



## What strange, silly, or embarrassing situation happened early in your career?

\*The following responses are available on AALLNET only. For the responses published in the December 2007 issue of *AALL Spectrum*, please click [here](#).

“During my first year of librarianship, many, many years ago, I was asked to give a presentation on what was then leading edge information technology—the optical coincidence system. The presentation was given to 11 visitors from Japan. I had scripted the whole thing, practiced, and did what I thought was a great job. The visitors all smiled, some took my photograph, bowed, and left. Only later did I learn that 10 of the 11 spoke no English, and the translator had no idea what I was talking about so he didn’t bother to translate. I guess I should have suspected something when there were no questions, but I was so sure I had done such a terrific job that I thought there was nothing to ask.”

- *Mary Ann E. Archer, associate director for public services at William Mitchell College of Law Warren E. Burger Library in St. Paul, Minnesota*

“I’m probably going to regret this, however, I had an embarrassing moment during the time I spent working in a medical library that I think about from time to time. Basically I held a part time position there for about a year and a half while working on my MLS degree, and one of my duties involved devoting a few hours towards shelving and shelf reading. Although necessary, these duties in particular can be boring, and I was able to get through it by listening to music with my CD player and headphones. Unfortunately I would dance and lightly hum to myself as I did so. However, with the headphones on, I could never tell how loud I was humming. One evening a song that I enjoyed in particular (possibly from Michael Jackson) started playing, and I lost control and found myself grooving to it and humming fairly loudly. I was shelving at the same

time, so after a minute or two I turned around and there’s my boss with two other co-workers and a patron. My boss and the patron had a bewildered look on their faces while my co-workers were laughing and imitating my movements. I did not hear them walk in at all, and I don’t think a human being could have straightened up faster than I did, although it was too late. Also I’m a horrible dancer, which made it even worse. My boss didn’t really ask me about it after that, however, shelving and shelf reading became one of my permanent duties from then on. Moral of the story... well I guess there’s a reason why they play classical music on elevators.”

- *Michael W. Benain, serials and electronic services librarian at WilmerHale in Washington, D.C.*

“I started my law librarian career seven years ago. I’d been a technical services librarian in academic libraries prior to entering the corporate world, so this was my first real experience in the legal environment. In my very first week as assistant librarian, I was alone in the library when an agitated older male attorney appeared in my office. He was polite but emphatic in his request that I find an older state case for him ASAP. His detail recall was sketchy, but he knew the subject area and that one of the party names was “Such and Such,” or possibly “So and So.” He then stood there, looking over my shoulder, waiting for me to produce it! My mind went blank. My boss was in a meeting, so I couldn’t ask for assistance. I was stymied for a moment, but then I had what I thought was a flash of brilliance—I told him that I would bring the case to his office so that he didn’t have to waste his valuable time while I retrieved it. He was happy for me to do that, thanked me, and left. With him gone,

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I was able to concentrate and found the case within about three minutes. I collected the case from the printer, turned around to go deliver it...and only then realized that I had absolutely no idea who the attorney was. I'd sent him away without asking his name, his office location, or anything else that would help me find him. I was so embarrassed. Fortunately, my very kind boss returned from his meeting just then and, upon hearing my story, showed me a 'face book' of all the lawyers in the firm, and I found the attorney in question—one of the most senior partners of all, it turned out. I delivered the case without further incident, but I had learned a valuable lesson about always finding out who is asking for assistance!"

- *Jennifer McLeod Finch, director of library and research services at McLane, Graf, Raulerson & Middleton in Manchester, New Hampshire*

"I began my first job as evening reference librarian at Seton Hall University Law School in October 1973. I was hired with no background in legal materials and did not have a law librarianship course in library school (Queens College), though I had English legal and constitutional history background from my graduate degree in history. The third week on the job I was asked to give a tour of the library to one of the classes. Almost every word out of my mouth was wrong in describing various titles, as the professor pointed out. My lack of knowledge of the books really showed up, and I was quite embarrassed about how little I knew at the time. Since then I have mastered all of the basic sources."

- *Joel Fishman, assistant director for lawyer services at Duquesne University Center for Legal Information Allegheny County Law Library in Pittsburgh*

"I learned a valuable lesson early in my career. I attended a legislative forum as a representative of our state government libraries consortium, although many types of libraries were present. In one of the sessions, a woman stood up and gave an impassioned speech about funding for childrens' programs in public libraries. At a later social gathering, I was introduced to her. Making small talk, I commented on her earlier speech and inquired if she was a children's librarian.

Her colleague laughed and informed me that she was the director of the Minneapolis Public Library. I now make it a practice to inquire, when meeting another librarian for the first time, if he or she is the director of the library (I figure I can always work my way down). If they laugh uproariously, I know we're on the same level. More often than not, though, the answer has been 'yes.'"

- *Karla Gedell, research librarian at the Minnesota Office of Attorney General in St. Paul*

"My first month or so on the job, an attorney walked into the law library with his legal assistant. After introducing me to his assistant, he proceeded to tell her that we had a top-notch law library and that the librarians were great, etc. Then he turned to me with his reference question and said, 'We're looking for lis pendens.' I thought carefully for a moment, and then replied, 'I'm sorry, I don't know her.' An odd look crossed his face, and then he went back into the stacks, pulling out a book with a section discussing notices of lis pendens. I was mortified. I'm sure that attorney had a good laugh later about the librarian who didn't know who 'Liz Pendens' was!"

- *Katy Gill, assistant law librarian at Collin County Law Library in McKinney, Texas*

"In my third year as a law firm librarian, I accepted a position in a different part of New York City—in midtown. Previously I had worked for two law firms located in the same building in lower Manhattan. Each firm was on a high floor of this 60-story building. The library I had just left enjoyed spectacular views of New York Harbor. A few weeks into my new midtown job, I received a call from a partner asking in which direction the Statue of Liberty faced. The question did not seem to be related to his work—perhaps he had a wager with someone or was completing the crossword puzzle. Yet, I knew how to answer the question immediately. I telephoned a colleague at my former library and asked him to please look out a window. When I called the partner back, he wanted to know how I had found the answer

so quickly and where I had found the information. It was an example of not only what you know, but whom you know!”

- *Martha Goldman, library services manager at Jones Day in New York*

“My first library job was as acquisition assistant in a medical library. This was well before the days of online catalogs. One of my jobs was to gather precataloging information on new titles, create temporary cards, and file them in our card catalog—you know, the old-fashioned kind with drawers and rods. The first time I had cards to file—I hadn’t been on the job a week—I carefully removed the rod from the drawer, pulled the drawer out, and proceeded to turn it upside down on my foot. Cards went everywhere! At least my new employer learned very quickly that I could alphabetize.”

- *Riva Laughlin, librarian at Haynes and Boone, LLP in Houston*

“One year relatively early in my career as a reference librarian in a law firm, it was my turn at the reference desk. I took a request from an attorney whose client was interested in information relating to his estate planning. The attorney wanted me to find out who could provide the service of freezing the client’s head upon his death! She assured me that even though she was asking for this information on April 1, it was no joke—the client really wanted to explore this option. After some false starts contacting cryogenics labs that clearly did not handle human heads, I was able to locate about four companies in the United States that did provide this service. I ordered the brochures and turned the information over to the attorney, but never heard if the client ever became a popsicle.”

- *Jan Lawrence, manager of information resources at Dorsey & Whitney LLP in Seattle*

“It was my first week at my new job as head of reference at a high-powered D.C. law firm in 1987. The firm had just moved into new offices, and everyone was still settling in. I was naturally anxious to make a good first impression—and prove to them

that I could do this job! I got a phone call on the reference line, and the caller asked for the current exchange rate for French Francs. I asked for her name and phone number so that I could obtain the information and call her back, and she said, ‘You don’t have that information right there? You shouldn’t have to make me wait for it.’

“‘Man,’ I thought, ‘this is going to be tough! I am not sure I am cut out for this!’ I told her that I didn’t have it, but that I could get it right away and call her back. I should have been suspicious when she gave me an outside number instead of just an extension, but I thought she might be calling from a client’s office or from home. I obtained the information from a bank (this was before the Internet!) and called her back.

“When I introduced myself and told her where I was calling from, she said, ‘But I called Riggs Bank! What are you doing returning my call?’ It turns out a local bank had our phone numbers before we had moved into our new space. I was so grateful that the partners weren’t expecting us to have all the currency exchange rates at our fingertips at all times!”

- *Michael Saint-Onge, senior librarian relations consultant at LexisNexis Librarian Relations Group*

“This may classify as just downright stupidity on my part. I came to law librarianship after being a newspaper librarian. Not having much, if any, exposure to the legal field (terminology, resources, etc.) I learned a lot on the fly. My first week there, probably my second or third day, I was asked to get a copy of statute. I was a bit confused, because I had no idea what the item he was asking for looked like, so I asked for a description. He looked at me sort of funny, shook his head, and asked if I understood what he was asking for? Suddenly I realized what I had misunderstood...vocabulary lesson no. 1—it is *statute*, not *statue*!”

- *Carol J. Schmitt, law library manager at Boardman Law Firm LLP in Madison, Wisconsin*

“The most interesting question I received early in my career was, ‘Who were Clark Gable’s wives?’ At the time (1993), I was in the legal department of Dresser Industries and would sometimes field reference

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questions from other departments. Our facilities manager was a Clark Gable fan and dropped by my office to see if I knew the answer. When I promptly answered, 'Josephine Dillon, Ria Langham, Carole Lombard, Sylvia Ashley, and Kay Williams,' he was absolutely amazed and decided that librarians knew everything."

- *Jennifer S. Stephens, librarian for attorney services at Haynes and Boone, LLP in Dallas*

"I've had many, including the guy who asked me for a photo of the Holy Grail, but the most outrageous was back in the 1970s when I was working general reference at Sacramento State College. A woman phoned to ask where one might locate a death certificate. Naturally, I asked where and when the person in question had died. After placing me on hold for a couple of minutes, the querant replied, 'the where is San Francisco, and the when, well, it hasn't yet happened!' Ahem!?!??"

- *Linda Wallihan, law librarian at the Third Appellate District Court of Appeals in Sacramento, California*

"During the first month of my first job in law libraries at the University of New Mexico, I was called upon to do some research for a senior faculty member who had a reputation for being very demanding. When I stopped into his office to discuss his research project, he began by telling me that he was pressed for time and only had a few minutes to meet with me. He then began talking very quickly, describing the project. He talked about concepts I'd never heard of, and he used lots of acronyms that were unfamiliar to me. I took two whole pages of notes, and although I didn't understand them, I assumed that I could take my notes back to one of the more senior librarians for help with decoding them. However, none of my librarian colleagues could understand my notes either. So, I ended up having to go back to this professor to ask him to re-explain his project, define his terms of art, and decode his acronyms. I was extremely embarrassed, and I felt like an idiot. However, it taught me a valuable lesson about asking clarifying

questions and getting explanations on the spot from professors or any library patron during a reference interview."

- *Ron Wheeler, associate director for public services at Georgia State University College of Law Library in Atlanta*

"Oh where to start? I can think of a few:

"When I decided on my own that Arthur Adelbert Stearns' *The Law of Suretyship* was out of date and I pitched it, not realizing that it continues to be the foremost authority on the topic. Oops.

"When a young associate asked me to do some research and I didn't get the answer to him right away, he asked, 'Is there an astute law librarian that you can call?'

"When I removed some unsigned-out library books from that same young associate's office during our periodic room sweeps (and leaving him a courtesy note listing the titles removed), he stormed into the library, loudly accusing me of 'violating the sanctity of attorney-client privilege.'

"Finally, an associate had to have an English translation of the Brazilian Civil Code. I spent an afternoon at the local large law school library before returning empty-handed. He said that was okay; he suspected as much and wanted my lack of success to serve as the impetus for the firm to send him to Brazil on the matter. Someone did get sent there eventually, but not him (how sweet that was!)."

- *Robert B. Winger, reference librarian at McGuire Woods LLP in Chicago*