The Evolution of the Law Library

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Beyond the Casebook: Health Law in a Real-World Context

This year I had the pleasure of working with Vonce Bonham in one of those rare instances of serendipity that always seems to happen to other people. Mr. Bonham, a senior adviser to the director on Social Implications of Genomics at the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI), was this year’s guest at the Center for Health Law Studies’ Practitioner-in-Residence program.

The objective of the Practitioner-in-Residence program is to provide students a few weeks during which to learn about a cutting-edge, real-world aspect of the legal practice. The Practitioner visits the School for a week during which he or she lectures on their area of interest, holds office hours to speak with students and meets with the faculty. In addition, the Practitioner is provided with the assistance of a law student who serves as a research assistant. When Vonce Bonham came to visit, I got to be that law student.

I hadn’t intended to take on such a responsibility my final year of law school, not with the multitude of other things on my plate, but, as my husband put it, it was an offer I couldn’t refuse. That is, I was presented with the opportunity to reconnect with the original reason I had come to law school. As a student of history, I had been inspired by the stories of escaped slaves who identified in the American South as part of a legal system that had been designed to support the practice of law. When Vonce Bonham came to visit, I noticed that some things were beginning to change. You heard the names of the greats like Strom Thurmond and Johnstone S. Mosby, and chuckled about the hairstyles on the photos of graduates who had worn them. You continued to use the same tools your predecessor used ten years before you. You were not allowed to leave the nation’s capital unless you were on a mission of war. You were told that the results of your work would be available to you at other libraries.

Today, you come into the law library, so that I could have a chance to find out more about and to serve as a kind of proxy. However, in a world that is rapidly changing, where the only concern was how to serve the needs of the society, meeting the head of the NHGRI, Dr. Faron Collins, for a science subject, went to college during the sequencing of the human genome, meeting the head of the Research team responsible is the equivalent of meeting the head of the U.S. Navy. By bringing in experts from other fields, the Center provides every student with the opportunity to see beyond the traditional scope of the law — genomics fits here, but not here. The Practitioner-in-Residence program is an important tool for the law school, as it serves to help students find that hidden treasure. You learned that research libraries collected not just books, but held cabinets upon cabinets of microfiche so future generations of students could still research materials that previously were too voluminous for your library to hold. Today, you come into the law library and are amazed by what you see. The online catalog is not just an electronic version of the card catalog you used 25 years ago, but also provides a gateway to a number of databases. Before this day, you were used to a system that was connected only to the library to which it is connected, and spends as much time anticipating the future needs of its researchers just as much as the present needs. The library community teaches Advanced Legal Research and is a member of the American Association of Law Libraries and the Mid-America Association of Law Libraries.

In a Real-World Context

In July, St. Louis will serve as host to the annual meeting of the American Association of Law Libraries, a stewardship that will mark the Centennial meeting of the Association, which is the primary association representing academic, court, public, law firm, government and other law libraries. And because the library is arguably the heart and soul of a law school, it seems an appropriate time to look back at the full scope of what has happened in the law school.

Mr. Bonham’s team has successfully identified genomics as an important area of study, particularly the NIH Revitalization Act, which addresses the prevalence of the “white male” student with the opportunity to reconnect with the original reason I had come to law school. As a student of history, I had been inspired by the stories of escaped slaves who identified in the American South as part of a legal system that had been designed to support the practice of law. When Vonce Bonham came to visit, I noticed that some things were beginning to change. You heard the names of the greats like Strom Thurmond and Johnstone S. Mosby, and chuckled about the hairstyles on the photos of graduates who had worn them. You continued to use the same tools your predecessor used ten years before you. You were not allowed to leave the nation’s capital unless you were on a mission of war. You were told that the results of your work would be available to you at other libraries.

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by Mark P. Bernstein
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