

THE INTERVIEW

Laurie Atkinson – President of ALLA

Abstract: The President of the Australian Law Librarians' Association talks to LIM about her varied career, the problems facing the organisation, and why she believes we're living in a time where those working in the profession can really make a difference.

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Laurie Atkinson, President of the Australian Law Librarians' Association

Many information professionals in the law sector have enjoyed careers which also encompass other areas of librarianship, whether that's in public libraries, academia or the business world. It all helps to build up experience which can be used throughout a career. But when it comes to having jobs which are also fun, then surely nothing can beat being paid to look after a toy library.

This is just one of the many library roles that Laurie Atkinson, the current President of the Australian Law Librarians' Association (ALLA) and Director of the Law Library of Victoria and Supreme Court Librarian at Supreme Court of Victoria, has filled during her long career. "I stumbled across a job in the university library when I was studying for my first degree, which was

literature and history," Laurie says. "And I got the job. The librarian, after a little while, said to me, 'Why don't you become a librarian? You're really good at it and you seem to really like it.' So, I studied as a postgraduate and then got a real job in a uni' library. But then, very young, I had children, so I opted out of the workforce for a few years. And then I got involved in the local toy library. I was on the committee. They very politely asked me to step off the committee so that they could employ me, paying me to do the work. So that was a bit flattering, and also fun, because my little kids just had toys around them all the time."

Since then Laurie has had many more jobs in the librarianship field. "When I was working at the toy library, one of the members was looking for a children's librarian at the local public library. She said: 'come and work for us', and that's kind of been the story of my career, just people saying, 'come and do this'."

LAW LIBRARY VICTORIA

After a spell working for the state government Laurie moved on to the Law Library Victoria. "I came in at what was a time of some difficult transition into this organisation that we've created at the Law Library Victoria, which again I was asked to do," Laurie says. "And coming to this environment, where there is so much respect for the written word, and so much respect for the structure of information, and so much respect for professional skills and education, has been great."

Laurie very much enjoys her current role, while she also loves the sumptuous surroundings in which she works. "The building was built in the 1880s when there had been 25 years or so of gold rush in Victoria," she says. "So the government had a heap of money and they built these grand structures. It's a four-storey high dome, with another couple of floors on the top of it. It's an enormous building, with painted glass windows on the inside of the dome."

Yet despite having worked at the Law Library Victoria for over 10 years now, Laurie does not, necessarily, think of herself as a law librarian. "I don't feel like I am a law librarian, but a colleague assured me that I am!" she says. "I am in awe of the skill of law librarians, but it's never been my day-to-day job before. So, the answer to the



Laurie very much enjoys working in the sumptuous surroundings of the Law Library Victoria

question, why did I become a law librarian, is that I was asked to do it. And how? It was because I've done so much in complex organisational structures in libraries. I've always been a librarian, and they needed somebody in this space who could take a complex organisation and try to make it simple. But I've loved it. I took to it like a duck to water, and if I'd known how amazing and fascinating it is, I would have done it 35 years ago."

Laurie particularly admires what she calls "the discrete knowledge" of the law librarian. "We don't certify, we don't have any kind of certification for being a law librarian, but we could," she says. "Because it's such a discrete knowledge base. For where I am, in Victoria, we have judges, barristers, solicitors, associates, students, librarians in law firms, everybody asks us questions because the reputation of the librarians is very strong. I think it's pretty strong in Australia in the legal community, but it's very strong in Victoria. You know that you will get reliable answers and it will just save so much time, because the librarians know how to find it. And our information is really good."

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Laurie has always kept herself very busy in work, but also outside of it, volunteering for a number of roles over the years. "I've always had extracurricular activities that I get involved with," she says. "I think just connecting with people in a different way is a fun thing to do. For instance, I was involved with the Victoria Day group. We would

award the Victorian of the Year and a range of different awards annually and hold a function and awards ceremony at the town hall. And while I was involved with them, they managed their budget to a surplus for the first time."

After that Laurie was involved with the THREE for All Foundation, which is to do with championing human rights. "But with the THREE for All Foundation, I came to realise that it was just like my work, in terms of what I did there as a company secretary for them," she says. "I was going to another meeting and making sure certain things happened by certain times. And whilst I really respected the work of the organisation, I wasn't involved with it. I was just a pen pusher. And so now my volunteering is more tangible. I've joined a Bush Regeneration Group, and so I've got to do some gardening. That's cool. It's fun."

It's fair to say that things have been pretty much non-stop for many years for Laurie, then. However, recently something happened to her that should be seen as a warning to us all. "I want to share a personal experience I've had this year, because I've had a shocking health issue that I want to spread the word about," Laurie says. "I thought I was in peak physical fitness. When I go on holidays, often it's hiking or a similar activity, and I don't have a car, so I walk or catch public transport everywhere. I eat quite well, I exercise, I'm very, very active. I was having some chest pain, but I thought, 'I'm so well, it can't possibly be the traditional chest pain which means there's a heart problem'. And I was wrong.

"I'm just starting back at work fulltime [at the time of interview] after having had heart surgery," Laurie adds. "It

just came as such a shock. So, my message is: don't ignore the symptoms. The heart issue that I had, if it did progress to a heart attack, would almost certainly have killed me."

Thankfully, Laurie now says she is fine, and she has recently made trips to the BIALL Conference in Leeds and the IALL (International Association of Law Librarians) Conference in Oslo, in her capacity as President of the Australian Law Librarians' Association (ALLA).

For someone with a history of volunteering it's perhaps no surprise that she has taken on a role such as President of ALLA, but she admits it took a while before she stepped forward, even if the process itself was then rather sudden. "That all happened very quickly, actually, after years of being a member and just riding on the coat-tails of others, really benefiting from the work of those who have been on the board and who do so much," Laurie says. "No one put any pressure on me. I just started to feel a bit guilty that I had never contributed. So I thought, 'I'll put my hand up'. I got back from holidays and there was an email saying that they were looking for a Vice President, that they hadn't filled the post at the AGM. So I rang the President and I said, 'I might be happy to help'. I thought I'd have a couple of years as Vice President, but I didn't. I had less than a year. So I have got my training wheels on still. I'm very much still learning."

Laurie is now well into the first year of a two-year term – though Presidents have completed just one year recently – and she says she is enjoying it immensely, especially interacting with her fellow board members. "They're just a delight to work with. They're very knowledgeable. We have got a very respectful culture. I think people do come with open minds, so we don't fall into disagreeing. We do disagree, but not to the end. There are different views shared, and our position is shaped by the contributions of members in discussion. There's a great respect for the experience of people who have been involved as members for a long time, while bringing new people in and welcoming new ideas. I have found that, professionally and personally, very, very satisfying."

The same goes for interacting with the wider membership. "We're a pretty small community," Laurie says. "There are about 300 members. And many, many of them know each other and have known each other all their careers. They have very strong relationships and they are a wonderful group of people."

Heading this community does not come without its challenges, though. "For the President, and I think I speak for most of the board members as well, the biggest challenge is dealing with the tension between operational matters and fulfilling our obligations as directors, with regard to strategy and corporate governance. We don't have any paid staff, so we don't have an executive officer or anyone like that that's getting paid to do anything. So that is a real challenge. Because it's tempting to just drop everything and fix one thing. But if you do that too

much, then you're not keeping an eye on what's going on across the organisation and the external environment. But if all your time is spent looking across the organisation and the external environment, then nothing ever gets fixed. What I've observed, and other board members have commented on this as well, is that there is a similarity, or there can be a similarity, between each agenda and minutes. So that shows a lack of progress; we're actually not resolving issues and moving on."

TERM TIME

As mentioned above, there has been some inconsistency in the length of terms for President at ALLA in recent years, although the constitution says it should be two years, and Laurie does believe that by completing the full term she may be able to solve some of the issues the organisation faces. "The reason I'm attracted to doing a second year is because I think that does give me time, while I'm President, to see a few things through to completion and move on. But I can see why people do move on. And it's not like people move on and leave and you never see them again. There are only one or two members of the board who have not been President before. And I'm one of them. Mostly, they keep giving. They just give in different ways."

There are also supposed to be two years as Vice President and two as Past President at ALLA, so it's quite a commitment to do the full terms. "It's an awful lot to ask, you would be looking at a six-year horizon if you step up as Vice President," Laurie says. "It's a long time, but it would really give you a chance to see something through. I think it would be ideal for the organisation, to have stability and leadership for that period."

While there is plenty to do in the long term, Laurie has already accomplished much in her time as President, including sending a survey out to all the members. "The best thing I did was get a survey into the field," she says. "There was a really nice level of responses from members that helped shape our work programme for the year. It helped us to identify and then prioritise what we needed to do. We sent that survey out and did that very quickly, so that the board got to consider it within a few months of forming as the new board. It has helped us allocate sizeable chunks of tasks to groups."

One of the tangible results of this survey has been the introduction of a code of conduct for the mailing list. "We were seeing that this was being used as a quasi-interlibrary loan system, and it just isn't an interlibrary loan system," Laurie says. "It's got a different purpose, and there are other tools to use for interlibrary loans. So that came up as a priority through the survey. I'm a big fan of lawyers these days. I can see what they do. So we flipped that off to a law firm, and they drafted up a code of conduct that put us in compliance with the Copyright Act."

"It was a little controversial, and hard for the members who had been using the mailing list for interlibrary loan," Laurie adds. "It was definitely not on my

horizon, but it speaks to the professionalism of the law librarians. They know the Copyright Act well enough. They're engaging in the mailing list enough. They know their own obligations. The lawyers could see it straight away. It was a very fixable problem. It was just a nice, sharp thing for us to do."

OBJECTIVE THINKING

As far as the challenges facing the organisation as a whole go, Laurie says: "A bit more of a complicated thing, and one that I'm very keen to get back into, is that our constitution has 21 objectives, and that's too many.

"Also, I think that we've got too much work to do to not pay someone, but we're not really big enough to pay someone. But I also think, right now, the technology is the biggest challenge. It's just so hard to find the right technology to work for an organisation. How do we navigate a little organisation in a complex technical world where we haven't got a huge amount of money? How do we put the right resources into managing the organisation to get the best results possible for our members?"

One thing all library associations are having to address is diversity and inclusion, and ALLA is no exception, although this is related to a broader, more fundamental, issue. "We have a very limited member engagement strategy, not just diversity and inclusion, but for anything," Laurie says. "This is something that we are working with as one of our broader issues. It didn't

come up in the survey because it's not something that members would see, but it's something that we, as a board, have identified: how do we attract people? Then, if that attraction is addressing diversity and inclusion, so that we're not just attracting one type of person, that's good. One thing that's in our favour is that I think it's becoming instilled in workplaces right across the country. So, we would be in lockstep with that."

Of course, one challenge ALLA faces which is not an issue with BIALL is the sheer size of Australia, something which means that when it comes to its annual conference the larger population centres tend to take it in turns, although it was held in Hobart, Tasmania a couple of years ago and attendance was good, Laurie tells us.

It's not all about Australia, though, and ALLA is very much a part of the wider family of legal information professional organisations, and to this end it has been in contact with BIALL in recent times. "I had a great session with Julie [Christmas, President at time of interview] towards the end of last year. And on the strength of that, she passed on the salary survey [see LIM Spring 2024]. So that's something that we're looking at. We've set up an advocacy advisory group. We have divisions and chapters at the state level, and they have presidents. That presidents' group from the chapters and divisions forms our Advocacy Advisory Committee. And they're having a look at the salary survey. We would very much like to be able to benchmark against it. And it would be interesting to see what the Americans are doing there as well, and



Laurie (left) presenting with Vanessa Blackmore at a recent ALLA conference

the Canadians, and see if we can move the profession up. Because I think that what we contribute is unsung a lot of the time.”

PROFESSIONAL PATHWAYS

The worth of librarianship is actually – unsurprisingly – something that Laurie is deeply passionate about, and she admits that she worries that the paths into the profession seem to be dwindling. “I have had a bit to do with our broader industry association and their work on professional pathways, the ways of accreditation,” she says. “We’ve had, over the last 10 years, many library schools close, the universities that used to teach librarianship no longer do. There’s now only two or three in this country that are teaching librarians. So that’s really depressing.

“I think that if we’re not educating then we don’t have a well-structured education of the principles of librarianship and the ethics of librarianship, and librarians are very ethical people,” Laurie adds. “I know it gets bandied about as a joke that we are a bit subversive, but we actually are. To make information available in an egalitarian way is really quite subversive to structured economies like ours. You can get ahead if you’ve got access to information. And this is what librarians do. I think there’s never been a better time, never been a more critical time, to have a profession that is skilled and knowledgeable about authentic reliable information. I don’t know if it’s just librarians who see it like that.”

Laurie remains optimistic about the future for the profession as a whole, and particularly the role of the librarian in this quickly changing world of knowledge. “It is a really fascinating time,” she says. “I had a very interesting conversation with one of the publishers, and it was very hard to get them to talk to me in any other role than as a buyer of their product. So, they very much identify librarians as the gatekeepers to the company

purse, whereas the company is seeing the librarians as the filter to what they would buy. Who do we trust? What is behind or under the hood of those products and how do they work?”

“So that is us, right now. But there are still people in my world who think of us as people who put books on shelves. There are definitely those people around, and they’ve probably got a point, that we don’t want to lose sight of that traditional curation and management of a collection part of it, whether it’s digital or print. But where my time goes now is in contract management, supplier relationship management, product evaluation, trying to get my head around technology, and on who do you trust? So, we’re not going away. And I think this issue of trust is going to get bigger.”

But librarians need to shout out loud about this, Laurie adds. “Probably, we’ll be doing ourselves a favour to work on that branding a bit more, as the natural go-to for complex digital matters.”

As for ALLA, Laurie is clear on where she believes it needs to be in five years’ time “I hope our membership is larger. I hope our financial sustainability is stronger. We are facing pressures that are really difficult for us with our organisation, the size it is. So, if we can grow the membership, if we can improve our financial sustainability and have better internal organisation that’s able to be resourced, we’ll be in a much stronger place. But I have got to say, the strength of the organisation is its members and the extent to which they come together. So whatever happens in the future, I hope that that remains a constant.”

But perhaps the most important thing to leave you with, in the light of Laurie’s recent health scare, is this very important and extremely sound piece of advice. “You can achieve all your professional goals, be a consummate professional, without spending 10 or 12 hours a day in the office.”