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From Law Firm to Library: Finding a Second Career as a Copyright Specialist

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Abstract

My first job out of law school was as an associate at a big DC law firm, where I rotated through the firm's pro bono and education practice groups. After a couple of years in DC, I moved to a smaller firm in my home town of Chapel Hill, North Carolina—I learned a lot at the big firm, but I wanted to experience a community law practice where I could see my clients across the desk and advocate for them in a more personal way. I took on a wide variety of cases, and rather serendipitously, while volunteering for the local arts commission, I came to represent several local artists in small-scale copyright matters. My interest in copyright was piqued, and I started looking for ways to incorporate more of this work into my practice. I happen to have a few family members who are librarians, and I live in a town with a great library school. I made appointments to talk with several law librarians and library copyright specialists, and decided to apply to library school. While I was in library school, I interned at two law libraries and also at Duke's copyright office, and after graduating I was lucky enough to find a job as a copyright librarian. I've found that working as a copyright librarian incorporates many of the things I loved about practicing law—my one-on-one copyright consultations with faculty and other members of the campus community have the personal feel of client meetings at a small law firm, while the issues we deal with have the interest and import of big firm matters. I also get to work closely with my general counsel's office, so I feel well supported on tricky questions. I keep my law license active so that I can volunteer on other issues I care about, such as voting rights. I hope this story will be helpful to anyone currently practicing law who might be interested in finding a fulfilling second career that allows them to use their legal education and practice experience in a new way.

Keywords: Careers, copyright librarianship



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When I was choosing where to attend law school, I was particularly drawn to joint programs in law and history, as well as programs with a strong public service orientation, and I ended up attending UVA for their JD/MA program in American Legal History. I enjoyed my time in the history department so much that I came close to pursuing further graduate study in that field, but I also felt strongly pulled towards putting my legal training into practice for real clients.

My first job out of law school was as an associate at a big DC law firm, where I rotated through the firm's pro bono and education practice groups. My very first client was a chess master who was starting a tenants' association in his building to advocate for livable housing conditions for himself and his neighbors. I found a particular connection with clients for whom the resources of a big firm could make meaningful improvements in their daily lives. I also really enjoyed working on higher education matters, which I found to be intellectually engaging and personally meaningful.

After a couple of years in DC, I moved to a smaller firm in my home town of Chapel Hill, North Carolina—I learned a great deal at the big firm, but I wanted to experience a community law practice where I could see my clients across the desk and advocate for them in a more personal way. I took on a wide variety of cases, from the local farmers' market to the community modern dance company, and rather serendipitously, while volunteering for the local arts commission, I came to represent several local artists in small-scale copyright matters. My interest in copyright was piqued, and I started looking for ways to incorporate more copyright law into my practice. I have several family members who are librarians, and I live in a town with a great library school, so I made appointments to talk with several law librarians and library copyright specialists. I learned that the library world's philosophy on the role of copyright in our legal system and society—with its emphasis on advancing the progress of knowledge and democratizing access to information—was quite aligned with my own. I decided to apply to library school.

While I was in library school, I interned at two law libraries and also at Duke University Libraries' copyright office. I found that the role of a library copyright specialist really fit with my own practice, experience, and personality. After graduating from library school, I was lucky enough to find a job as a copyright librarian at UNC Charlotte. My day-to-day work at UNC Charlotte is varied and engaging—I work with our library's administration on copyright policy, our special collections department on deeds of gift and copyright research in specific collections, help negotiate licenses for the library's electronic resources, and work

with faculty and students on their individual questions about copyright and fair use in their teaching, research, and writing.

I've found that working as a copyright librarian incorporates many of the things I loved about practicing law—my one-on-one copyright consultations with faculty and other members of the campus community have the personal feel of client meetings at a small law firm, while the issues we deal with have the interest and import of big firm matters. I am grateful to be part of an intellectually engaged campus community, in the same way that I enjoyed being a history graduate student. I also get to work closely with my university's general counsel's office, so I feel well supported on tricky legal questions—particularly important to me since I am a department of one. I continue to keep my law license and membership in the local bar association active, so that I can volunteer on other issues I care about, such as voting rights—and I value the knowledge that a friend or community member can still call on me if they need legal help. For anyone currently practicing law and looking for a fulfilling second career, copyright librarianship can offer a way to use their legal education and client counseling experience in a new and interesting way.