



The Ghost of Lawyer Future

A Letter to the Newly Minted Attorney

By Kristina Bilowus



Dear New Attorney,

Congratulations! You survived the bar exam and have received a P number. The long hours of memorizing, outlining, and studying are behind you. Throughout law school, you may have thought this day would never come, but at long last, here you are. You're now officially a member of the State Bar and a counselor.

Take time to reflect, appreciate, and live in this moment. You worked hard and sacrificed much to get to this point. Still, the real work has yet to begin.

Before continuing, let me introduce myself. Think of me as the Ghost of Lawyer Future. I'm you—from the future. I wrote this letter to provide you with a few suggestions to help make your life and career better as you get started.

The basics

As kids, we're taught manners and the Golden Rule. As you enter the complex world of the legal profession, don't forget these lessons.

Civility goes a long way. So does kindness. Being a zealous advocate is not synonymous with being a jerk. One can be

assertive and understanding at the same time. Your clients want and deserve respect. Opposing counsel are colleagues, classmates, and often friends. You'll work together on future cases long after the present one has ended.

Humility and belief

Entering the profession can be daunting for several reasons. One reason is the transition from law school to legal practice. You're no longer in the womb of the classroom or under the guidance of a supervisor in a clinical setting. You now have clients, a new role, and a different set of responsibilities.

You may be tempted to try to compensate for your lack of experience with confidence. While the expression "confidence is key" is true, so are humility and seeking the guidance of others.

You may also be tempted to overpromise results. Clients' expectations may not be realistic regarding legal results. They may also

seek absolutes or guarantees from you, the person they look to for guidance. Resist this temptation! Instead, provide knowledgeable and reasonable advice. In the role of legal counselor, you must educate your clients on both the positive and negative potential outcomes.

When posed with a question you can't answer, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know, but I'll find out." And be sure to follow up. Seek the expertise of your superiors and colleagues. Let your clients know that while you may not have all the answers at any given moment, their concerns are important and merit further exploration.

As a young attorney, there's much to learn. This is a profession of longevity, and much can be gleaned from observing and talking with those who have more experience. Listen more and talk less. Ask questions. Approach others with humility—especially as you seek advice.

I like to think we're continual students of life's lessons and there's a revolving door of learning. While we grow from experiences, the process never ends. Being an attorney requires us to hone our craft through reading, updating, and evaluating our own progress. In doing so, we become better practitioners.

As a rookie, it's essential to seek the wisdom of those who've gone before you. Take the time to learn from the veterans.

By the same token, believe in yourself and your abilities. Being a new attorney presents a host of first opportunities. Maybe it's a first appearance in court or the first contract you draft without a supervisor. Or maybe it's attending a meeting in lieu of another and you're expected to participate and make decisions. Approach these experiences with confidence. You're there for a reason—often because someone (i.e., a boss) already thinks you're capable. If you're flying solo through these experiences, be your best cheerleader and take comfort in the fact that you already know a lot and know yourself even better.

Tough stuff

"What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."

The author of this quote is often debated, but the message is not.

This is the part where I wish I could spare you the mistakes and disappointments you'll surely experience. While I can't stop you, I'll share what I've learned.

As stewards of the law, much is expected of us because much has been given to us. At times, you'll crash and burn—sometimes in dramatic fashion.

You'll make mistakes; own them. You'll fail; keep trying. You'll feel like no one believes in you, most notably yourself; rise above it.

You owe it to your clients, your colleagues, and yourself. Don't be afraid to ask for help when needed. Remember what you have accomplished and what you are capable of doing. You can only move forward and learn from the past. Be true

to yourself and what you stand for. Cling to integrity, be honest, and seek to do good.

Reputation

Reputation. This one word defines our profession. How you handle yourself, how you treat others, and how you live by example shapes your reputation. As previously discussed, treat others as you want to be treated. Avoid gossip. Be professional. How do you want to be remembered?

Passion

It's an honor and privilege to practice law. There may be days when you doubt these words and question why you pursued this career. These thoughts will be fleeting. You have the opportunity to do great things for your community and those around you. Whether you are in the throes of a job hunt or settling into your first (or second) job, put 110 percent into the process.

You may already know exactly what you want to do, or maybe you're still figuring it out. You may switch jobs several times over the course of your career. One of the best things about the profession you chose are the myriad opportunities in front of you. As a young attorney, you have the responsibility to learn as much as you can and produce the best work product. By doing so, you are honing your craft.

Take it a step further and find out what you truly like to do. Not only will you perform better, you'll be richly satisfied. Wherever the law takes you, find the passion in your career and life.

You may be thinking, "I know all this already." But do you? I probably heard similar words when I started my career, but I don't know if I fully understood them at the time.

I want you to be excited and hopeful about the journey you're beginning. While the road ahead isn't easy, it can be rewarding. You're going to experience amazing opportunities and meet awesome people. You'll also make mistakes. You'll continue to grow and learn.

If you take away nothing else, remember this: Who you are becoming today will shape the person you are tomorrow. Make each day count and stand for something good.

Again, congratulations, Esquire. ■



Kristina Bilowus is a family law practitioner with Findling Law, PLC, in Royal Oak and an adjunct professor at Western Michigan University Cooley Law School. She is a member of the Young Lawyers Section Executive Council, serving the Oakland County District. Additionally, Kristina serves on the boards for the Women's Bar Association and Women Lawyers Association of Michigan.

Women Lawyers Association of Michigan.