

Articles

"A Guide to Life After Law School—Don't Wring Your Hands Too Much"

Kathleen J. Wu

Texas Lawyer

September 3, 2001

If you're in law school right now, you're in a position that many lawyers wish they could be in again. No, they don't want to be broke again, with the prospect of \$60,000 in student loans hanging over their heads. But they wouldn't mind being able to start over, with all the knowledge they've gained over the past five to 50 years.

It is with that thought in mind that I write this column, a guide to life after law school, through the eyes of somebody 15 years out (A more senior lawyer would have different advice, I'm sure, but he can write his own column.)

As much as you don't want to hear this, your law school grades do matter. No, they don't make you a better lawyer, necessarily, but they are the key to getting offers at top-tier firms, the kind that can help you payoff those loans before your kids are in college. Even if you don't see yourself at a big firm, the skills and discipline you develop while getting those good grades put you in a better position to excel at whatever you choose to do after you graduate.

True, we all know people who have great grades but can't carry on a conversation for more than 15 minutes. And we also know geniuses (or at least really intelligent people) who had lousy grades. But it's a safe bet that somebody who took the time and effort to study hard enough to make good grades has the kind of discipline needed to excel in the law.

Pedigree Does Matter

By now, of course, you've already chosen your law school or you wouldn't be reading this. But the truth is that most firms limit their recruiting to those schools they consider "top tier." I'm certainly not going to walk into the hornet's nest of which schools are on that list, but you all know which schools I'm talking about. And you also know which schools aren't on that list.

That doesn't mean if you're at a second- or third-tier school that you're not going to get a decent job out of law school. But be prepared for more rejections than offers, particularly if you aren't at the top of your class. And don't start salivating at all the stories of first-year associates making \$100k-plus a year. You probably won't be pulling that down anytime soon.

On the other hand, take a look at the most successful lawyers in the country (however categorized) and you will find that law school and class rank matter little in the long run. Hard work and talent will prevail.

Don't Be Afraid

I remember when my classmates and I were wringing our hands over what we were going to do after law school. Did we really want to go to a big firm? Should we go into public service and try to make the world a better place? Should we try the government route? It was agonizing; in retrospect, it was misplaced energy.

The truth is that if you pick one particular route now, there are no career cops who will tell you, "Sorry, you went to Skadden. You can't work at Greenpeace now," or "Excuse me, you're on the prosecutors' career track. You can't switch to corporate law." If you spend a year or so doing indigent defense, and you decide it's not your bag, you can switch tracks. Granted, you may not get the offer you want right away, but you can work your way there.

If you're a typical law student, you're probably in your 20s, single and childless. I want you to go up to a married 40-year-old with a kid or two, any married 40-year-old with a kid or two, and ask what he or she would do if he or she were in his or her 20s, single and childless. Chances are, the person will tell you to do something that may sound crazy, like spend the summer waiting tables in Cabo San Lucas, or trekking through Nepal or working as a river guide in Colorado. Their crazy may be different than my crazy, but you get the picture.

Articles

Never again will you be this unfettered. Granted, you've got student loans. But you can work those out. Once you get married, buy a house, develop a clientele that's counting on you and have a couple of kids, it's a lot more difficult to take a break from the real world. Of course, you always can tell yourself that you'll be better able to afford such silliness once you're a bit more solvent, but something always seems to get in the way. So do it now, while you can still blame any indiscretions on being young and stupid.

It's no exaggeration when old-timers say to those in their 20s, "You've got your whole life ahead of you." You may not appreciate everything you have in your plus column right now because it's easy to get distracted by what you don't have, i.e. money, work experience, etc. But believe me when I tell you that the world truly is your oyster. Be sure to enjoy it.

Originally appeared in **TEXAS LAWYER**.

Kathleen J. Wu is a commercial real estate lawyer and managing partner of the Dallas office of Houston's Andrews & Kurth. Her e-mail address is kwu@akllp.com. The views represented here are her own and do not represent those of the firm.

Copyright 2001, Texas Lawyer. All rights reserved.