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VOICES ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

A Transition to Retirement

It's never too early to start thinking about and planning for your retirement.

BY MARY WHISNER

Careers include many transitions. You enter a degree program, you land your first professional position, you move across the country for a new opportunity. Even staying in one place involves transitions—for instance, when a new co-worker is hired, when your building is remodeled, or when your library adopts a new online system.

You seek out some transitions, but others are imposed on you and out of your control, such as when an earthquake requires you to move everything to temporary quarters. But short of control, you might have influence. For example, budget cuts could mandate layoffs, yet you could have a say in how to restructure your department.

When you apply for a job, your prospective supervisor talks to you about the work and expectations for advancement. You tour the library and talk to the staff. You try to get a feel for the new

neighborhood. When you are considering retirement, you still need to figure out whether the “job” is a good fit for you. One helpful resource, the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) [Encore Caucus](#), is made up of people who are approaching the end of their careers or have already retired. At the start of your career, you might have found your way with the help of the [Conference of Newer Law Librarians \(CONELL\)](#) and the [AALL Mentor Program](#). Use the Encore Caucus for a later-life chapter.

In my thirties and forties, I didn't look very far ahead. But I did start paying into the university's retirement plan, socking away a little more than what was required. (Advice to younger people: do this. Over the decades, those payroll deductions add up.)

In my fifties and sixties, I noticed colleagues and acquaintances who were retiring: my long-time library director and several co-workers; professors; neighbors and relatives;

even some librarians I had trained as interns. I also observed people who had health problems or died in their sixties, before they could enjoy retirement, so I concluded I shouldn't wait forever.

Retirement began to seem possible and interesting, but deciding to retire took years because I still loved my work. Externally imposed markers (eligibility for Medicare and Social Security) clicked past.

One personal challenge was that I had identified so strongly with my work—being a law librarian and working at the University of Washington. How would it feel to lose those identities? Last winter, I got a helpful reminder that professional identity isn't everything when I heard someone in my community band say that she used to be a computer programmer, and I realized that it hadn't been important to me to know her profession in all the years I had known her.

In the summer of 2021, I told my library director and the law

school's HR director that I planned to retire during the coming school year. I wanted to give them time to plan for my replacement, since getting librarian positions through the university bureaucracy is not simple or quick. In March 2022, I submitted a form setting my retirement date: the last day of the school year, June 10, 2022.

In the spring, I was busy with my regular workload—reference shifts, class presentations, library guides, and so on. I also began the daunting task of clearing out my office. After 34 years, I had accumulated a lot of books, papers, and digital files. I chipped away at sorting, weeding, and recycling. (Tip for younger people: try to stay on top of your piles so you don't have as big a task at the end.)

Clearing my office was a chore, but it also helped me process my transition. Old memos evoked people and issues from decades ago. Folders about interns reminded me of terrific students I had worked with—and then I took the contents to the shred bin. Files from class presentations: recycling bin. Articles I had saved: recycled. But wait: what if I want to write again? I kept the citations, just in case—a way to hold on to my identity as a scholar. Although I had once been excited to get boxes of reprints of my *Law Library Journal* essays, I realized that no one needed or wanted hard copies: more paper for the recycling bin.

In addition to all the sorting and recycling, my last weeks included some goodbyes: ice cream with library staff, an embarrassing but nice tribute during the law school's year-end convocation, and a wild shift when the chat system lit up with messages from former interns. Leave-taking is part of transitions.

In retirement, so far, I mostly do what I used to do on weekends: walk the dog, stream videos, practice the trumpet, run errands, and read. But the weekend doesn't end

with going to work Monday morning (although Monday evenings I go to a tutoring center to volunteer). I have taken some trips without even needing to use annual leave.

I do miss aspects of my job. I liked working with people, both library staff and patrons (whether I met them only once or knew them for years). I miss seeing people. I also liked feeling helpful by answering a reference question, speaking to a class, or preparing a research guide. Helping the dog get to the off-leash park isn't the same. Finally, I miss feeling competent. Even when I was fumbling with a new skill (such as sharing screens in Zoom), I felt I was a good reference librarian. Retired, I'm an average dog walker and a mediocre musician. I'm pretty good at watching videos, but who cares?

I'm feeling out how connected I want to be professionally. I became a [sustaining member](#) of AALL, so I never have to renew again. I enjoyed attending the [Annual Meeting](#) in Denver. I also had a great time attending the We Robot conference in September. I'm not on email all day, every day, the way I was when I was working, but I'm glad to be in touch with many people.


I encourage you to start thinking about retirement—even idly. Find out about your employer's policies. For example, will you be compensated for unused vacation days? At my employer, yes. And I was happy to learn that emeritus status would let me keep email, OneDrive, and access to databases. Talk to people who have retired—what have their experiences been?

Encore Caucus members (and other retired law librarians I know) are doing all kinds of things. Some use their professional skills in new roles, such as serving on a nonprofit board or volunteering with a legal aid group. Others do things never done in law libraries, such as leading

water aerobics classes or feeding a vulture in a wildlife refuge. Many treasure time with family—from tiny grandchildren to parents in their nineties. Some travel a lot. One served for two years on a grand jury. Some are taking classes in art or history or languages. Others make pottery or sew quilts or knit sweaters. Some research genealogy. Some even go back into law librarianship, perhaps part-time.

There's more to retirement than the first year. Signing up for a class when you're 65 doesn't commit you to it until you're 90. If we live long enough, aging will require some adjustments, whether it's seeing new medical specialists or changing hobbies (one retired librarian scaled back from running marathons to taking day hikes). At some point, many people move, perhaps to a retirement community. I'm less than a year into my retirement and hope to have a long time to try out different pursuits. We'll see.

Perhaps this article will start you thinking about your own retirement, whether it's around the corner or many years in the future. You can talk to financial advisers about pensions and health insurance. It's also important to think about intangibles, like changing your professional identity and what you will miss about your work. You plan your other career moves (job to job, city to city); this transition is worth planning, too. ■

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