

Confessions

of a New Law Librarian

by Kimberly Barskaitiki



Last year I was hired at a law firm for a part-time summer secretarial job. I

strangely had a premonition my first day, as I walked into the skyscraper, that I would work there a looooooong time. "I'll be here forever," I sensed. "Maybe I'll have to settle for clerical work, but this is the first day of the rest of my life." I had been a student my whole life, searching for a subject that interested me and at the same time would lead to gainful employment. I never was able to commit to any of my office jobs seriously because they underutilized my knowledge and skills. I was the best example of the epithet "overeducated and underemployed."

I got to know the firm well, and to my amazement, half way through the summer an opening in the library came along. I hadn't dared to anticipate any opening at all in the library. The present employees had all been there for some years. I didn't even dare to think that someone might leave. At my secretarial interview, I only mentioned that I finished my MLIS coursework in the spring and was taking comprehensive exams in the summer. When the library opening came along, I felt so fortunate that the office manager considered me and called me to talk about it. It also wasn't so bad that I got a nice raise! I could actually afford to live decently, to pay all my basic living expenses, and maintain a savings account, for the first time in my life.

Although the job in the firm library was mostly clerical, I was fortunate to handle some reference requests. The librarians taught me all their basic tricks for the most common requests. I had earned a paralegal certificate some years ago, which gave me an edge in starting to learn legal research. The librarians passed

along to me requests for case decisions, articles, company information, and news developments.

I also started to learn LEXIS and WESTLAW. I felt fortunate to have taken Online Retrieval in my MLIS program. I hadn't clearly understood some concepts, but merely having heard some terminology, and gaining some familiarity with strategies, made me feel more comfortable than I would have felt jumping into the deep end of database searching with no preparation. My

employers understood that I was interested in the job well enough for some basic library experience, but eventually I would move on to a professional position.

I took my comps and passed in July, and then graduated just about the time I started working as the library assistant. At work, I filed looseleaf updates, filed, filed, and filed some more. By winter, it was getting pretty dull. I felt depressed, lacking in reference experience. I feared nobody would be interested in me as a new graduate with only a few months of fieldwork.

Lo and behold, soon a librarian announced she was leaving the firm. My jaw dropped. She was leaving for an academic reference job. Not only was I excited for her to move into the wonderful world of academics, but I was excited for myself because I would fit well in her spot.

And move I did. I was elated. I was for once in my life in the right place at the right time. I took my best friend out to dinner. She said, "I can't call you *underemployed* anymore. You're just plain employed." At the office, we had a month to find a replacement for my job. I started handling more reference requests. I learned how to do the cataloging. It was wonderful to go to a job every day that offered more than dull, routine tasks. I had to use my brain and analyze information and solve information mysteries using the endless resources on the World Wide Web. Best of all, I didn't mind going back to work Monday morning.

I was excited to visit my library school to pitch the library assistant vacancy to students in the program. It was a superb chance for a

student to gain library work experience and make a living at the same time.

I find reference work and serials management intellectually stimulating with a range of deadlines and a variety of problems to solve—some fairly straightforward and less time-consuming, but others more involved and difficult, requiring more effort and thought. At times we have crises or bumps in the road. But in the end, problems work themselves out. I try to learn from my mistakes to avoid them in the future. If I goof up (which happens more than I care for!), then I apologize and try to make good on the problem.

One day I arrived at work a little bit late. The library director promptly informed me that we had to attend a presentation in 15 minutes on saegis.com for searching trademarks. "Wow," I thought, "This is really cool. Learning new software for work. And although it wrecks my agenda for the morning, I can handle it!"

However corny it may sound, after having many mega-dull, go-nowhere, peanuts-paying jobs for years, and after fearing getting stuck in them forever, I'm tickled pink to be a "real librarian" now. The whole professional world has opened before me: volunteering on committees, the chance to meet other librarians at lunches and dinners, and to hear about their work experiences and challenges. A chance to demonstrate scholarship for more than just a grade on a transcript.

I thank my lucky stars every day for having discovered a vocation for which I was qualified to study ... a vocation whose challenges I could rise to meet without being overmatched. I am immensely thankful to my MLIS program, my professors, and my employer for helping me achieve a wonderful life.

My mother, who passed away many years ago, was dissatisfied with her life of clerical work in spite of her college education. She wanted better for me. I think she would not be disappointed.

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