

Young Lawyers Entering the Profession to Help the Underdogs

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While the public may generally believe lawyers have chosen their profession “for the money,” in fact many pick law as a career from a burning desire to help the underdog.

“Just like Superman and Batman they come to the rescue of people in great distress, to battle evil, well-armed opponents in the name of justice and to aid widows and orphans against Wall Street villains and greedy finance companies,” says Michael Coyne, associate dean of the Massachusetts School of Law at Andover(MSLAW).

In interviews he conducted with law students on the Comcast show “Educational Forum,” to air at 11 a.m. October 24th, 2010, Coyne says, “I want you to meet today’s lawyers, the next generation of leaders, and learn why people turn to the law, how the face of law school has changed and how law schools must change to remain relevant.”

To begin with, Coyne interviewed Clynetta Neely, whose application was rejected by 27 different law schools as she repeatedly scored low on the entry-level Law School Admissions Test(LSAT), which supposedly screens out poor prospects at most of the nation’s 200-plus law schools recognized by the American Bar Assn.(ABA). Even though Neely was working as a paralegal in immigration law at the Department of Justice, law school admissions officials would not credit her experience or prior excellent academic record.

When she applied at MSLAW, though, Neely said she was interviewed in person by an admissions person who was “more interested in how I had established myself as an adult since I graduated from undergrad, and by what I had done in the workforce. It was just enlightening to be able to get into a school where the LSAT was not a..factor.”

(Note: MSLAW does not choose to affiliate itself with the ABA. In fact, it was instrumental in inspiring a suit by the U.S. Department of Justice against ABA for attempting to dictate policies to law schools. ABA the suit settled by signing a consent decree to stop such practices and paying a fine.)

Not only is Neely graduating from MSLAW with honors but she has been highly successful as a member of its trial advocacy teams, winning against schools such as Harvard and Syracuse. In the last five years in the Thurgood Marshall competition, for example, MSLAW teams have finished nationally in third place three times, second place twice, and first place once. “It’s what’s here and now that counts, it’s not what a multiple choice test says you should have the ability to do,” Coyne said, “because you’ve won the Dean’s Award for significant accomplishments and you’ve proven by a long shot that you’re going to be just one terrific lawyer.”

Neely said the most important things she learned in law school were “tolerance for other people...from different backgrounds of life”; teamwork, because nobody in law school makes it alone; and to lead by example because “a great leader’s a leader not because they put themselves out but because they make others greater.”

Albanian-born Daniel Terpollari said he grew up in a totalitarian society that imbued him with a desire for justice that led him to law school. While Americans were enjoying freedom of speech, he said, “we weren’t able to speak, we weren’t able to think, we weren’t able to do anything that a free person should do. Some of our relatives were executed for speaking out by that horrible regime.”

“When I was 10 or 15 years old, I would think to myself and say, ‘One day I will become an attorney...and fight injustice in the world, because unless you experience it you never know what freedom means, what freedom of speech is, and what great opportunities this country has to offer people,” Terpollari said. After completing law school, he says, “I’m still passionate, and I still love the legal profession and I’ll be able to fight for people in the future.”

After arriving in the U.S., Daniel met his wife, Aurora, a foreign exchange student and they decided to go to law school together, which he described as “not a piece of cake” for a married couple, either. “You have to just keep plugging, keep on pushing, you have to work in law school as never before. And even though we had our hard times and our trials, we just kept talking to each other, put our heads down, and worked hard,” he said.

As immigrants, he said, “We have had to surpass all the challenges with a foreign language, and also the financial difficulties, and also other social and economic difficulties that everyone has but are more difficult for us being foreigners in America.” In the process of overcoming those challenges, however, Daniel said the dedication and motivation created in him a work ethic “that will help you in the future.”

Being bilingual, Daniel said, will equip him to help other Europeans who have settled in the U.S. but do not seek legal counsel as needed due to the language barrier. These immigrants, he says, “don’t have friends, they don’t have connections..and I know for sure that so many people suffer because of that.” He concluded that law school had made him “a different person” by enhancing his levels of confidence and knowledge and prepared him to fulfill his dream of helping people in need of a lawyer.

Daniel’s wife, Aurora, added she believes that “everybody should go through law school because the knowledge you get is so broad and deep it makes you more confident going towards the future” and “what I learned for myself made me a stronger person.”

“Another graduating lawyer is one of the rare individuals who also possess a medical degree. Adam Beck told interviewer Coyne that he was inspired to attend by San Francisco Forty-Niners quarterback Steve Young, who got his law degree on the side and, in fact, had to be in class the day after he won the Super Bowl. Beck thought if Young could do it, he could do it as well. Asked how earning a law degree had helped him in his medical practice, Beck replied, “It’s really forced me to look at both sides. Going in, I was (as an expert witness) always on the doctor’s side, pro-doctor everything, and there really are two sides to every story. So I think I try to be as fair as possible.”

Beck says that he also learned to be more careful going over documents such as consent for

surgery. “Before I started law school I wasn’t able to even read a contract and make heads or tails of it. Now I can pick up almost anything and read it, and decipher it without calling somebody.” What’s more, he added, he no longer fears lawyers as do a lot of doctors. Additionally, becoming a lawyer has reinforced his approach to treating patients. “In medicine we try not to direct the patient anywhere. We just let them speak and we’re able to formulate a diagnosis. It’s very similar to law in that way. We categorize in our brains where we want to go with a different set of symptoms so I think the two (professions) overlap in that way.”

The most significant lesson he learned in law school, Beck says, was “You really want to get cases over early. Nobody wins in a lawsuit. If there’s a conflict, we try to negotiate or mediate it early. It’s always better if you can talk things through upfront and communicate with the other side, and if you hear both sides of the issue hopefully you can get to a compromise quickly that saves a lot of time and money and stress on everybody.”

Amy Dimitriadis, one of the stars of MSLAW’s trial advocacy teams, said the competitive experience taught her to “stand up in court and get your voice heard.” In most law schools, she said, students are just reading and briefing cases and writing memos. But in actual practice, it’s the courtroom where you really practice law. “And it gave me a feel for what it’s actually going to be like out there eventually when I get to it.” She goes on to say that “for me right now practicing law is about helping people when they need it the most without necessarily holding a badge or a scalpel...it’s helping them when perhaps they are at their most desperate, when they need justice, when they need someone to help them when no one else can.” She said that law school made her even more determined to achieve her career goal of becoming a practicing lawyer.

Neil Judd, another advocacy team winner, recalled that he was “trembling tremendously” when he gave his opening statement in his first competition. But he told himself that the judges are “going to like me or aren’t going to like me but at the end of the day, this is me. And I wish I knew that earlier in life.” Judd added that law school prepared him for those moments because it taught him, “Not everything is handed to you on a silver platter. You actually have to work for it, fight for it. And at the end of the day, you need to only be happy to yourself.” Today, he adds, “you can put anyone else at the other table next to me and I’m not afraid of them, no matter what school they say they’re from, or whatever their background is. We practiced and prepared so much no one else could have done it more than us.”

Shane Rodriguez said he was inspired to attend law school from his childhood days watching Perry Mason on television. “But more than that, it was a way out of the inner city for me. It was a way for me to climb out of living in poverty and to help others climb out once I became an attorney.” Rodriguez, who is assistant chief of police at a public university, said he juggled both time-consuming efforts by “making sacrifices, by giving up a number of different things” so that one day he would pass the bar exam. Law school, he says, has helped him in his work as “one of the things it’s really taught me is to have an open mind and to go into cases and people’s particular situations with an open mind.” He explained that in law enforcement “it’s very easy to rush to judgment when you’re dealing with criminal defendants all the time...and to look at the circumstances behind a particular situation instead of just coming in with a very narrow focused view.”

The Massachusetts School of Law was founded in 1988 to provide a quality, affordable

education to students from minority, immigrant, and low-income households who otherwise would be unable to enter the legal profession. A Wall Street Journal article referred to MSLAW as “The Little Law School That Could” and renowned jurisprudence scholar Brian Tamanaha at Princeton University has called upon the nation’s law schools to shift their teaching approach from the ‘academic’ or research model to one designed to train “good lawyers,” citing MSLAW’s example. MSLAW’s dean and cofounder, Lawrence Velvel, has been cited by The National Jurist magazine as “one of the most influential people in legal education over the past 15 years” and The National Law Journal has honored Velvel for his contributions to law school reform.

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