

Editor's Perspective



By Seth L. Thompson, Esquire

Never Graduate

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is with great honor and privilege that I present to you the Class of 2008.” These or similar words will be, have been, or are being spoken around the country, including at my co-worker’s recent graduation. Tassels migrate, mortarboards fly, and beach balls reaffirm the law of gravity. Proud family members and friends congratulate pie-eyed, fresh-faced graduates.

Truth be told, my teammate (in the parlance of the team concept that my colleague described in this column space last issue) is not as pie-eyed as I may have been at that point in my life. Her years among the angular walkways, red brick, and ivy of academia also involved a full-time job, rent, and utility bills. As a judge once spontaneously and succinctly stated while expressing amazement over the success of a self-made man, “I wasn’t born with a silver spoon, but I was born with a spoon.” My co-worker earned it all: spoon; knife; fork; seat at the table. In light of her resulting “real world” approach to problems, as opposed to the time-abundant and expense-free world of pure theory, I rely heavily on her practical knowledge and expertise with the personalities, situations, and geography of Sussex County. Clients constantly tell me she is a real asset to the firm. I expect that to be the case in whatever endeavor she applies her abilities and education.

A staple of graduation/commencement is, of course, the speech, which typically comes in the form of advice. As lawyers, we know a thing or two about advice. After all, it is the service we provide; it is our chief export. As I have had to tell a client on isolated occasions, “I’m

your attorney. I won’t fix your car, build your cabinets, or remodel your living room. I give you advice, which you are, of course, free to ignore, but then I’m not sure why you are paying me.” Here, the monetary issue does not exist, so I hope this article’s advice is worth a little more than its price.

Being the nostalgic type, I think back to the advice that I have received over the years. Being the legal type, I like to rely on precedent. Thus, my long-term advice is two-fold: 1) engage in lifelong learning; and 2) wear sunscreen. The former was the theme presented at the Penn State commencement in December of 1999. The latter was the theme of, according to Wikipedia, a proposed commencement speech written by Mary Schmich in an article for the *Chicago Tribune*, rumored to be an MIT commencement speech delivered by Kurt Vonnegut, and eventually set to music as a spoken word song by Baz Luhrmann. Now might be a good time to mention a tangential piece of advice: always consider your source (including this article).

On the first point, education does not end at graduation, and it is not confined to the office. The use of “commencement” over “graduation” implies that the degree recipients are now on the verge of something new and hopefully great. This makes perfect sense to me. Still, I believe it is also important, to let yourself look back, if only for a moment, and measure your progress before “commencing.” The diploma is the tangible symbol of having completed the program and crossed a threshold, and no one will be able to take that away, no matter how frequently dreams recur of forgetting to turn in a final paper.

We won’t use some of what was studied, but a lot of what was studied in school will eventually prove necessary and worthy of those long hours in the library. (Last week, I had to dust off the Rule Against Perpetuities, figuratively and literally. I knew I hung on to law school notes, the bar review books, and pre-admission seminar materials for a reason.) Conversely, we won’t have studied in school a lot of what will prove necessary and worthy of long hours spent in an electronic database or in an office meeting. The key is to master the skills that allow us to analyze issues arising in differing arenas.

I would submit that those analytical skills are not always best developed in front of a computer, but through actual interaction with your fellow occupants of this increasingly impersonal world. One-on-one in-person discussion gave way to teleconferences, which in turn gave way to e-mail, which has been further reduced to BlackBerry txt-styl msgs. But, abstract advice is easy to come by and may come off as trite. The devil is in the implementation.

It might sound trite, but it’s important that we learn a new skill, interact, and socialize. Take French lessons. Volunteer to perform in the arts. Find an exercise buddy. Become a member of a museum. And, remember that it is only lip service until you dedicate resources to the goal. There is an episode of *The Simpsons* in which a home security system salesperson visits the house for an estimate but is immediately shown the door when the price was mentioned. As a last effort to save the sale, the representative says,

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formal section or committee, a group of lawyers led by Craig Martin is examining ways that members of the Bar can support our veterans and enlisted servicemen and women.

In May, the Association and its members lent a critical helping hand to the National Mock Trial Competition. Hundreds of you helped to judge the competition once, twice, and in Randy Herndon's case, for all four rounds! The Competition was a tremendous success. Next year's host city, Atlanta, will have to work hard to match close to what Delaware did.

It has been an honor to serve as President of the DSBA. I am fortunate to have practiced in Delaware for nearly three decades and pleased that I have been able to give back to a legal community that has provided me with so much opportunity and satisfaction. I look forward to continuing to serve as a member of the Executive Committee led by Allen Terrell. So, au revoir for now. ☞

"But surely you can't put a price on your family's safety." As Homer closes the door in the salesperson's face, he says, "You wouldn't think so, but here we are." The point is, your priorities can be measured in a concrete manner: allocation of time and money. Thus, we have a simple, scientific method for measuring our internal integrity if we choose to espouse lifelong learning.

Analyzing the benefits of an unquenched thirst for new knowledge proves a bit more elusive. This brings us to Mary Schmich's speech, in which she notes the unscientific basis of advice like mine involving lifelong learning as consisting of nothing more than personal experience. This is as opposed to the studies demonstrating the benefits of sunscreen. Therefore, it is with more certainty that I close, as did Ms. Schmich, by saying, trust me on the sunscreen. ☞

2008 National High School Mock Trial Competition

The Supreme Court of Delaware, the Delaware Law Related Education Center, and the Delaware State Bar Association hosted the 2008 National High School Mock Trial Championship May 8 – 10, 2008 in Wilmington, Delaware. There were 43 teams from the United States, Guam, Commonwealth of the Mariana Islands, and South Korea attending the 25th Annual Championship. The cover of this month's Bar Journal shows the Delaware Champions from the Charter School of Wilmington, who came in third at the National Championship. The first place team was from Jonesboro High School, Jonesboro, Georgia and the second place team was from Kalamazoo Central High School, Kalamazoo, Michigan. Next month's issue will provide additional information about the Championship. ☞

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