

Lessons I Have Learned

Contributed by John Browning
Mon, Jun 25, 2012, 01:49 PM

Around this time of year, graduating students at all levels are treated to pearls of wisdom dispensed by commencement speakers. Theoretically, the bigger the name of the commencement speaker, the more valuable is the advice given to the graduates—who are probably too busy worrying about the dim prospects for jobs and the looming specter of student loan debt to listen to what the dignitary at the podium has to say. Nationwide, politicians, celebrities, captains of industry, and towering figures in dozens of fields are exchanging enough pithy words about grit, determination, and unlocking your inner potential to fill the average infomercial or self-help book, all in the cause of collecting a fat honorarium check, an honorary degree, or both. I feel especially sorry for the graduating law students out there, who are entering a summer that, for most, is characterized by uncertain employment prospects, crushing school debt, and of course the dreaded bar exam. I wish somebody would pass along some nuggets of practical advice to these young people. And since I'm not a big enough name to rate a real invitation to give such a commencement address, my only chance to impart some of the lessons I've learned comes courtesy of this column. So here goes nothing.

1) People will never pass up the chance to poke fun at the legal profession, so develop a really good sense of humor (if you don't have one already). Case in point: northern Virginia attorney Hana Brilliant, who doubles as the president of the Fair Oaks (Virginia) Volunteer Fire & Rescue Company. Tired of the ambulance-chasing jokes she heard around the firehouse, Brilliant started the Fair Oaks Ambulance Chase 5k and Kid's Fun Run, in which runners actually do chase an ambulance and the proceeds benefit the volunteer fire department. This year's Ambulance Chase raised over \$7,000.

2) Just because you're becoming a lawyer doesn't mean you can't indulge other passions. Whether it's writing or roller derby, building legos or banging drums, find time to pursue other interests that keep you balanced and help you find that inner bliss. Remember that bit about all work and no play? One great example of having it all is the Honorable Nicole Laurin-Walker, whose day job consists of presiding over misdemeanor criminal offenses as a municipal court judge in Gilbert, Arizona. But since 2006, the judge rocks by night as lead singer of the Love Me Nots. Her band's "modern take on garage rock" has led to four albums, a European tour, and even a writeup in the French edition of Rolling Stone magazine. A bout with breast cancer convinced Judge Laurin-Walker that "This whole thing can end at any time, so do what you can while you can do it." Presiding over shoplifting charges, DUIs, and domestic violence cases may be what she does in the way of a career, but she finds the time to pursue her musical passions as well. Find your happiness wherever you can.

3) Never stop learning, and be open to learning from unexpected sources. Armed with your J.D. diploma and a passing score on the bar exam, you may think you know everything. You do not. Listen and learn from anyone and everyone, from the grizzled old trial lawyers telling you war stories to the legal secretaries and paralegals urging you to be nice to the courthouse staff. To this day, I delight in learning—whether it's from the continuing legal education courses or professional journals that keep me current on the areas of law in which I practice, or even from pop culture. Rappers like Kanye West have waxed philosophical on the finer points of family law, as in the song "Gold Digger": "If you ain't no punk, holla We want pre-nup! We want pre-nup! Yeah, it's something that you need to have, 'cause when she leaves . . . she gon' leave with half." Similarly, Jay-Z helps break down 4th Amendment search-and-seizure law and the finer points of criminal procedure in his song "99 Problems" when he says "Well my glove compartment is locked, so is the trunk in the back and I know my rights so you gon' need a warrant for that."

4) Be respectful of the judiciary, no matter how they behave. Judges can be pretty sarcastic when they want to be. In response to an out-of-state lawyer's motion to change the venue of a case away from Galveston in the Southern District of Texas, the federal judge noted "Defendant will be pleased to discover that the highway is paved and lighted all the way to Galveston, and thanks to the efforts of this Court's predecessor . . . the trip should be free of rustlers, hooligans, or vicious varmints of unsavory kind. Moreover, the speed limit was recently increased to seventy miles per hour on most of the road leading to Galveston, so Defendant should be able to hurtle to justice at lightning speed." Smith v. Colonial Penn Ins. Co., 943 F. Supp. 782, 752 (S.D. Tex. 1996).

5) Give back. Remember why you decided to become a lawyer in the first place. Maybe it was a lawyer who came to speak at a career day when you were in high school, or some attorney who made an impression on you in your youth, or a relative's brush with the legal system. No matter how busy you may be, make some time to give back—to your community, to the legal profession, or to people who can't afford to pay for legal services. I was fortunate enough to go through both my undergraduate education and my law school years with the aid of academic scholarships, and I am happy to write checks that will help support future students in getting their degrees. Similarly, while I've won plenty of cases for companies that barely acknowledged the victories beyond paying my bill, nothing compares to hearing the heartfelt thanks of a pro bono client. A judge I know refers to it as "billable hours for the soul," and I can't describe it better than that.

They don't teach you this stuff in law school, but they probably should.

