



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

## The Lighter Side of Dealing with Difficult Users

by Paul Healey

Librarians deal with a wide variety of people. Most library users are a pleasure to serve — nice, friendly, intelligent folk who are looking for information. But just about every library, including most law libraries, must deal with people who are not so easy to serve. These people are angry, difficult, addled, mentally ill, cantankerous, confused, eccentric, idiosyncratic, ignorant, mean-spirited or just hard to get along with. Struggling with deep and difficult problems, many of these patrons deserve our sympathy more than anything else. Others are creating their own problems by displacing their anger, refusing to be responsible for their own problems or insisting that they are the center of the universe. Still others are just plain weird.

Any law librarian who has been working for a while will have at least one interesting story about dealing with a difficult user, and most will have many. In any gathering of law librarians where the talk turns to user behaviors, the anecdotes will spill out thick and heavy. This article recounts a few of those anecdotes. Names

*of patrons have been concealed to protect the misguided. No actual patrons or librarians have been harmed in the writing of this article.*

Law is a difficult topic for the lay person to understand. There are different kinds of law, as well as different conceptions of what law is. Alvin Podboy, director of libraries at Baker & Hostetler LLP in Cleveland, once had to think on his feet in dealing with a user with a specific request. "I had a pro se patron come in and ask for 'the book of the laws.' I advised her that the library had hundreds of thousands of law books, and if she was more specific, I'd be glad to try and assist her," Podboy recalled. "She became very upset and irate and reiterated that she wanted 'the one book of the law' and that she knew we had it. I relented and gave her the Bible."

Then there was the user who asked Mary Rumsey, foreign, comparative and international law librarian at the University of Minnesota Law Library, for information on "resurrection rights." Rumsey told him she wasn't familiar with that term but wondered if it was a property concept. "He said, 'Yes. It's an ancient Greek property concept. I'd like you to look it up on LexisNexis™ under E-u-r-y-d-i-c-e or O-r-p-h-e-u-s or P-e-r-s-e-p-h-o-n-e.'" These were all names of characters from Greek mythology who visited the realm of the dead," Rumsey said. "I determined that I couldn't help him."

Most pro se users really need legal advice, which they are often seeking from the law librarian. Law librarians who deal with the public can all tell stories of their efforts to avoid practicing law while assisting users. Some users claim they understand that the librarian can't give a legal opinion, but then persist in asking for advice. One patron gave Rumsey a long-winded explanation of his divorce, then asked for a form that would prevent his ex-spouse from moving out of state. Rumsey explained several times that she couldn't advise him on what form to use, but that she could show him books of forms that might have what he was looking for. He finally uttered the classic response, "I don't need legal advice, I just need you to tell me what form to use."

On the other hand, sometimes some practical advice is called for. Sharon Wayland, director of the Tarrant County

Law Library in Fort Worth, Texas, remembered patron who asked a librarian, "If I tear up my marriage license, will I be divorced?" The librarian wisely replied, "If you tear up your birth certificate, will you be dead?"

Sometimes the requests of pro se users can be a bit creepy. A user asked Wayland if the library had "a description of the crimes you can commit." Then there was the woman who called from California and said she was moving to Tennessee. "She said she had been committing adultery in California and planned to commit adultery in Tennessee," Wayland said. "She wanted to know if adultery was a crime in Texas just in case she decided to commit adultery while she was driving through Texas on her way to Tennessee."

April Schwartz, business law librarian at the University of Minnesota Law Library, recalled the time an especially loud user was at the reference desk. "I was working the reference desk, and I had lots of students standing in front of me, doing cite checks and class assignments," she explained. "A guy walked in and fairly shouted that he wanted the Minnesota law on mayhem so he could defend himself. Apparently he was perfectly OK with everyone knowing about this. To help me even more, he said he needed the part about cutting off and mutilating body parts. He certainly sent a hush over the crowd."

Sally Curtis Askew, reference and public service librarian at the University of Georgia law library, had a brush with the type of client most of us would like to avoid. He was in the library almost every day and obviously knew how to use legal materials and conduct legal research. Gradually, he became friendly with the library staff, chatting with them and asking questions from time to time. "For about six months, he was in here regularly, and at Christmas he brought in a large tin of wrapped candy as a Christmas gift to the staff. Then, we didn't see him any more," Askew said. Several months later staff members heard news reports of a man who had been arrested for abducting the wife of another man, killing her and flying a small plane over the Okefenokee Swamp to dump her body where he thought it would never be found. "The name sounded familiar, and later that day we realized it was our former researcher," she said.

It is not uncommon for pro se library users to misunderstand or mispronounce the names of legal concepts. Some mishaps can be quite humorous. Helen Reed, librarian at William H. Miller Law Library in Evansville, Ind., reported two such incidents. In the first, a user requested the “Ominous Streets Act.” He said it had something to do with guns. In the second, a pro se divorce patron was looking for a form he called a “final degree of delusion.” That one is not that uncommon.

Charles Dyer, director of the San Diego County Public Law Library, recalled a user who asked for help on “the delusions of marriage.”

Wayland remembered a patron who asked if the library was “a government suppository” and the woman who came in wanting a divorce because her husband had died and she wanted to remarry. “Her sister had told her she would have to get an ‘uncontested divorce,’” Wayland said.

Law firm and other private law libraries may not have to deal with pro se users, but they do have to deal with attorneys and summer associates. Though trained in law, both groups can provide some memorable experiences. Summer associates are notorious for their inability to conduct research in spite of what librarians try to teach them in law school. David Webster, research librarian at Ballard Spahr Andrews & Ingersoll in Philadelphia, described a summer associate from a few years ago who “asked about the head notes that West adds to published cases,” Webster said. “The associate said, ‘I know that the head notes are searchable in WESTLAW, but is there anywhere that they’re all collected in print? That would be really helpful.’”

Law students can behave the same way at school. Julia Wentz, associate director of Loyola University School of Law Library in Chicago, recalled helping a third-year

student with a particular issue. It is reasonable to assume that a third-year law student would have some knowledge of how law works. “She was using the *Federal Practice Digest*. I explained that she should use the state digest because it was an issue of state law,” Wentz said. “Her response was, ‘Oh, I suppose they wouldn’t want to make a big deal out of it.’ It took me a few seconds to realize that she thought a party’s desire to ‘make a federal case of it’ determined jurisdiction!”

And finally, what sometimes seems like a ridiculous reference request may turn out to be true after all, as Kathy Carlson, state law librarian at the Wyoming State Law Library, once found out. “A number of years ago I received a call from someone trying to produce one of those ‘true life’ television shows on strange but true laws. He was trying to confirm that Wyoming

***(continued on page 32)***

had a law prohibiting the photographing of rabbits in winter without a permit. I searched but never found such a law," Wentz explained. "The postscript is that several weeks after I received the question, the local newspaper ran a story on some of what I refer to as 'slap happy' laws. The Wyoming legislature meets only a short time each year, and if they are behind,

they have been known to stay in session late into the night. In some of these late night sessions they can get a little 'slap happy' and make some odd proposals. Lo and behold. One of these proposals mentioned by the newspaper was a proposal to prohibit the photographing of rabbits in winter without a permit."

**Paul Healey** ([phealey@law.uiuc.edu](mailto:phealey@law.uiuc.edu)) is head of public services and associate professor of library administration at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and serves as editorial director of AALL Spectrum.