly magnificent society employs people to help aim that light.

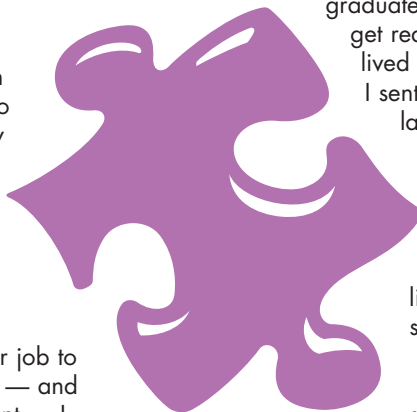
As I listened to the librarian talk about her job to a group of academics — and one bookish law student — I was reminded of the role of the piano tuner. Most piano players will admit that the only thing they know about the esoteric field of tuning — more an art than a science — is how to hand over a \$75 check twice a year to the person who does it. That's because the history of tuning starts with Pythagoras discovering a connection between musical consonance and mathematical relationships and gets progressively more complicated from there. Only a small fraternity of people get it, and it is they who keep the 10 million pianos in this country working.

That's the connection I made as I followed with rapt attention the short tour by the Supreme Court law librarian. This gigantic room full of books was indispensable to our civilization, and this one person was indispensable to this particular room of books. To me, that seemed like a lot of responsibility without a lot of fanfare. As I spent the rest of the weekend listening to the jargon-addled ramblings of "important" academics and the slippery slick poses of high-paid confidence men, that seemed like just the tonic. I began the application process to library school within a week.

What I never expected was the camaraderie. I knew that being a law librarian would provide an environment where I could grow intellectually, where I could be a part of something more important than a single person and, I was soon to discover, a profession where I'd probably never want for work opportunities. I just never expected to like so many of the people I work with. And that started as soon as I was introduced to the field.

Upon receiving my acceptance to graduate school, I set about trying to get real-world library experience. I lived in Cleveland at the time, so I sent out letters to several of the larger firms explaining my situation and asking if they had room for some summer help. Among the responses I received was one from a firm librarian who managed somehow to get me on for 20 hours a week. Those of you who have ever squeezed blood from a stone know the Herculean effort it takes to create a position in a law firm. Within the same week, I was told that the library at my law school had done something similar for me.

So after a summer that gave me a cursory introduction to cataloging, reference, "projects" and that singular phenomenon known as book moving, I arrived in central Illinois with a good sense of the field I had chosen and a newly discovered aptitude for reshelving. I also assumed that I had exhausted my luck when it came to working with good folks. I was in for a surprise.



My time as a graduate student in the University of Illinois law library has been almost universally positive. (The one exception, of course, has been the steady destruction of my diet by the abundance of sweet-laden "get-togethers.") Where my time in Cleveland was spent carrying out the varied projects of an academic library and putting out the small fires of a partner-driven law firm, my time here has been largely spent doing the one thing I thought law librarianship would be: reference.

Spending the bulk of my time at the reference desk has enhanced my education by at least a factor of 10. While my classes are certainly valuable, they are only intermittently — and sometimes, accidentally — so. But every time I'm on the reference desk I'm learning something that will come up again. Whether it's explaining to first-year law students the value of West's Digest or carefully navigating the Sargasso Sea of the patent process with a pro se patron without

actually giving legal advice, it is all worth my time. After the excitement I felt having just completed an attenuated session of tracking down an obscure Australian treaty, I told a colleague that working the reference desk is like a never-ending Mensa tryout but without all the people in turtleneck sweaters.

I suspect there will come a time when I'm not so sanguine about the idea of spending so much time on the reference desk ... and I bet it will have something to do with legislative histories. But I'm not there yet. Right now I feel very fortunate to get paid to spend my days in a library trying to figure out legal problems without actually having to figure out legal problems. If someone had told me at the beginning of law school that there was a job where I could work on legal matters, where I would be encouraged to research and publish, but where I wouldn't spend my evenings wondering if I'd done enough with my days, I wouldn't have believed

them. And I certainly wouldn't have spent 2½ years with butterflies in my stomach. Now I think maybe fortune is just paying me back for all those years of sour luck.

Though we may not think about it much, how we spend our days is how we spend our lives. That occurred to me as I spoke with an attorney friend a few weeks ago; he said that the only thing he would hate more than being surrounded by books all day was working with so many people. I told him that he hadn't met the people I'd met. Then I told him, since it was 9 p.m. and he was still at work, that he should probably call his wife instead of me. I didn't have an answer for him on the question of being surrounded by books; that might not be for everyone. For me, it's just about right.

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