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HEADLINE: Final Exam for Area Law Schools
Alumni Discuss How Well - or Poorly - Their Alma Maters Prepared Them for the Law

BODY:

By Lindsay Van Tine

Forget the U.S. News & World Report annual rankings. If you want the real scoop on the quality of local law schools, talk to some of their recent graduates.

Legal Times asked seven young D.C.-area lawyers to share their thoughts on how law school prepared them for what they're doing now-and how it didn't.

All have chosen widely divergent career paths, ranging from dot-com entrepreneur to big firm litigator to commonwealth prosecutor. While they agree their law school experience was valuable, each cites a different reason. But when it comes to criticism, a consensus emerges: Law school may have prepared these grads well academically, but it fell short when it came to real-world experience.

Indeed, they say they learned their most valuable lessons in law school outside the confines of a classroom, whether at a practice clinic, clerking, or even as a Rhodes scholar.

Nonetheless, the seven agree that at least some of what they learned in law school remains relevant to their careers today, even if they're no longer practicing law.

The Med School Model

Craig Franco is a New York native whose office is graced by a prominently positioned Yankees pennant, but he exudes an almost small-town Southern charm on a recent stroll through the airy new Arlington Court House building. Greeting almost everyone he encounters by name and grinning familiarly at everyone else, the 28-year-old assistant commonwealth's attorney is obviously in his element.

Not surprising, when you consider that he rarely exits the building during working hours. His office is on the fifth floor, with the other commonwealth attorneys'; he rides the elevator down to ground level to talk with police officers, to the third floor to argue in general district court, up to the fourth for juvenile cases, and up to the 10th for circuit court.

The 1997 grad of George Mason University School of Law calls his job of eight months "exceptionally rewarding-the job I've always wanted since going to law school." As a prosecutor of felonies and misdemeanors for the state, he handles cases that range from petty larceny to Peeping Toms to possession of narcotics. It's a line of work that practically runs in his family: His father is a retired police officer, his brother a drug enforcement agent.

While Franco says Mason prepared him well academically, "law school doesn't prepare you to deal with judges and juries and other personalities. (In school,) there are mock trials and client counseling and writing competitions, but it's essentially an academic arena." And people skills, he says, are much more crucial to his job-he's in court nearly every day-than some of the esoteric black-letter law he learned in classes about, say, negotiable instruments.

"For the most part, I don't use anything outside of criminal litigation anymore," he says, shrugging.

He's talked with his lawyer buddies about the dearth of real-life skills taught in law schools, and they think they've come up with a viable solution: Take some cues from medical schools.

"I think the way med schools teach doctors to be doctors, with an internship and a residency before you start practicing, could be very valuable for law students too," he says. "Obviously, you don't need seven or eight years of real-life experience just to start practicing law, but maybe two and a half years of law school followed by a year of practicing as a nonlawyer."

After taking the bar, Franco spent two months working the night shift of a huge antitrust case as one of 300 temps at D.C.'s Collier, Shannon, Rill & Scott. He then had a two-year stint at the small Fairfax firm of Brault, Palmer, Grove, Zimmerman, White & Steinhilber.

While the temping job required little more than basic legal knowledge-"you just had to put the time in," he says-his first day at the firm made all too clear his lack of real-world experience.

"They said, 'Here's tomorrow's docket. Take care of it,' " he says. "That's fairly typical of a small firm-no one holds your hand."

Franco says Mason did teach him how to present a case to a jury: "You string it all together, make it a nice clear story. You put the puzzle together for them." But he learned on his own that the jury doesn't always see things the way lawyers do.

In a recent case involving a bad check, he pointed out what he thought was the most coherent legal argument to the jury. As it turned out, though, what swayed them was a small detail about the way the check was made out-which Franco thought was less important than the other evidence. "But," he says, shrugging, "they got it right. Juries are smarter than a lot of people want to think."

Learning to Think Like a Lawyer

At ease in a glass-walled conference room, a casually attired Terry Turnipseed quips, "It's taken me this long to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up,"

There's no doubt that the 35-year-old, now a national tax manager at the Big Five accounting firm Deloitte & Touche, has followed a rather unusual career path-from nuclear engineering policy work to nuclear energy law to his current field of expertise, estate planning.

With an undergraduate degree in nuclear engineering and two related masters degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Turnipseed started his career working as an issues manager for the U.S. Council for Energy Awareness, then moved to the Department of Energy.

But after several years of policy work, he says, "I could tell I would plateau very soon in nuclear energy."

So he decided to go to law school. In 1995, he graduated from Georgetown University Law Center after 31/2 years, while working 35 hours a week as a law clerk in Shaw Pittman's nuclear energy group.

"It was a strain," he admits with a smile. "When you work and go to school, both suffer a little bit."

Still, Turnipseed thinks the Evening Division-where the average entering age is 29-was a better experience than standard law school. It was telling, he says, to compare the approaches taken by older, working students like himself and the handful of Evening Division students who had come straight from college.

"They would have spent the entire day reading the three or four cases assigned, whereas those of us who were working were lucky if we had had a chance to skim them over," he says. "Law school was their whole world. But I think it was better to have a broader perspective. If I had just gone from college to law school to a firm, with my only working experience having been as a summer associate, I don't think I would have been quite as ready to hit the ground running."

By the summer of his second year at Georgetown, he had already had more practical, real-world experience than most law students could dream of, but Turnipseed took on a little more. He participated in the appellate litigation clinic, part of Georgetown's top-rated clinic program. He calls it "an outstanding experience. At the end, we got together several real federal court of appeals judges and conducted mock arguments against assistant attorneys general from all over the country. And we did pretty well."

Turnipseed says that while Georgetown was "very good on a theoretical level, it was very bad at teaching you black-letter law."

When it came to the bar exam, he says, "Georgetown students were starting from scratch. Students from smaller schools were more prepared, because they had done more black-letter law. But I would be surprised if they were taught to write as well as we were."

For Turnipseed, who had never taken an essay test while an undergraduate at Mississippi State University, it was a fair trade. In addition to honing his writing skills, Turnipseed says Georgetown also helped him change his approach to problem solving.

"It's harder to learn how to think. And I really needed that. . . . In engineering, you get to an answer. But in law school, the whole point is that there is no answer-you argue both sides. It took me a couple of years to re-gear."

Fresh out of law school, Turnipseed worked in energy and nuclear groups at the D.C. offices of Philadelphia's Morgan, Lewis & Bockius and the Chicago-based Winston & Strawn.

But in 1997, he decided it was time for another change. In his last year at Georgetown, he had taken an estate and gift tax course, mostly because it fit in his schedule. He was surprised to find himself fascinated with the field.

"At that point, I had no time left to pursue that any further," he says, "but it stuck in the back of my head." He returned to Georgetown for the nine-month LL.M. tax program, graduating in 1998.

Since then, he's been working at Deloitte in a job he clearly loves. Bar rules against fee sharing prevent him from practicing law, but he says he doesn't miss it.

"We don't actually draft anything," he says, "but frankly, that's the boring part. The fun part is meeting with clients, understanding their goals and needs, and crafting an estate plan for them. It would be hard at this point to return to the drudgery of a firm."

Practically Minded

As an undergraduate history and government major at Georgetown University, Lily Arbab Camet was torn between pursuing a career in journalism or law.

By the time she graduated in 1990, she had made up her mind to become a lawyer. A two-year stint as a legal assistant at the D.C. office of New York's Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom confirmed her choice.

Now a fourth-year associate at Skadden, Camet says much of her practice involves representing corporate clients and individuals in criminal and civil investigations by Congress, independent counsel, and federal enforcement agencies.

But that doesn't mean she hasn't retained some of her journalistic leanings.

Just as journalists report and record real-world events, "in criminal law, you're dealing with clients who have real-world issues and challenges, and you're using your legal skills to impact and explain their lives."

A 1995 graduate of American University's Washington College of Law, Camet, 32, doesn't buy the oft-repeated platitude that law school is more about academic exertions than real-world practicality.

"American did a really good job with providing a variety of practical opportunities," she says. "My favorite experiences in law school were the practical ones."

Granted, she clearly took advantage of nearly every opportunity afforded her, such as a yearlong practice clinic, a dean's fellowship, an editorial spot on the law review, a position as a professor's research assistant, or a post-law-school clerkship in her hometown of Kansas City working for Judge Pasco Bowman II of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 8th Circuit.

Camet says her best experience at American was the criminal justice clinic that spanned her third year. In the fall semester, students defended cases in the District and Circuit Courts of Montgomery County under the supervision of American's clinical faculty practitioners. In the spring, they switched over to prosecution, this time supervised by Montgomery County state attorneys. Camet worked several cases from start to finish, helping argue 10 bench and three jury trials.

The fact that the clinic allowed her to sit on both sides of the courtroom well continues to influence her current practice. "It was an opportunity to see both defense and prosecution back to back, which was made possible by the clinical setting," she says. "You can then apply one to the other. In the spring semester, as a prosecutor, I was very conscious of what the defense would be doing. Even in my practice today, it's made me more primed to think through the strengths and weaknesses of my arguments and how these would be perceived by the other side."

In the end, the only shortcoming Camet can identify in American's law program is that its strengths—namely, opportunities for practical experience—could be more comprehensive. "I was able

to take advantage of the practical opportunities American offers," she says. "But I would hope that practical opportunities will become even more available, more accessible, more prominent in the law school curriculum.

"While you definitely need the nuts and bolts, the black-letter law, it's those practical experiences that I've drawn on the most since graduation."

Maximum Exposure

Tall and blond, with an easygoing manner, Michael Hyde looks every inch the grown-up California boy. Born and bred in San Jose, he graduated from Santa Clara University as a political science major, then spent a year as a legislative assistant in the California State Senate.

It was his fascination with all things political that drew him across the country to George Washington University Law School. "I'd always been curious about Washington," he says. "I thought I could use the opportunity of living here to explore the political world."

His office is now a block and a half from the White House, but he's long since forgone politics, opting instead for corporate litigation as a fourth-year associate at the D.C. office of Boston's Hale and Dorr.

Hyde, 30, says most of what he learned in law school isn't applicable on a daily basis. But, he explains, that isn't the point. "Law school is really about being exposed to a lot of different things—classes, job opportunities, even meeting a lot of different kinds of people," he says. "One day I may be happy I've learned something, even though I've never used it before—it may pop an excellent idea into my head. Everything you're exposed to in law school could fall into that category."

And as law school broadens perspectives, he continues, it also teaches students how to think. "When I'm working on a case now, about one-fourth to one-half of my time is spent learning the applicable black-letter law, taking in facts, learning how the law works," he says. "The rest of the time is spent thinking through it and applying it."

While Hyde credits his law school years with expanding his horizons, he says that his opportunities for practical experience were largely limited to a trial advocacy class.

"That's one thing GW could push a little bit more," he says. "The opportunities are there, but it's really up to the student to take the initiative. I'm not sure I realized then how important it is to search that kind of thing out."

After graduation, Hyde filled in the gaps in his practical know-how with a year-long clerkship with J. Calvitt Clarke, a federal judge in Norfolk, Va. From that, he took away the crucial lesson that a client's interests come first—a lesson that's essential to his current practice.

"It's so important to understand what the goals of your client are, because meeting those goals is your primary job," he says. "But that's not something you learn in law school. In law school, you get a fact pattern, and it's 'Tell me what you think.' On an exam, you never see anything that says, 'Here are the interests you have to take into consideration.'"

Hyde wrote for the law review while at GW, an experience that he credits with improving his writing. But he says he's found that writing in his current practice is a whole different ball game.

"It's a different type of exercise. When it comes to litigation, you want to present your material efficiently, to be straight to the point. There's not much room for footnotes, and you don't want to be broad and expansive, which is something that's more accepted in a law review setting."

Riding the Dot-Com Wave

It's hard to get ahold of Swati Agrawal and Janice Ugaki these days. Since co-founding Firmseek.com, a D.C.-based Internet professional services marketplace, in November 1999, they've been discovering that riding the dot-com wave isn't always a walk on the beach.

Both are veterans of New York's Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, and they say anyone who complains about the grind young associates must endure should stand in their shoes for a day.

"The hours I work now put the hours at Paul, Weiss to shame," says a laughing Ugaki, over a quick lunch at a downtown deli. But they don't regret making the switch from firm to Firmseek.com for a second.

"It's like night and day," says the 30-year-old Agrawal, a 1995 Yale Law School graduate who is now CEO of the nine-employee start-up. "A firm is good if you like predictability, stability-if you're risk-averse. To be in the business world, on the other hand, you definitely can't be risk-averse. But it makes you feel like you're alive."

"It's so much harder," chimes in the 31-year-old Ugaki, executive vice president for business development and a 1999 Harvard Law School alumna, "but so rewarding. It's a constant challenge."

The two met during the summer of 1992 while interning in Washington-Ugaki at the Department of State, Agrawal at the Department of Labor- before heading off to law school.

The following year, Ugaki was selected for a Rhodes scholarship. After returning to Harvard, she graduated in 1999 and joined the New York office of Paul, Weiss as an associate. Agrawal had been an associate at the firm's D.C. office since graduating from Yale in 1995.

While at Paul, Weiss, Agrawal noticed that most client referrals were accomplished through informal networks. "Clients ask law firms they've done business with, 'Does anyone know anyone who practices in this area?' " she says. "There was no communication platform for professional services. I thought: There must be a better way to do this."

She contacted Ugaki, who signed on immediately, and Firmseek.com was born.

Although no longer practicing lawyers, both say that their law school training comes in handy in the business world.

"In law school, you're always asked to identify the argument, and then the counter-argument, and then the counter-argument to that. You always have to be looking four steps ahead," Ugaki says. "That's very applicable to business, where you're not only dealing with the here and now. You have to plan into the future, plan for consequences."

They agree that classes utilizing the Socratic method taught them how to think on their feet. "When you're called on in front of your peers, the last thing you want to do is not perform-so you learn to think and talk under pressure," Ugaki explains. "It still helps me a lot. When I'm in front of a boardroom presenting Firmseek to clients, these executives are peppering me with questions, and I have to respond calmly, rationally, persuasively."

Despite having attended what are arguably the two most prestigious law schools in the country, both women say their most valuable law school experiences were outside the classroom. People skills, they agree, are especially key: Ugaki honed hers as a teaching fellow in the East Asian Studies Department at Harvard College and as a Rhodes scholar, while Agrawal cites the Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic at Yale as a forum for team building.

People skills "are much more important than the academic lessons I learned and the cases I memorized," Ugaki says. "Being able to relate to a client, to empathize with the challenges they are facing, is much more critical than knowing the holdings of a particular case."

Agrawal thinks every law student should supplement academics with a practice clinic, which she says provides invaluable real-world experience. "Until you actually have to sit down and work on a case, everything is pure theory," she says. "It's really different to think about real strategy-like what are the backgrounds of the judges sitting on your panel and what approaches are they most likely to respond to? That's much harder to get outside of a real-world setting."

If given the chance to improve law school curriculum, Ugaki would recommend a broader approach.

"I would emphasize a multidisciplinary education that incorporates public policy and business into law," she says. "You can serve a client much better if you understand the policy implications, the business ramifications-not just the black-letter law."

The Basic Tool Kit

Each new day brings the renewed possibility that Greg Mueller, who radiates a nice-guy persona from every pore, will infringe upon someone's First Amendment rights.

The 28-year-old Federal Election Commission staff attorney says it's all in a day's work.

"Whether it's a position we take in court or a regulation that the agency promulgates or a position in enforcement, there are going to be First Amendment implications," says the 1998 Catholic University of America Columbus School of Law grad. "We regulate in an area that includes peoples' speech and political activity, so we don't want to do it in a blunt way."

Mueller, who has worked for the FEC since law school, thinks his experience at Catholic prepared him well for the daily challenges inherent in litigating for the agency. He cites a constitutional law course in particular as one that imparted valuable skills.

"It internalized the analytical framework that you use to solve complex constitutional problems," he says. "I fall back to that framework when I begin thinking about any sort of constitutional issue today. I find that it helps me frame the issue for further research."

Mueller admits that he felt a bit lost his first day on the job.

"Confronting the FEC campaign law for the first time was very daunting. It has its own complex vocabulary," he says. "But the hope is that law school gives you some basic tools so that you can attack the statutes and case law."

In addition, Mueller says a federal litigation class gave him a solid understanding of the implications of sovereign immunity, and continues to help him grasp the statutes he works with.

"It gave me a context to put it in," he says. "You say: Oh, another example of Congress waiving sovereign immunity."

One of the most exceptional aspects of Catholic, he says, is its faculty, who "cared a great deal about being effective teachers."

"There's a genuine emphasis on evaluation," he says. "You get a sense that most professors really want to hear from you-what's right and what's wrong, and they take great note of that."

Lindsay Van Tine, a Legal Times summer intern, is a sophomore majoring in English at Yale University.

Photo cutlines/credits

Craig Franco

George Mason University School of law, 1997

Terry Turnipseed

Georgetown University Law Center, 1995

Lily Arbab Camet

American University, 1995

Michael Hyde

George Washington University law School, 1996

Swati Agrawal (front) and Janice Ugaki

Yale law school, 1995; harvard law school, 1999

Greg Mueller

Catholic University Columbus School of law, 1998/Photos by Patrice Gilbert

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