

Planning Their Work, Working Their Plan

Five Women Law Students Share Their Stories

By Stephanie B. Goldberg

How much have you changed since law school? Did you begin your first year with lofty goals of a public service career only to find that the economics of a public interest salary made it impossible? Did you feel a measure of trepidation about working for a large law firm, or was this your paramount goal? Did you find mentors easily, or was being mentored the furthest thing from your mind? Were you welcomed into the profession, or did you feel that you had years of hard work ahead to make your workplace sensitive to your needs and goals?

What is law school and planning for the future like for today's women students? How do their experiences affect their goals and plans?

Perspectives decided to find out by meeting five diverse women law students from across the country, learning their stories, and revisiting them

in each of the next three years as they complete school and enter law practice. We want to learn about their situations, accomplishments, and challenges, and see if they encounter the obstacles to which women have testified during the Commission on Women in the Profession's 19-year history: the struggle for work/life balance, a lack of community involvement, a shortage of meaningful work, a feeling of being on the outside looking in, the glass ceiling, sexual harassment, and so on. We plan to look at the profession through these women's eyes to see how welcoming it is to young female lawyers of great promise.

First, some vital statistics: Three of the five law students are married; two have children; two expect their husband to be the primary caregiver for their children; all are recipients of some sort of financial aid; and all plan

to go into private practice. The law schools they attend are the University of Pittsburgh, Columbia University, Rutgers University, Boalt Hall, and the University of Southern California. To ensure a measure of privacy and encourage the greatest candor, we allowed the women to identify themselves by their first name and last initial. The five also agreed to allow us to check in with them once a year for the next three years.

Alexandria S., 3L University of Pittsburgh

Alexandria S., 30, is a 3L at the University of Pittsburgh, is married with one child, and is the first woman in her family to graduate from high school. The daughter of a drug-addicted single mother, Alexandria lived with her grandmother in the Baltimore housing projects until age 12, when she

moved to suburban Columbia, Maryland, to live with her father.

As an undergraduate at Howard University, Alexandria founded Girls Rising, a big-sister-type program for girls in the inner city. In that environment, “it’s easy to believe that your world doesn’t go beyond five blocks,” Alexandria says. “When I was growing up, it was important for me to see women doing things.” While her law studies have made it difficult for her to participate in a formal mentoring program, she hopes to do so following graduation. With an offer in hand from a large prestigious firm, she has discussed with a partner the importance of being a mentor. Alexandria believes her firm will be very supportive of this activity, which carries a weekly time commitment.

Alexandria transferred from Howard University to the University of Maryland, graduating with a degree in legal studies. She had always wanted to be a lawyer even though, as a child, her knowledge of law was limited to what she saw on television. A high school guidance counselor tried to steer her to community college, but Alexandria was undeterred. “You can’t let other people define you,” she says.

After the birth of her son, she started law school. “We were fortunate that my husband’s job allowed him to be the primary caregiver,” says Alexandria, who admits that her 55- to 60-hour weeks can be stressful. Nevertheless, she’s enjoyed the intellectual interaction of law school and the relationships she’s formed with classmates. Along with achieving a strong academic record, Alexandria is active in the school’s online news service, moot court, the Black Law Students Association, and a neighborhood legal services clinic. She’s leaning toward a career in litigation and is excited by her prospective firm’s wide range of practice. Pro bono work is important to her, but so is the prospect of being well compensated and taking time off for a judicial clerkship.

As for racism, Alexandria, who is African American, doesn’t feel she’s experienced any in law school or her clerkships. “I do come in contact with people who seem a little surprised or even uncomfortable with who I am,

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but I can’t tell if it’s because I’m a woman or I’m black,” she explains. “It’s something I’ve been up against my entire life. You just have to persevere. Black people spend their lives overcoming presumptions.”

Erin W., 1L Columbia University

Erin W., 22, is a 1L at Columbia University, which is a long way from her home in San Antonio, Texas. She attended a state university there, graduating with high honors in her field of philosophy despite a fairly grueling work schedule that included a stint managing a waitstaff at a local restaurant. A prize-winning debater since high school, Erin felt that law school was a good fit with her verbal skills and competitive intellect. She hopes to practice in the New York area after graduation. Her boyfriend since high school, a computer programmer, is moving to New York to be with her. “After I finish school, he wants to get his master’s degree. I don’t plan to have a family until I’m 30 or so. We’ve talked about my being the major breadwinner and his working out of the home and staying with the kids. I don’t want to be one of those New York career women whose children are raised by nannies.”

Erin has clear-cut goals for her first year of law school. “I want to finish in good standing. I’m interested

in becoming involved with my school activities, which I really couldn’t do as an undergrad. I want to try out for a journal on gender and constitutional law and do moot court.” And yet, Erin admits to being intimidated that “everyone has an Ivy League education” and she doesn’t. But the rigorous trials she faces excite her. “I want to challenge myself,” she explains. “I’m energized by competition. Being competitive with yourself is not a bad thing. I just want to do all that I can.”

Sarah W., 2L Rutgers University

Sarah W., 28, married and a 2L at Rutgers University, has a public interest fellowship and is interning this fall at the American Civil Liberties Union in New York. So it’s a little surprising to hear her say that she plans to practice in the private sector rather than pursue public interest work. “Money is a huge influence,” Sarah admits. “I’m graduating with \$120,000 in debt from undergrad loans. I went to the University of Pennsylvania, an expensive undergrad school. I went to school and took jobs, ignoring their financial consequences, and I really don’t feel I can do that anymore.”

If the path she’s taken thus far hasn’t been lucrative, it has been very interesting. Following graduation from college, Sarah moved to Santiago, Chile, where she taught English and became fluent in Spanish. She met her future husband there, and the two returned to the states four years ago. Sarah worked as a social work case manager and temporary paralegal. Eventually, she found her way to a job in the Brooklyn district attorney’s office, which convinced her to go to law school.

Sarah, who is on law review, admits that she’s never been this busy before. “It does bother me a little,” she concedes. “My husband is very supportive but would prefer to be more spontaneous. For right now, that isn’t a possibility.” She clerked at

a human rights organization this past summer but is interviewing for a firm clerkship this fall. “I’ve always had a travel bug, and I want to do international work. Small firms don’t really offer that scope of practice.”

Right now, her biggest obstacle is figuring out how to balance life and school, which she describes as a continuous challenge. “I spend maybe one night a week with my husband,” Sarah explains. “We also want to have kids, and I’m really trying to figure out how to make that work.”

**Catherine T., 3L
Boalt Hall**

Catherine T., 33, married with one child, is a 3L at Boalt Hall. A former software engineer in Silicon Valley, California, Catherine admits to experiencing quite a bit of culture shock in entering the legal community. “The attitude toward human capital is completely different,” she says. “Going through layoffs is a way of life in the software field. I’m very impressed by how carefully law firms select their personnel and how much they want to retain them.”

In some ways, she views her background in another field as a blessing. Catherine has clerked for two years at one of the country’s most prestigious firms, which also has a reputation for being a pressure cooker. “I knew nothing about the firm when I interviewed. If I had, I might have been intimidated about working there. All I knew is that I liked the people I met and found the work—intellectual property—very stimulating.” Nor did Catherine know anything of the work/life balance issues that women in the legal profession grapple with. Seven months pregnant when her clerkship began, she told the firm that she had to work part-time. “The partner said, ‘How many hours can you work?’ and that was that.” During the second summer, the firm allocated space for mothers to nurse their babies. “I appreciate the gesture,” she says. “They were obviously making an effort.”

With her technical background and high grades that earned her a spot on law review, Catherine has her pick of employment offers. She plans to go to a big firm and then “play it by ear.” “I want to save as much of my salary as I can so we don’t get

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hooked into the big-firm lifestyle,” she explains. “Two years after I start my job, my husband and I are going to sit down and reevaluate. We’ll see if this is working. If life at a big firm isn’t for me, I’ll do something else.”

**Olivia G., 2L
University of
Southern California**

Olivia G., 24, is a 2L at the University of Southern California and a living example of the American dream. Political unrest drove her family to emigrate from Nicaragua in 1984. It was a struggle for the family to learn English and hurdle the obstacles associated with being a foreigner. But today, both her parents are engineers with advanced degrees and her brother has just enrolled in medical school. “I tell my story a lot,” says Olivia, who feels drawn to immigration law, education, and civil rights. Active in her school’s La Raza organization, she says she wants to empower people who are in disadvantaged situations. As someone who studied in Cuba and Nicaragua during her undergraduate years at Claremont College, she brings a cross-cultural perspective to all that she does. “Spanish will always be my first language,” says Olivia, who bears no

trace of a Hispanic accent. “I live with a lot of dichotomies.”

Perhaps the most striking dichotomy is her decision to seek employment with a large firm after graduation rather than pursuing public interest work. “I have \$72,000 in loans, and while that’s not a back-breaking amount,” Olivia explains, “I feel I have to retire it before I can do anything else.” She clerked for a large firm this past summer and really enjoyed it. “I found out that I can carve out a niche in an area of practice and do it for however long I find satisfying.”

She admits that her first year of law school stripped away a little of her self-confidence. “It wasn’t until the end of the semester that I learned that I had to work with the material rather than just reading and memorizing it,” Olivia says. Now that she’s hit her stride, she has big plans for the year ahead. “I qualified for moot court, which is highly competitive,” she explains. “I want to find mentors this year and build relationships with my teachers. I want to talk in class and be intellectually aggressive, which many women are afraid to do because it intimidates the men in the class. And I want a social life—I didn’t date at all last year because I was so wrapped up in my studies.” She assumes that she will marry and have a family, but adds, “I’m so young. It bothers me that I have to plan these things so early in my life. It’s a little scary.”

On to the Year Ahead

These five extraordinary young women all have one thing in common: They have planned their futures rather than letting decisions happen by default. We’ll revisit them in 2007 to see how the year has unfolded for each of them as they move toward their professional and personal goals. 🍷

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