from the editor

Dear Peace Corps, I’ve Finally Here, Almost . . .

In Johannesburg, South Africa, a law librarian with graying hair and funky glasses walks into a bar and orders a Bombay Sapphire® and tonic. She is not wearing sensible shoes. The barkeep has her look up from his BlackBerry and says, “You’re late; we had an appointment 25 years ago.” She stirs the drink, takes a deep breath and says, “Yes, but there was this sofa . . . .”

In 1989, I graduated from the University of Wisconsin Law School, or, as my professors used to say, “the last bastion of liberalism.” It was, after all, the era of rampant consumerism, and my professors hoped many of us would practice public interest law. Back then, if you lived in a graduate student dorm, shopped thrift stores, used public transportation, scalped undergraduate meal tickets, and drank 75-cent tap beer, you could finish law school with manageable debt. This meant a career in public interest law was a real option.

Many of my professors had served in the Peace Corps, and I was inspired by their passion and the nature of the work. When offered a big law firm job, however, I seized it as an opportunity to earn a good salary and live cheaply as I paid off my student loans in supersized monthly payments. One year after graduating from law school, I hosted my 30th birthday in a sparsely furnished apartment that housed a mattress, a table with two chairs, a bean bag chair, a stereo, a dual-disk drive computer, and a remote-free 12-inch black and white television. My party guests commented on my foresight in moving the furniture out to make space for the party. I told them I had no furniture because I was doing the law firm gig only until my debt was paid off and I could join the Peace Corps.

As it turns out, I didn’t really need furniture, art, or groceries; I was never home. I worked in the corporate and financial institutions group at Vedder Price. The lawyers were smart, interesting, and produced innovative client solutions. Most corporate lawyers will tell you that even though the hours are horrific, there is nothing like the adrenaline rush you get from doing M&A deals. One deal led to the next. I made good money, received bonuses, and paid down my debt by living cheaply. Soon I would be off to the Peace Corps, but then there was this sofa . . . .

Seemingly common events can change the course of a career. In my case, it was a sofa in a shop window. Twenty plus years later, my friends still chide me for my indecision and the magnitude I placed on the purchase of that sofa. Intuitively, I knew it was a career choice and agonized long enough that the shop sales staff ignored me when I repeatedly came in to look at the sofa. What would follow that sofa were a house, a husband, a child, and the series of job-related moves around the country that two-résumé families endure. During that time, we frequently started our annual holiday letter with, “The gypsy caravan is now parked at . . . .” Along the way, I coined the phrase “right angle résumé,” as I found new and interesting career options wherever the caravan happened to be parked.

Recently, many of my conversations with law librarians have touched on “What if my job is eliminated?” I am reminded during these conversations of Anne Marie Slaughter’s advice in “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” (The Atlantic Monthly, July/August 2012)—that we should “think about the climb to leadership not in terms of a straight upward slope, but as irregular stair steps, with periodic plateaus (and even dips).”

Career plateaus, dips, or restarts are opportunities. As one former colleague at Vedder Price wisely counseled in a conversation about careers, “Be nimble.” I viewed each caravan stop as a résumé-building opportunity. Since leaving law school to work in the corporate and financial institutions group at Vedder Price, I told them I had no furniture because I was doing the law firm gig only until my debt was paid off and I could join the Peace Corps. I’ve never said “no” and now an academic law library. I never said “no” and now an academic law library. I never said “no” and now an academic law library.

Although my family has had to adjust to Skype as a primary means of communication and to fewer extravagances, it has been well worth it in light of this right-angle opportunity to undertake this important work. I am certainly enjoying the challenges and opportunities here. You can follow my near misses with international incidents on my blog at www.allnet.org/Blogs/spectrum-blog.

For 2014, I hope that any unanticipated diversions, circuitous routes, or “plateaus and dips” bring you opportunities to grow and expand your résumé. I urge you to embrace these opportunities and allow change to help you develop and own a position, whether it is a current position or a new one. ■