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OF THE WAY

Mid-America Association of Law Libraries' Past President Jeri Kay Hopkins's take on what leadership means in the legal information community—and why encouraging and inspiring co-workers might be easier, and more important, than you think.

**JERI KAY HOPKINS**

- BRANCH LIBRARIAN
- U.S. COURT OF APPEALS  
8TH CIRCUIT LIBRARY
- OMAHA, NEBRASKA

More than a decade ago, Jeri Kay Hopkins was working as an attorney, running her own practice, when she and her husband, Rick, decided to adopt.

On one of the adoption forms, Rick was asked to identify what his wife would change about her life, if she could. His answer caught her completely off guard.

“He said, ‘Her career,’ and I thought, ‘He’s right!’” Hopkins says. “I was spending all my time at the local library, volunteering; that’s what I really enjoyed.”

After a staff member at the library suggested she look into becoming a law librarian, Hopkins enrolled in the University of Missouri’s master of library science program. Three months later, in 2004, she started working at the U.S. Court of Appeals 8th Circuit Library. She received her degree in 2007.

Hopkins has since served as president, vice president, secretary, and board

member of AALL’s Mid-America Association of Law Libraries (MAALL) chapter. Her adopted daughter, Bliss, is now 10.

“I never planned to be a librarian,” Hopkins says. “But I love my job. It’s never the same every day.”

The Omaha-based branch librarian recently shared her thoughts with *AALL Spectrum* on crafting a career path, professional leadership, and changes in the legal information industry.

## QUICK HITS WITH JERI KAY HOPKINS



### Your favorite leadership guru?

Dr. Rebecca Pasco at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. She is the coordinator of my library school program and has done amazing things for Nebraska libraries and

librarians. She has and still is mentoring an entire generation of librarians in the Nebraska area.

### Words to live by?

"Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible."—Dalai Lama

### Three essential traits for leadership are ...

Honesty, vision, and flexibility.

### Three essential resources for professional growth are ...

Library associations, mentors (the more the better), and just making the time to do it!

### Every day I look forward to ...

A new challenge.

### E-books or print?

Both! I'm on the go so

much that I have three or four books going at the same time. I like to have a print book by my bed at night, and on my phone I always have an audio book and an e-book that I read whenever I have a few minutes. I've always got my nose in a book of some kind when I'm standing in line or waiting at the dentist office.

### Scrabble or Words with Friends?

Neither! I prefer Bubble Witch 2.

### Favorite apps?

OverDrive, MyFitnessPal, and Out of Milk ... oh, and my Google Calendar app on my phone. I'm not sure how I ever survived without it!

### Last book you read?

*Computer Coding for Kids* by Carol Vorderman.

### You've held several leadership positions within MAALL. Do you feel the legal information industry generally has a sufficient number of leaders?

There are, at least in our area, in the Midwest. In particular, the MAALL past president, Cindy Bassett, did an outstanding job of organizing strategic planning that we'd never done before. We had two-hour conference calls every three to four weeks about resources and obstacles. We have some really strong will for supporting the Association and the industry as a whole.

### What plans have come about from MAALL's strategic planning efforts?

We came up with some exciting suggestions for the future. I think we're going to start having more online training opportunities, in addition to

events where we can all communicate in person.

That's one of the great things about MAALL. Everyone loves to get together—from networking opportunities to webinars where you can share ideas from different areas. This year, we live-streamed a lot of the training classes from our last conference. We also recorded most of them and put them online for those who couldn't attend. We're hoping to do that at every conference.

### Have you worked to encourage leadership in any way in your role at the U.S. Court of Appeals 8th Circuit Library?

I've learned that leadership skills are applicable in any working relationship. However, I took a leadership training course in the District Court of Nebraska, which I also contribute to, and one thing I learned is that you can

lead from wherever you're at. The way to do that is to always support your boss by giving ideas and suggestions—not just identifying problems, but also offering solutions.

It also helps to really be supportive of your co-workers by encouraging them and passing along kudos. People sometimes talk about other workers positively, but, if you aren't around, you may never hear that, so I try to pass it on when I can. In library service, you do your best so others can achieve their goals—what they want out of life and work.

### What are the two most valuable lessons or best practices you've learned in the professional leadership positions you've held?

Kindness—being kind to others. Librarians are in a service industry. If you're not helping others, you're holding back the whole organization.

You can lead from wherever you're at. The way to do that is to always support your boss by giving ideas and suggestions—not just identifying problems, but also offering solutions.

And leadership is about more than just managing day-to-day operations. It's about vision and looking to the future, understanding what the current trends are, and projecting them out into the next few years. You have to be kind, and you have to have a vision for where you want to go.

**In recent years, many libraries have tried to place a stronger emphasis on highlighting the value they provide to the institutions they serve. Has that been a goal at your workplace?**

Analytics are one component we really plan to focus on for the next three to five years—documenting all we do, in numbers, as much as we can, to help inform us if what we're doing is something we need to continue to do or if we need to refocus. We have a blog, and we put things on there about references, databases that are coming out, training—if someone says, 'How do you do this?' we put a tutorial on our blog. We do it mostly for ourselves and make it public so if someone else wants to use it they can. We're averaging about 50 unique users a month. That's surprising; occasionally we'll get three or four comments saying they really liked a post, but we really haven't gotten much feedback [in the past].

**Are there any other current issues you feel industry leaders need to address?**

At least for the courts, we've reached a critical mass with being able to work absolutely anywhere. That's happening in all industries. Buildings become less important as people are more able to get information from wherever they are—working in a car, like probation officers do, or at a computer at home,

or any other place outside of a court or building. My library has staff who live in six states, and the circuit librarian is in St. Louis. You have to be able to figure out ways to reach remote employees and clients.

**Do you think being able to work remotely will impact what the future of leadership in the legal information profession will look like?**

To supervise people who don't work where you are, you have to learn how to communicate long distance—how do you know whether people are doing their job when you're not there? How do you encourage them and support them when you can't physically help them? My library has been doing that here forever, but I think it's going to become more of a trend. Law firms are spreading out; they aren't centrally located anymore. The trend has really just started to hit law schools, too. Supervising people long-distance can be a different challenge.

**How can young legal information professionals begin to prepare themselves to become future leaders in their field?**

Volunteer—and not just in our industry, but in other places—as much as you can because you always gain valuable skills by interacting with others and doing things you never thought you could do before. I think it was Eleanor Roosevelt who said do what you're afraid to do; if it's causing you fear, then that's the very thing you should be doing.

Just call everybody up and volunteer. There are people who have volunteered and got a position as soon as they graduated because they didn't just wait for an internship to open

up. Call all your local libraries, and say you'll come in and help for a few hours. You'll gain skills and contacts that you can put on your resume so you have a wide variety of experience. I volunteered and ended up going to library school and got my job a month later—then uprooted my whole family from a tiny town in Nebraska to Omaha. You never know where life is going to take you.

**Have you held any leadership positions outside of the industry?**

I've recently taken on being the treasurer of my daughter's school, which is a co-op with 50 families and 75 children. The parents do everything; we change the light bulbs, and do the hiring and firing. The treasurer has to pay all the bills, handle payroll, and balance the checkbook. So now I'm managing a \$600,000-a-year budget in my spare time. It takes about 15 to 20 hours a week, on top of my regular job.

I was the treasurer for a local library when I was an attorney, so I've done it before, but it wasn't nearly as hard as this! There's no documentation that says, 'This is how you do it'—I have to create a manual, and I formed a finance committee, which the school has never had. I recruited people with finance degrees to help me do some long-range planning and budgeting, and for big ideas, like rearranging classrooms and figuring out ways to bring more income to the school.

**And finally, do you have any other advice for legal information professionals?**

Yes—that you get more out of volunteering for an association than you give to it. You just learn so many valuable skills from working with a lot of different people. You aren't just working in the tiny little world of your own library. You expand your horizons a great deal. ■