

The Multifaceted World of an AALL Executive Director

Roger H. Parent Reflects on His Nine Years at AALL

by Kay Todd



In January, AALL Executive Director Roger H. Parent announced that he will retire at the end of the year.

An M.L.S. graduate of Simmons College in Boston, Parent came to AALL with both library and association experience. After working in a variety of public, academic and private libraries, he became the staff development officer at the Princeton University Library. He moved to Chicago in 1979, where he joined the American Library Association. He left ALA as the deputy executive director and chief operating officer to serve as executive director of AALL in 1993.

At AALL, Parent guided the Executive Board through the development and implementation of two strategic plans, resulting in numerous enhancements to AALL's programs and member benefits. His achievements include the design of the regional Professional Development Program; the publication of the Association's first magazine, AALL Spectrum; and the expansion of the Washington Affairs Office. Frank Houdek's article on page 10 reviews many of Parent's significant accomplishments during his nine years as executive director of AALL.

When Parent retires from AALL in December, he plans to move to St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, sail around the Caribbean and spend more time with his family.

Parent recently spoke with Kay Todd, 1993–1994 AALL president, at the AALL Annual Meeting in Orlando, Fla., about how AALL has changed during his tenure. This is an edited transcript.

Q. Before becoming an association executive, you were a librarian in both academic and public libraries. What prepared you for shifting your career from librarianship to association management?

A. An association executive requires knowledge of the field of the association membership. My librarianship background put me in a good position. I understand the nature of the work of the membership. I've been on the front line at reference desks. I've done collection development. I've also worked in special libraries. The broader that background experience is for anybody in a position like mine, the better positioned

he or she is to succeed as association staff. Although I never worked in a law library, my work with special collections has been helpful. I started my career as an art librarian and spent seven years working with special collections, making sure that the collection reflected the community we served. That experience is comparable to what our members do all the time.

Q. What are the differences between association management and working in a library?

A. One of the big differences is the budget. Most of our members who work in libraries have allocation budgets; their focus is making sure they don't spend more than they've been given. In an association, you are responsible for generating revenues to support programs. Some knowledge about business and some entrepreneurial experience — being creative in how you generate revenues, particularly non-dues revenue — are important. That's a big distinction. Association executives also need a whole range of special skills. Association staff has financial responsibilities, so you need CPAs. You need people who are familiar with convention planning, contract negotiations and working with hotels.

Q. What skills are essential for an executive director to succeed?

A. All presidents come to the Association with some terrific ideas, things they would like to see happen during their tenures. Most people don't get to be president unless they've served many years in the profession and the Association. They come with a lot of experience and knowledge, not only about the profession but about AALL itself.

One of the essential skills for the executive director is the ability to stand back, put your own ego aside, put your own agenda aside, and help the president succeed in doing what he or she wants to do and also help him or her have a good experience as president. Although it's a very stressful time for AALL presidents because they have so much on their agendas, I think most of them should walk away feeling that they've learned something from the experience, and hopefully they've had fun doing it.

Q. Were there ever times in your career when you had to decide where your responsibility lay — with the Executive Board's agenda or the president's agenda?

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A. That has not happened in AALL. There's a culture here of the president not taking over the organization. There's a culture of letting the board be the primary decision-maker for the organization. Although presidents certainly provide some focus and carry out particular projects in which they are interested, I haven't experienced a conflict between what they want to do and what the board wants to do.

We also have safeguards: the strategic plan that the board has endorsed, a planning process and a financial plan. All these things are very healthy. They prevent any one person, the executive director or the president, from having a dominant agenda of his or her own. At AALL, the board knows its responsibilities and works as a unit. Where boards are divided — where they're not clear on objectives for the organization — staff is confused and torn between competing priorities and allegiances.

Q. You mentioned the AALL board and its culture of speaking and acting as one, without public dissension. I'm sure there has been dissension on issues, but the public face of the board has been unified. How has that come about?

A. I wouldn't use the word "dissension" because I have never sensed that on the AALL board. Certainly there have been differences of opinion. When he was president, Pat Kehoe used to say that even reasonable men can disagree and we have to respect differences of opinion. That's a normal and accepted part of working in groups.

Q. The popular "Bowling Alone" study suggests that people are seeking fewer group "connections." What do you think lies ahead for professional associations in terms of membership numbers and what members want?

A. First of all, we're very lucky right now. The Association is in a strong position. Whatever happens in the future, we are building on the base of a strong Association. Changes in associations are evolutionary. Nothing happens overnight, and the core things that members want from associations don't change a lot. The way you deliver programs and services might change, but not what members want. They have an ongoing interest in continuing-education opportunities. They have an ongoing need for networking, so members can learn from each other. Those

common threads [in AALL] are going to continue for a long time.

What may change is how those services are delivered. During the last two years — through our Professional Development Program — we have been rethinking the Annual Meeting as the sole delivery mechanism for continuing education. We're trying to get programs out regionally. Today we're partnering with the West Legal Edcenter to mount some of our conference programs on that Web site, providing access and [continuing legal education] credits to those members and nonmembers who want to purchase those programs. This is one of our initial steps towards delivering continuing education through the Internet.

We've had a lot more experience with listserv discussions and some experience with teleconferencing. But we're not changing the goal of providing continuing education. Instead we are coming up with new and less expensive formats of delivering continuing education.

Q. It's clear that we are an association for those who deal with legal information. Do you think today's economic times place particular stresses on associations whose membership cannot grow infinitely? Can AALL be a viable single-focus information association?

A. Yes. Consultant Helen Little did an excellent study of the membership several years ago. After talking to members and holding focus groups, she concluded that AALL is a "boutique" association. She urged us not to dilute the focus of the Association just to bring in more members. She acknowledged that our members were highly satisfied with the Association. Furthermore she thought that if we tried to bring in new members from peripheral groups merely to grow the size of the membership, we would dilute our focus. If AALL brought in additional members from different groups like trustees or paraprofessionals, they would want programs and services targeted to their needs. Little said every time you bring in a new group, you must also refocus your organization to serve the needs of that group.

Q. While keeping your core of membership happy?

A. While *trying* to keep the core membership happy. Little felt we were in a strong position because we do have a core membership that shares common interests.

This is a strength that we should build on. The challenge for AALL is that members' appetite for programs and services extends beyond the resources from dues that are available to the Association.

Partnerships have been helpful. I mentioned the West Legal Edcenter. That's the kind of new service we can't provide on our own. We cannot do everything, even though we know there's a need and an interest. Our most successful teleconferences occurred when we partnered with other library associations. In those instances, the target group was huge. Over 10,000 people participated. Therefore, the costs were defrayed among many participants. For those teleconferences, you must find the right balance between content that has a general interest to many librarians and relevance to law librarians. We have been very reliant on publishers to help support new programs. They have been very generous to AALL, but we need to strike the right balance. When we're looking for outside support, priorities are shifted a little bit to what the donor or granting agency wants. We have to define the core set of member benefits that we're going to provide, then define what we will do through other kinds of arrangements, such as partnerships with other associations, fund raising, etc.

Q. What are some accomplishments that have provided you with particular satisfaction over the past nine years?

A. One of the most important jobs for an association executive is to build trust and confidence in the organization among the leadership and the members. In the past, I would hear from board members about member complaints. That doesn't happen anymore. I surmise that members are content and feel confident in the Headquarters and staff. That wasn't easy to accomplish. The board wants to feel confident that the resources of the Association are being handled properly and that the information they're being given is accurate and complete. I have taken that as a personal responsibility. I think my success in developing the board's confidence in the staff has been a tremendous help to AALL. Board members are able to focus on what is of real importance: programs, services and the agenda for the Association.

AALL has been fortunate to have

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relationships with vendors that are willing to help the Association. During my tenure, we increased the size of the restricted endowment from about \$100,000 for scholarships to over \$600,000 today — a huge increase.

The major endowments that were created are the research fund, where LexisNexis™ contributed \$100,000; the Strait minority scholarship, where West contributed \$150,000; and the LexisNexis™ John R. Johnson Memorial Scholarship that's over \$200,000. The board wanted more long-term funding for those programs, and we're grateful for the corporate support. This means that the scholarships and the research activities can continue steadily over time.

Q. You came to AALL with a sophisticated knowledge of finances. Is that a skill that you developed through continuing education?

A. Yes. My experience at the American Library Association was incredible. When I served as chief operating officer for eight years, it allowed me to be in constant, almost daily, communication with its financial staff. I gained a lot of knowledge that I was able to apply at AALL.

Q. What experience did you gain at AALL about legal publishers?

A. AALL is conflicted about publisher relations — the need to advocate with publishers for prices and services that are in the best interests of libraries while at the same time holding out our hands for corporate support. As executive director, I often found myself in the middle. I feel good about my success in building long-term relationships with vendors. I've concentrated on developing their trust and confidence. When they support the organization, they want to make sure that the activities they support reflect well on them.

I've stayed away from the advocacy issues because those are member issues. The members, the librarians who are their customers, have the strongest voice with the publishers. Working with Frank Houdek when he was chair of [the Committee on Relations with Information Vendors], we changed the focus of CRIV from being exclusively a complaint-resolution committee to one where CRIV is far more knowledgeable about publishing and involved in building long-term relationships between publishers and AALL. They have achieved some of

their new knowledge through site visits that were started a few years ago. With its Web site, member alerts and many other activities, CRIV changed the nature of the relationship between itself and AALL and the vendors.

Q. You have obviously worked with many different boards. What are the characteristics of a good board?

A. There are the obvious ones: that people work well together and have a common purpose. In AALL, we've had board retreats every year to train new boards. An important piece of each retreat has been determining priorities for the next year. We've been very good in that regard.

It is equally important for the board to be fully engaged. That's reflected in people understanding the materials that are presented to them for action. It also means paying attention to what the committees and [Special Interest Sections] are doing and supporting those groups. It's also important for board members to understand agenda materials and to come with their own views on possible actions the Association could take. Diverse points of view are important and everyone must participate.

Q. How do you avoid disagreements or situations where the executive director tries to move the Association in a direction that differs from the board?

A. It's a mistake for an executive director to have his or her own agenda that is at odds with the board's. That indicates that the executive director doesn't really understand association management or the organization. The board understands the organization a lot better than any one executive director. The board sets the broad direction for the association and wisely lets the executive director figure out how to accomplish it. How goals are met really requires the experience and the knowledge of the professional association executive. The AALL board has been willing to let the staff, not just the executive director, figure out the best way of getting it done. When association executives have ideas about changes that they would like to see, that they think are in the best interest of the association, they must bring the board along. They also need to bring the membership along rather than going on their own to change the nature of the organization. This approach — broad-based consultation — will take time, but it's the only way.

The way we introduced continuing education regionally is a good example. That was a major change for AALL. The members helped to shape the program and influenced the way the board thought about it. The ultimate result is that the staff is implementing this program within a broad framework that came from the membership rather than the executive director or staff.

Q. AALL seems to have a good system of strategic planning and making initiatives or goals a part of the financial long-range planning process, where the board sets the goals for the year and the financial process then allocates resources. Is it an optimal way of applying resources?

A. I think so. Having played a role in shaping how it's done, I certainly feel vested in it, but it seems to work. There are no indications that the board doesn't like this process. There are no indications that members don't have a chance to request things that they would like to see from the organization. So it seems to be working well. Conflict is an example of things not working. Micromanaging is an example of things not working. I just don't see these things occurring right now in AALL. It's a process that evolved over time. It wasn't something that was imposed on AALL. A lot of people shaped the way the process works now, and it took many years to get it to work as smoothly as it does.

Q. AALL has had outreach efforts for years with other organizations and with government relations on programs where AALL participates beyond its own boundaries. What do you think about the significance of these relationships and activities?

A. AALL makes a large investment in building relationships. I have been most involved with the library associations, while the AALL presidents have been more involved with the law-related organizations, such as the American Bar Association Council of the Section on Legal Education. Relationship-building is one of the most important things that an association does over time with other groups that share common interests. We've had two stellar examples of how that benefits everybody.

One is the work of the Washington Affairs Office and the Shared Legal Capability, a group that represents the library community to key decision-makers. Bob Oakley and Mary Alice Baish [of the Washington Affairs Office] are recognized

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as knowledgeable experts in their field, and they often speak for the whole library community. That reflects positively on AALL and on law librarians. It's a very good example of where we've had impact beyond our own community by working collaboratively with other associations.

I feel most excited about my role in the four-year effort to sponsor the international conference in Boston of the International Federation of Library Associations. Not only was that conference a huge success in attracting people from all over the world to Boston, it raised AALL's visibility among librarians internationally. As an outcome of the IFLA conference, AALL and the International Association of Law Libraries are creating the first discussion group for law librarians at IFLA. They will meet for the first time in Glasgow, Scotland, this year. It raises our visibility internationally at a time when it's very important for us to do that.

Q. What are some of the challenges AALL will face in the next 10 years?

A. There's really one thing that comes to my mind: the Professional Development Program. Providing continuing education for our members is extraordinarily important and has a very high priority. However we haven't really got that program on solid ground yet despite wonderful support from BNA Inc. We still face some challenges in terms of how we deliver programs. Are workshops at the local level the best approach long term? Are the program topics

and the way we go about selecting program topics working as well as they should? How do we pay for and support this program on an ongoing basis? There's a tremendous amount of price resistance from our members to paying registration fees over \$200. The next executive director is going to have to bring some creativity to that effort.

Q. Clearly the Association's investment fund fluctuates somewhat, but the Association's investment manager seems to have been successful in keeping the fund on an even keel.

A. AALL has used the same investment strategy for a long time [with two different investment managers]. Funds are invested conservatively. We minimize the risks that we're willing to take. We're probably never going to out-perform the market, but at the same time, the losses will never exceed dramatically the stock market either. We have knowledgeable people at Chevy Chase Trust managing the portfolio, which has grown to almost \$2 million today. Our current treasurer, Anne C. Matthewman, continues the commitment to this philosophy about the permanent investment fund that her predecessors put into place. So there's no danger of our beginning to chip away at the value of that fund.

Q. Are there any particular aspects of the job that you enjoyed, that you particularly looked forward to?

A. Member interaction, without any question whatsoever. That's the part I love the best because I find working with the

members intellectually challenging. I am always working with different groups of people, and there's an almost unlimited range of issues that people are interested in and concerned about. It really is a way of keeping in touch with what's happening in the field. I love the fun of interacting with members socially and in business meetings as well. I think we have had some of the most fun at meetings where people are really engaged in what they are doing but at the same time not taking themselves too seriously. When working with Association leaders, I work with the best and the brightest in the field. They are the people who are also successful at home. They tend to be the leaders of their libraries, leaders of their chapters and leaders at the national level. It's really quite wonderful to have a chance to work with people like that continually as I have for over 20 years.

Q. Has this been a personally rewarding job? Are you pleased you took the job?

A. Yes, this experience in AALL has been the best. It's terrific to end a career in librarianship and association management on such a high note. I feel good about what I have contributed. I feel that my contributions have been recognized and appreciated by the leaders and the members. It's wonderful to end a career and to leave a position where people respect you and express so much support.

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