

Law

• Law students say the darndest things

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I've been a lawyer longer than a teacher, but I've been teaching long enough to know that you never know what you're going to get on the first day of class. I was still surprised, however, by what recently occurred during the introductions I require each of my students to give as the first-day icebreaker. And that was the flashback of the non-hallucinogenic kind I experienced when one of the students in my appellate advocacy class told me what he intended to do with his law degree.

As soon as the words left his lips, I was transported back in time to another conversation about career choices, which occurred between my daughter and her mother in the early 1990s. The two were driving in the car when Sarah, who was 4 or 5 years old at the time, emitted a deep sigh from the back seat and asked my wife, after several moments of obvious reflection, "Mommy, is it hard being a lawyer?"

The nature of the question and the way in which it was asked filled my wife with a great sense of pride that our young child appeared to be giving serious consideration to following her mother's career path. Matching the thoughtful tone in which the question was asked, my wife responded, "Why, yes, honey, it is hard being a lawyer because people come to you with serious problems and depend on your advice, but it's a wonderful job because you get paid to use your brain to help people."

This magic moment continued for a few more seconds as my daughter pondered her mother's sage words before announcing, "Then I don't want to be a lawyer. I don't want to work hard. What's the easiest job there is?"

I can't recall which jobs Mommy Dearest identified for little Sarah — my father thought of the woman who sits outside of the public bathrooms in Rome, collecting a coin from each user, and said that would be the dream job for his granddaughter — but big Sarah's views about working have sure come a long way since preschool. If there's harder work than what she currently does, juggling two part-time jobs as a case manager at two homeless shelters, I'd like to know what it is.

Time will tell whether the student who triggered this flashback will experience a similar evolution in his present-day goal of what he wants to do when he grows up. A few of the other students in this class expressed an interest in criminal law, while some were thinking about a career focusing on taxation, estates, or intellectual property. A handful had full-time jobs and intended to use their law degrees to make a complete vocational change. But of the hundreds of individuals I have had the opportunity to teach over the years who have considered pursuing a broad spectrum of possibilities, this was the first time I have had a student say that he just wants to use his law degree to make money.

Beyond the paycheck

When I told one of my partners what this student had said, his immediate reaction was a skeptical “Good luck.” My firm has weathered the economic downturn by diversifying its practice areas and has actually added lawyers to meet the increased demand for legal services, but the employment picture generally has not been an especially rosy one, particularly for recent graduates. Even those lucky enough to get offers have sometimes found themselves in the position of being given a delayed start date, and others have suffered the even greater blow of having offers rescinded.

Although I do not disagree with my partner’s opinion questioning how realistic a goal it is to get a law degree just to make money, the student’s response bothered me for a different reason: Making money is certainly an important benefit of having a law degree, but it should not be the end goal.

Now don’t get me wrong. Just because my daughter has morphed into a social worker and I voted for Obama does not mean that I’m a socialist or have a philosophical objection to making money. Lots of students have to take out loans to pay for law school, and perhaps this student is one of them. But there are more important things about a law degree than the paycheck it generates.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to attach a dollar figure to job satisfaction, which should be the top item on the checklist of every law student who looks for work.

Being happy with your job and going to work every day can never be overrated. Money can be a positive influence, but there is only so much dissatisfaction the student who lands a well-paying job can take before deciding that maybe the golden handcuffs aren’t really worth it. Financial rewards may not seem so valuable to the young lawyer who doesn’t get to see the inside of a courtroom and instead spends most of his or her billable time reviewing documents in a room with no windows.

And no amount of money can offset the misery of having a job you hate, whether it’s because of the working environment or the substantive work itself. Some lawyers, to put it kindly, are impossible human beings. Some lawyers specialize in practice areas which would result in my involuntary hospitalization in a psych ward if that’s what I had to do on a daily basis. There is a lot not to like about the practice of law.

But there is also so much to love about the work we do that it would be truly sad if we didn’t occasionally think to ourselves that each of us had the greatest job in the world. Finding the right

fit sometimes takes a while, but that should be the goal of not just every law student, but every lawyer. Once that goal is met, even the hardest job is easy.