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Lawyer offers tips on achieving career fulfillment

By Seth E. Darmstadter

According to the wisdom of Wikipedia, Law Day is meant to “reflect on the role of law in the foundation of the country and to recognize its importance for society.”

I suspect we earn this national day of recognition by claiming victim to the other 364 days that are reserved for lawyer jokes. Don't get me wrong, many lawyer jokes are funny, but attorneys are in a unique position to impact others daily and there is much for which we can be proud.

My regular column in *Chicago Lawyer* magazine, “Climbing the Ladder,” offers practical tips for young lawyers who, like me, work daily to progress within the legal community. The tips contained herein are geared less toward career advancement and more toward career fulfillment.

Tip 1: Expand your mind

Just a few weeks ago I was coaching a cross-examination CLE class and I noticed that one of my students appeared unusually nervous when it was her turn to cross-examine the witness.

She stood up from her seat in the back of the room, both her voice and hands shaking. To my surprise, she delivered a textbook cross-examination and a flawless impeachment of the witness. When she finished, I provided her with positive feedback and she told the class that we had just witnessed her first-ever cross-examination.

She was a commercial real estate attorney who decided that it would be fun to come into a courtroom and learn some trial advocacy skills. It was clear that she was intellectually curious about trial law and so she left her comfort zone, took a risk and expanded her depth of knowledge and skill.

She may never try a case, but I think it may be time for me to learn a thing or two about the Bankruptcy Code or the basics of a commercial real estate transaction.

Tip 2: Practice civility

Civility among attorneys is perhaps the most basic and fundamental principle in our practice and it also is probably the simplest one to ignore — especially among my



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contemporaries. I find myself coming into the office every day and putting on my gloves, gearing up for the next round of legal sparring; be it on a conference call, in a legal memorandum, or during live deposition or courtroom action.

Often it seems that the vast majority of my interactions with opposing attorneys are adversarial and it is natural if not instinctual for a certain degree of animosity to carry over into my non-work life.

Frankly, I knew when I decided to litigate cases that I was entering an adversarial profession. What I did not know, and what I continue to learn, is that it is not only acceptable but even honorable to maintain a high-degree of civility with your opponent. For example, just because you win or lose a legal battle in court does not mean you cannot grant a professional courtesy at the request of your opposing counsel. Similarly, virtually all discovery disputes can be worked out between attorneys in a simple 201(k) conference; it is possible to respect the process and make reasonable concessions without compromising your client's interests.

Regularly, I take notice of how favorably both judges and juries respond when attorneys come to agreements and show deference not only to one another, but even to the other side's witnesses. The ability to turn up the level of competitiveness is proving far less valuable a skill than the ability to tone it down when the situation calls for civility.

Tip 3: Make an impact

Practicing law has many rewards. We are rewarded with professional fulfillment, intellectual growth and financial security, to name a few. Just last week I was reminded of another, less celebrated reward — the ability to meaningfully contribute to the greater community. I attended a memorial service at one of the city's law schools wherein an attorney who left the world at far too young an age was honored by the school and in particular by many of the people whose lives he impacted.

As individuals spoke about my colleague's innumerable contributions I realized the power that each of us has, because of our unique skill set and our place within the community, to make an impact. I am beginning to realize that our ability to effect change may be the law's greatest reward. I am seeing it more and more.

For example, in just the past couple of months, a friend used his legal training to volunteer to lead a group of concerned parents into a productive dialogue with the Chicago Public Schools to ensure that their community school would remain open.

Last week, I had the privilege of attending an event honoring a colleague for his work to protect abused children and his legal efforts in support of an agency dedicated to ending the cycle of child abuse.

On this Law Day, I am reminded of the words of one of my mentors, the Honorable David A. Erickson, who told me never to forget that while doctors were trying to cure disease by applying leeches to their patients, lawyers were writing the United States Constitution.