

Forging a Legal Career

Law Students, New Lawyers

Share Their Stories

By Stephanie B. Goldberg

They could be our daughters, sisters, or nieces, making the giant leap from law school to practice. In 2006, *Perspectives* chose five law students to follow over five years to learn what it's like to be a young lawyer in the 21st century.

This is the second installment of the series, which begins with a footnote: Catherine, a first-year lawyer at a prestigious firm, declined to participate because unauthorized contact with the press would have violated firm policy. "I'm very sorry, but I can't afford the risk," she said.

It's About Time

When *Perspectives* interviewed Alexandria more than a year ago, she was a 3L who had received an offer from a large firm where she had been a summer associate. An African American woman who spent her earliest years in the housing projects of Baltimore while her mother struggled with drug addiction, Alexandria, 31, says her life changed dramatically at age 12 when she moved to the suburbs to live with her father. The first woman in her family to graduate high school, she knew she wanted to be a lawyer even though a high school teacher recommended community college as a fallback.

After three years in the workforce, marriage, and the birth of a son, Alexandria was finally able to realize her dream of attending law school. During her first year, her husband was the primary caretaker for their son, now five years old. The plan was for her husband to begin graduate school in her second year, but that was put on hold when she gave birth to a daughter the following May. Two weeks later, Alexandria was working as a summer associate. "My husband says I'm a workaholic," she notes. "I know I'm really driven."

Now, with the bar examination behind her, Alexandria is a first-year associate in her firm's commercial litigation department, and her husband is back in school working on an advanced degree. Many things about her life have not changed—"the level of stress feels the same"—but others are quite different, such as her earning a salary that is three or four times what her husband was making.

She is gracious but always mindful of the time and her checklist of items to do. Her mantra as she passes from one activity to another: Keep calm. "Actually, the juggling I'm doing now doesn't feel different from what I did in law school," Alexandria reports. "The biggest difference in becoming a lawyer is being aware of the hours that you bill and of opportunities for career development."

She works from 8AM to 6:30PM on weekdays, except for nights when she must leave at 5 to pick up her children. "If you choose to work from home every so often, it's not an issue," she says.

For the most part, weekends are reserved for family. "My idea of downtime is being able to sleep in until 8, going on a date with my husband a couple of times a month,

going shopping for shoes for the kids, and going to Target," Alexandria says. Then she reminds herself of another item to put on her checklist: "I need to get better at scheduling a babysitter so my husband and I can go someplace on weekends."

She acknowledges that the past two and a half years have been sort of a blur. "I feel I need to slow down and take it all in. I'm always running to the next thing. There's not a lot of time to ask yourself, 'What do I really want to do with my career?'"

Alexandria believes she made the right choice in becoming a litigator. "I was pleasantly surprised I was able to argue in federal court in front of a judge." Interestingly enough, it was her pro bono work rather than her commercial assignments that provided her the opportunity.

She hasn't met any clients yet and sees rainmaking as an activity for the distant future. "It really isn't encouraged at our level, apart from joining boards and getting active in the community. I wouldn't know how to go about doing it."

Alexandria has only one regret—that she hasn't had time to establish a mentoring program for young girls as she did in another city. "It bothers me, but I want to save time for my family," she says. "I had to put that on hold during law school, and I don't want to do that anymore."

Not Ready to Settle Down

Olivia, 25, who emigrated from Nicaragua to Seattle at age two, is in the enviable position of receiving an offer of employment from the large Seattle firm where she clerked for the past two summers. But she declined the offer, preferring instead to pursue a Fulbright grant that will take her to Spain if she is successful.

"I made it to the final stages

when I applied in my last year of college,” she explains about her pending grant application, adding, “It’s something I feel I have to do.” She chose Spain for strategic reasons. A fluent Spanish speaker, she looked at the numbers and decided she had the best opportunity there.

A year ago, Olivia, now a 3L, reported that she wants to make her mark as a Latina, pointing to her experiences studying in Cuba and working in Nicaragua on a government grant. She’ll take the bar examination this summer and plans to practice law, but she is not sure what the future holds. And that’s okay with her. “I’ve just started to realize how many doors my law degree will open,” she notes.

Even though she won honors as a member of her law school’s moot court board, her experience is marred by the all-too-average grades she received her first year. She fears those grades won’t allow her a spot in the most prestigious firms and will relegate her to the second tier forever. She’s very hard on herself for not being attuned to her learning style. “It seems that verbalizing is more successful for me than putting all my energies in writing an outline,” Olivia notes. “I should have listened to my inner voice.”

She wishes she had been mentored her first year and that someone had stressed the importance of good grades and had urged her not to rely on the study skills that were sufficient for her as an undergraduate. “You really need someone telling you that you need to do x, y, and z.”

Yet she treasures the friendships she has made in school and classes that she believes took her to new intellectual heights. “I’ve loved my time in law school,” she says. “It always seemed like a privilege to be able to spend a day studying.”

Does she see marriage and children in her future? “I’d be lying if I didn’t say that I think about those things. By nature, I’m a planner. But I feel like there’s time to sort that out.

I’m only 25. Even if I were 40, there’s still time enough to have kids.”

Things Are Falling into Place

Sarah, 30, is on top of the world. A 3L, she’s been offered a job at one of the nation’s top firms, which means a starting salary of \$160,000. Only a handful of people at her school make the cut, and she is one of them.

Married, with five years under her belt as a social worker, Sarah came to her very public-interest-minded law school with the goal of working at a large law firm rather than for the government. She’ll leave with \$100,000 in graduate and undergraduate loans and an eager eye to the future tempered by hopes that she’ll still have time

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for pro bono, outside interests, and, eventually, children.

“This is a relaxed time for me,” Sarah says of her last semester in law school. “I’m just trying to enjoy myself before the bar exam.”

In the past year, Sarah has published her law review note and has cut back on school activities. She’s decided on a specialty—litigation. “I was never that interested in corporate law,” she admits, adding that she feels more confident professionally than ever before.

She’s come a long way from the liberal arts major who studied English literature because she loved it. “I feel I have a skill set now,” she says. In a way, she was a fish out

of water at law school. “People go there for different reasons. I always knew I wanted to do more than practice; I want to be part of an intellectual community.”

From time to time, she wonders what it would have been like to attend a more elite school like many of her colleagues at her future firm. “I might have gone somewhere else if money had been no object. But I’m very grateful for my school’s encouragement and aid, which will allow me to graduate with half the debt I would have had otherwise.”

Sarah doesn’t plan to live lavishly after graduation. “We’re keeping our apartment. We want to keep our living expenses down and get out of debt. I’m nervous about suddenly making money. I don’t want to get trapped,” she says, referring to the golden handcuffs that keep so many lawyers tied to their jobs.

“Having kids is a big question for us. It’s a real dilemma,” Sarah points out. “We feel ready, but I’m very apprehensive, knowing this job and the demands it will have on me.”

One of her future employer’s selling points was that the firm has a handful of women who made partner working half time, 40 hours a week. “They just increased maternity benefits,” Sarah adds, “and I met a lot of women who had babies and came back to work.”

Besides building her confidence and earning power, law school has changed Sarah in other ways. “I’m almost too organized. I don’t think I ever was this obsessive. I’m constantly planning when to work or cook or exercise.” Increasingly, maintaining her health is important to her, and she tries to find time to do yoga and eat well.

“Everyone tells me I’ll pass the bar exam, but you never know. The big goal is to start work and not let it totally consume my life. I don’t know what it will be like except that it will be really hard.”

She stops and reconsiders. “It will
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be challenging and demanding, but it doesn't have to be miserable. It's a great job. I'm lucky to have it. I'm going to try to enjoy it."

Living in the Now

Erin's path recalls that of the hero in the 1973 movie *The Paper Chase*, who graduated from a state school and then attended an Ivy League law school. Erin, 24, had just begun her first year of law school when *Perspectives* initially interviewed her. Her goal then was simply to graduate in good standing.

Now in her second year, Erin has earned excellent grades and distinction as a moot court debater. This past summer, she worked at a silk stocking law firm in New York. "I was wined and dined," she says. "You get sick of that by the end of the

summer and are relieved not to have to make small talk."


She enjoyed her work at the firm, particularly the pro bono opportunities it afforded her. She now knows that "there has to be a certain amount of quality to the work you do. Of course, you have to pay your dues, but you don't want to spend your time doing things that don't require a law degree."

She lives with her boyfriend of many years, a computer programmer who has been a bulwark of strength for her. Going into a high-stress occupation, Erin says it's important to know he's there and supports her.

In some ways, law school has proven even harder than she thought it would be. "Balancing school activities and studies is difficult," she reports. "To a certain extent, you adopt a perspective of 'How will this look on my résumé?' but you don't want to do things solely for that reason."

In other ways, law school has not been as daunting as she feared. "I see I needn't have worried about how I would do opposite students from Ivy League schools. All that really matters is your ability to learn."

She's enrolled in a yearlong legal clinic in which she represents foster children who are, as she puts it, "aging" out of the system. "It's a mixture of law and social work, but I'm gaining a lot of skill at negotiating, which will translate professionally."

Graduation is only a year and a half away, but Erin insists that she's not really focused on the future beyond looking forward to her career and being an adult. "My current situation is good, so I'm happy living in the now," she concludes. 

Stephanie B. Goldberg is a legal affairs journalist based in Chicago and is a former member of the Perspectives editorial board. Her work has appeared in the New York Times, BusinessWeek, the Chicago Tribune, and many legal publications.