

## **Raquel Ortiz: Living the Dream**

### **Introduction**

Raquel Ortiz was born in Santurce, Puerto Rico, in the late 1960's. She attended Harvard University as an undergraduate, Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science, and Suffolk University Law School. While in law school, she accepted her first professional position at the Harvard Law Library. She has been in her current position, the Head of Reference Services at Boston University's Pappas Law Library, since 2002, and she has been an adjunct professor at GSLIS for the past four years.

### **Time Together**

I grew up in a vibrant neighborhood of San Juan with my parents and younger brother, Andy, but there were always many other children around as well. We were also often surrounded by our big and bustling family of fifteen aunts and uncles and over forty first cousins, so our immediate family always felt much bigger.

For my whole life, my family has spent a great deal of time together—when I lived in Puerto Rico, we spent much of that time traveling. We visited most of the 78 towns in Puerto Rico by the time I was 18 and enjoyed everything the island has to offer. We went to the beautiful beaches, the rainforest, and the festivals, and we always learned about the things that make each town special. As we've grown older it's hard to continue to get together, but we do it whenever possible.

### **Cover to Cover**

My family shared a love of learning and in particular, reading. Growing up, my brother and I also shared an interest in computers. We were strongly encouraged in our education by our mother and father, who wanted us to be college educated but never pushed us in any particular direction. They did accurately predict that I would become a lawyer, although they could have never guessed that I would not practice law but rather become a law librarian. My mother worked as an account manager for Sears, and my father was a refrigerator technician. Being avid readers themselves, they instilled a thirst for knowledge in me and my brother from early on, starting us reading at a young age and later making tremendous sacrifices in order to send us to an excellent private school. They always said when we were growing up that our job was to get an education.

I particularly remember the thrill of our family getting our first encyclopedias. I read both of them cover to cover, one in Spanish and one in English, and then moved on to other books. Reading opened up to me the extensive possibilities of learning and made me want to learn more about American culture and its people. I also wanted to attend a liberal arts college while learning to be independent, so ultimately my reading greatly

influenced my decision to come to the United States and ultimately to move into library studies. In particular, I've loved reading mysteries my whole life, starting with the Bobbsey Twins. I loved the idea of figuring out how things worked, solving puzzles... And now I'm doing those same things as a librarian.

### **Pointing Her in the Right Direction**

My passion for learning eventually led me to the United States and to Harvard University. I was drawn to Harvard by its educational offerings as well as the diverse and interesting communities surrounding it. Fortunately, the university offered me financial aid that helped me and my family to afford the program. While in school, I worked in the Harvard libraries. I remember an earlier experience of using the Carnegie Library for a research project. It was such a beautiful building and had amazing resources, but I remember feeling lost until a librarian pointed me in the right direction.

On a larger scale, the same kind of thing happened during my second library job at Harvard, assisting the departmental librarian in preparing the library to be passed on following the librarian's retirement. This librarian became a friend and mentor to me. She saw my capacity for the profession and, as it turns out, in her own way she pointed me in the right direction by encouraging me to apply for library school. I went on from there to attend Simmons GSLIS. When I started the program, I didn't know what to expect. Once I got there, I was greatly influenced by my professors' knowledge and clear enjoyment of their profession. I especially liked Professor [Patricia G.] Oyler and [Professor Emeritus James] Matarazzo, whose very different but equally assertive styles have shaped how I teach my own students. My professors also encouraged me to explore my interests in management and public services, but it wasn't until I studied Literature of the Social Sciences that I discovered an interest in the law. I had a good experience at Simmons GSLIS because there I discovered that becoming a law librarian was the right path for me.

Though I continued to work in libraries, my interest in the field was intertwined with an interest in the field of law. I went on a series of informational interviews to learn more about the different settings that a law librarian might choose. Although academic law librarianship interested me, I was not sure whether I needed or wanted to get a second graduate degree to practice reference at a law school library. After finishing at GSLIS, I worked as a circulation supervisor at the Harvard Law Library. Working with the students and faculty at Harvard, I discovered that the academic aspects of the law interested me more than its practical aspects. There I also learned that the J.D. is important not only for academic reference librarians but also for advancement into library management. So, three years after graduating from GSLIS, I enrolled at Suffolk Law. While I was in the middle of law school I accepted my first professional library position as a document delivery librarian, again at the Harvard Law Library. In my new job, I was able to use the skills and knowledge I gained in library school while learning about law and the way that the materials in the library fit into legal practice. Through this position, I also gained supervisory, research, and administrative skills that have been very useful to

me as my career has developed. Throughout these experiences, I have been very lucky to have the support of my employers and colleagues. Harvard provided me with financial assistance and the flexibility to do my job while pursuing my professional degrees. My colleagues encouraged my professional development and gave needed emotional boosts by reminding me that the end justified all my hard work.

I'm now the Head of Reference Services at the Pappas Law Library at Boston University. In addition to managing the department, I divide my time between working at the reference desk and teaching. I consider these aspects of my work to be two sides of the same coin. I really enjoy contributing to the library's overall success and interacting with the community the library serves. Any day when I have plenty of contact with people is a great day, which means most days are great!

Along with my regular job responsibilities, I am also deeply involved in professional organizations. Having been a student member of the American Library Association, (ALA), I joined the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) and its local chapter, Law Librarians of New England (LLNE), when I began working at the Harvard Law Library in 1992, a year after graduating from Simmons. During the following year, I volunteered for a committee of LLNE, and since then I've been a member of the Executive Board. It's been a great way to meet other people who do exactly what I do while also being supportive of others in the field. I would highly recommend anyone interested in a particular field to become involved in their related professional organization.

### **An Ongoing Need**

Since I deal regularly with people's search for information, I see firsthand the importance of my work and the work of all librarians despite the rapid changes in the field. Librarians will always be needed, because the world of information continues to grow and someone has to be out there helping people sort through that information to find what they really need and can use. I don't know whether the word 'librarian' will be around forever, but the need will be as real regardless of what we are called. I see the library as a great equalizer. Librarians provide information without restriction of bias regardless of our personal beliefs or values. We work just as hard for every patron of the library and treat everyone as an equal. Whether it is a student looking for an obscure legal document, a faculty member needing a fact checked for a last minute interview, an alumnus using out of state legal materials, or a person trying to represent herself in court, our patrons leave the law library with the information they need and, when appropriate, with the tools to find other legal information.

### **Advice to Future Librarians of Color**

However the profession develops, I think there are some key ways in which future librarians of color may take advantage of their opportunities and pursue their calling with

success. Above all, I recommend getting experience as an intern or via a part-time/temporary job and getting involved with professional organizations. These are two things graduates are not doing enough of that will greatly raise their visibility to employers. A wealth of experience increases an applicant's ability to hit the ground running and thus distinguishes him or her in an applicant pool. For example, having worked at the Harvard Law Library while in library school enabled me to prove myself while also learning the day-to-day basics of the job. At the same time, involvement in professional organizations also increases a person's chance of getting hired while potentially helping pay the way through one's ongoing education. Many professional organizations offer scholarships and grants to librarianship candidates based on interest in the profession and a demonstrated ability to succeed. These financial opportunities are often underutilized, especially by minority candidates.

As for the hindrances a person of color may face in the profession, I believe the possible obstacles can be overcome by the power of dedication and perseverance. Though I may have been shielded to some extent by the inclusiveness of academia, I don't see any barriers, provided that you are willing to work hard and to show what you can do. The advice I have for any librarian who wants to attain managerial positions is that if you want to succeed and rise to the top, you have to be willing to go above and beyond what is normally expected of your job. This applies to all librarians, but I especially encourage librarians of color to heed this advice as we seem to be underrepresented in the managerial ranks.

### **Living the Dream**

I am proud that only seven years after completing law school, I already have what I consider my dream job, I am very much involved in the profession, and best of all, I get to teach at the library school that made it all possible. Having completed a law degree while working full time, I am also proud to have been able to continue giving back to the profession whose financial and moral support carried me through law school. In the long run, I would like to be remembered for my passion in librarianship, my thorough involvement in the profession, and my willingness to mentor those who are interested in the field I love. I hope I will have been able to point my share of people in the right direction in ways big and small, as others once did for me.