

# Different from the Others

By Tish Vincent

St. Mary's Catholic School in Lake Leelanau had a uniform policy. The girls wore gray, wool, knife-pleated skirts; white blouses; and navy blue blazers. We were required to wear navy blue knee socks and blue shoes. One fall day, the high school students were bussed to a regional competition. As we got off the bus and mingled with our peers, it was obvious who attended our school.

In the fall of my first year of law school, the preliminary moot court competitions and on-campus interviewing occurred on the same day. I wore my navy blue suit with a white blouse and navy high heels. Rushing to get to class on time, I parked and hustled across campus. Moving from the parking garage into the building was a sea of other people dressed in dark suits with dark shoes and carefully coifed hair. I remember thinking, "Holy cow, I feel like I am back in Catholic school!"

## Identity

Merriam Webster defines identity as "the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others."

I was in my 1-L year for six weeks when I went to get my hair cut. Having practiced therapy for 17 years at that time, I thought my stylist was asking for my therapeutic opinion about a recent drunk-driving incident that made the local news. I was stunned when I realized she wanted my legal opinion on the topic. "I've only been in law school six weeks!" I told her.

"I know," she said, "but what do you think?"

People react strongly to your identity as a lawyer. Friends, family members, business associates, and people at social gatherings may ask legal questions. Within weeks of an individual starting law school,

others may view him or her differently—seeking information, explanations, and even representation.

The Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program staff recently attended the annual meeting of the American Bar Association's Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs in Nashville. We had the opportunity to learn from experts in the fields of lawyer assistance, discipline, and therapy. One researcher presented his findings from a project that studied lawyers' thoughts about their work and lives.

When participants were asked what role they most strongly identified with, they answered resoundingly, "Being a lawyer."

An attorney in his golden years recently told me, "Attorneys don't like to think of retirement. They work much less, but still help family and friends who come to them." I was in awe of how much his identity as a lawyer meant to him and gave him a sense of purpose.

## Qualities

What personal qualities do lawyers have that distinguish us from individuals in other professions? In my experience, lawyers are intelligent, questioning, aggressive, and argumentative. They have problem-solving skills

and feel confident about their abilities to work toward solutions. They have staying power. These are not folks who quit when the going gets tough. They get tougher when the going gets tough.

## Beliefs

Most lawyers I know, and know of, have a strong belief in justice. They believe that all individuals and entities deserve their day in court and zealous representation. Most lawyers believe they should do their best for their clients, and many are responsible for finding solutions for their clients' problems. Recently, I heard one of our Lawyers and Judges Assistance Committee members say, "Lawyers don't sleep at night so their clients can."

## Knowledge

Lawyers know the law. We know contracts, civil procedure, torts, property, the Uniform Commercial Code, constitutional law, business enterprises, family law, and much more. I've studied many different subjects and, to me, the law is like an infinite quantity of rules—like the rules for Monopoly or chess. Rules, rules, rules, and more rules. Give lawyers an issue and they

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will start spouting the rules they know about the issue and search for any relevant rules they don't know.

As I made my way through law school, I would comment to my husband, a physician, that the law did not seem like a body of information. It seemed like a body of rules. I told him it was like Roberts Rules of Order on steroids. He asked, "What's Roberts Rules of Order?"

I learned civil procedure and evidence from a professor who graduated from Harvard Law and was a legend at our law school. He enjoyed cold-calling students, expecting us to have finished our reading and be able to accurately spout rules on a moment's notice. I dreaded his class, but I learned those rules!

Sadly, he passed away in 2011. At his funeral service, his brother shared a story about the professor from his high school days, when he got a job as an umpire for the school baseball team. During one game, he made a call that was protested by the parents and coaches. The chief umpire attempted to resolve the conflict. His brother recalled the discussion, the chief umpire bringing out the rules to consult, and the determination that the future civil procedure professor was correct. He remembered saying to the chief umpire, "My brother memorized the rule book!" The entire audience at the memorial service burst into laughter at this comment. That is what we learned from our professor, and that is what we will remember.

## Lawyers

Facebook is an easy method for staying in touch with friends and family, though it can be aggravating or frustrating at times.

Making the rounds on Facebook recently was a picture of a T-shirt imprinted with the words, "I am a LAWYER. To save time let's just assume that I am never wrong." I was surprised by my reaction to that statement. I felt like it was saying we were know-it-alls. We do know the law, or know where to find it.

We are not always in dark suits. We are not always in courtrooms. We are not visible like uniformed Catholic high school students. We know how to advocate. We know how to argue. We know how to solve problems. Most importantly, we know the law. We know the rules. We will patiently try to explain them to you and clarify any misconceptions.

As Jerry Seinfeld once said, "What are lawyers, really? To me a lawyer is basically the person that knows the rules of the country. We're all throwing the dice, playing the game, moving our pieces around the board, but if there's a problem, the lawyer is the only person that has read the inside of the top of the box."<sup>1</sup> ■



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## ENDNOTE

1. *Seinfeld* (television broadcast January 27, 1993), transcript available at <<http://www.seinfeldscripts.com/TheVisa.html>> (accessed November 20, 2014).

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