

# Balanced for Success

BY DONNA GERSON

**George Kaufman, author of *The Lawyer's Guide to Balancing Life and Work*, talks to *Student Lawyer's* Donna Gerson about work-life balance, career choices, and ways for law students to embrace their creativity and passion. How do *you* want to be remembered?**

**George, what is work-life balance?**

Work-life balance is really a shortcut for describing work and personal life and finding a balance between the two. The balance point varies for each individual depending on whether the individual is single, married, has children, has certain obligations that he or she needs to fulfill. In short, the attraction or obligation of work should not overwhelm the opportunity to retain or expand one's personal interests.

**Do you think it's possible to have work-life balance in the legal profession?**

Absolutely. The legal profession is not homogenous and you have choices. There is a difference between working in-house for a corporation or a foundation, working for a large firm or small firm, selecting a field of expertise, or working in academia. You have to look at each one of those choices and assess the attractions and limitations. Some of them certainly are less pressured than others. The ones that are less pressured have more opportunity for balance and the most obvious trade-off may be either in job security or income.

**In your book, you offer some critical observations about law school education. You write that law school is a narrowing experience, an aggressive experience, focusing more on advocacy than justice. What can students do to change these realities or is it out of their hands?**

I don't think it's out of their hands. I just think that in the first year they tend to be intimidated by the experience. The second year, they're working hard; and the third year, they can't wait to get out. Unfortunately, I think many law students become narrow and limited as they go through school. They lose their sense of curiosity, their sense of whimsy . . . the academic experience can be restrictive and narrowing, taking bright, able, capable minds and making them march in lockstep toward an uncertain and unknown future.

Law schools can broaden the academic experience by inviting outside speakers, developing nonlaw interests to have conversations about, creating more connections with the professors in terms of their own personal interests and passion. Virtually every decent law school is part of a university that has other graduate programs—tap into those resources.

**Are you aware of any law schools that are working to improve work-life balance and quality of life for lawyers?**

I'm not, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. I'm not familiar with law schools that are going out of their way to put a breadth of opportunity before students. If a law school wanted to be creative, it might offer tracks for students. There could be a public interest track, a mediation track, and so forth. For the most part, I tend to think that law school is passionless and people go through the process mindful of the aggregate student loan debt they're accumulating and eager to get out and practice law.

**You write that law students should use the interview process to gather information about work-life balance, not simply respond to questions. What questions should law students be asking?**

Certainly they should ask to see associates, and see associates without partners in the room. They have to realize the ones they make available will have a tendency to emulate the party line more than others, but students can get a dose of reality by asking more frank questions of them than they might be comfortable asking of the partners.

Ask about partnership. Is there a particular expectation about hours? How much is pro bono work encouraged? How do pro bono hours count toward the total? Even if there isn't an expectation of hours, is there an average number of hours that associates put in? What's the ratio between the hours that associates put in and that partners put in? What level of responsibility will an associate be given for dealing with clients and how soon will that take place and how meaningful will it be? If your interview is at 9 or 10 in the morning, look at the activity level. It would be interesting to go in at 6 p.m. and see if it's just as busy. Are people walking around in suits and high heels or more relaxed and casual? What's your impression of the office environment?

**You mention in your book that we don't use rituals to mark our passage from one stage of our professional lives to another. Can you elaborate on that?**

When I was about to leave my first firm and move to a second one, I didn't want to leave on a Friday and start on a Monday. Instead, I went to a retreat for three days just to empty the experience I had and anticipate the experience yet to come. I really wanted to acknowledge that there was a change taking place in my career when I left one place and moved to another.

We don't have a lot of opportunities to honor what we're doing as being important, sacred, or meaningful. Societies have all sorts of rituals for other events, whether that event is the birth of a child or getting married, or death. We need to cultivate rituals in law school and afterward that allow us to say that our professional and personal lives are important and meaningful, that we wish to remember them in some way other than picking up and cashing a paycheck.

**When you described your first job experience and your decision to leave firm practice after nearly five years, you wrote that "the system wasn't about to budge" to accommodate your desire for a more balanced life. Do you think the system has budged in the last 30 years?**

Yes. It has budged by changing the nature of the expectation of the individual within the law firm, lowering expectations for equity partnership and increasing opportunities for working on more flexible schedules. But billable hours have gone from being an expectation to being a requirement for promotion. Some young lawyers become preoccupied with posting large numbers of hours—almost as a badge of honor they proudly display. When it becomes a goal in itself, the consequences are unhealthy for the individual and the organization.

When I began practicing law, I was single and could make any contract I wanted with my employer. When I got married, my wife hadn't signed up for that contract. When we had kids, they hadn't signed up for that contract either and I had some fundamental choices and decisions to make about what my work life would look like.

**That's refreshing to hear from a man because it seems that women are conducting much of the flex-time debate. I'm not sure that is necessarily a good thing. I think the issue is extremely important, but I'm concerned that people view this issue solely as a mother's issue.**

I think women are leading the flex-time debate because they tend to be more able to acknowledge what their feelings are and make decisions based on that as opposed to it being solely an intellectual exercise.

**It has been suggested that lawyers could operate more like emergency room doctors, serving clients in shifts and sharing responsibilities with other lawyers. I**

**don't know how applicable that is to a large firm practice. What are your thoughts on this?**

I think it's an important issue. Whether it would work or not, it's good that people put forth options and opportunities. We won't have an answer for that or how clients react to it until somebody steps up and is willing to try it.

**You write about developing one's creativity as a means to fulfillment. How can law students exercise or develop their creativity while in law school and maintain it later on in practice?**

That goes back to the issue of passion. Are you interested in creative writing? Then form an informal group to write and listen to each other's work. Are you particularly fond of dance, music, or art? Organize a group to explore those areas and experiment—take risks!

**One big issue for lawyers now is creating parameters. With BlackBerrys and other technology that provide 24/7 access, what can lawyers do to be accessible yet have a personal life?**

You need to set guidelines and create reasonable limits for accessibility. During the work week, you are fair game; but nights and weekends should be down time unless there is a critical reason to contact you.

**Any recommendations for first-year students?**

I think that if there is an opportunity to be in touch with the most recent class of graduates, talk to them—whether in a panel discussion or informal get-together. What's their experience like? Where did they go? What turned out well? What didn't turn out well? What mistakes did they make? What successes did they have? What can you learn from them? You have to be a sponge gathering that sort of information so that you have the widest set of options when you go into your second and third years.

**For second-year students who are immersed in the on-campus interviewing process, any words of advice?**

If it's possible to split your time over the course of the summer so that you have an opportunity to have two very different experiences, that would be a good thing to consider. I would also plan at the end of the summer to come back to school and tell your war stories frankly—what worked and what didn't work. All too often the summer experience has an air of unreality to it. You are often wined and dined. That's not the reality of what it's like once you graduate. You need to separate the lure from the reality. Once you leave the protective law school environment, the reality of long hours and little recognition can be frustrating.

**Any suggestions or ideas for third-year and graduating part-time or evening students?**

Calculate your student loan debt and your monthly repayment bills. This will help you figure out your real salary requirements and help guide your job search. How flexible can you be geographically? Ask yourself about potential employers: Is there any difference between all the places that you have interviewed? Have any attracted you more than others and, if so, what was it that drew them to you?

Engage in self-assessment. Describe the top five or ten values that guide your life. Are you living by these values during the course of a typical day; if not, how has it failed? You get to see the gap between the value you have and the opportunity you have to live those values in reality. Decide what's important to you when you go out and interview and make career choices.

**You made an interesting transition in your career from law firm associate to partner at a small firm to president of a law firm-owned business, and now you are an author and a professional fund raiser. Do you have suggestions for law students who may be contemplating nontraditional career paths?**

A nontraditional career path follows one's personality and pursues one's passion. When I first came to the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies [a nonprofit organization focusing on wellness and personal growth], I took programs here 25 years ago and learned a philosophy and an approach that were quite different from anything that I was hearing in my professional world. The institute dealt with issues about our interdependence, the importance of community, the balanced life. Over time, it deeply influenced me and my wife and my two children. I have had an opportunity to come back, first as a volunteer chairman of the board and now as an employee doing their fund raising.

**You experienced success, you experienced challenges and impediments along the way in your career. Law students sometimes think careers are very linear with little room for detours. What are your thoughts about this?**

I think, in part, you have to deal with an individual's tolerance for risk. Lawyers by their nature tend to be risk averse, and I think that's why my career tends to be rather unusual. Yet I have spoken and spent time with many of my friends who come to me and say, "We're the senior partners in our firms, we have been there for 10 years, and we're bored. . . . What else can we be doing that's meaningful?"

Look at your legacy. What's the mark you want to leave in the world? And the question is, is somebody going to be satisfied with the practice of law for a 45-year career?

The answer may be yes. I am not trying to assign a value to it. I am trying to make sure that the value and the path are related to each other. I made a decision early on that I didn't want to give up time with my kids or wife for success and there was enough opportunity in other areas to be sufficiently successful that I would be able to hold on to both.

**Do you have any final thoughts for law students?**

Move beyond your comfort zone. I think there is an opportunity to say "yes" where our knee-jerk reaction would be to decline. Once I was flying to Washington on a Sunday for a meeting the following day. I was upset that I was required to surrender my time on the weekend to travel to this meeting.

Sitting next to me on the plane is a Russian who is struggling to write some poetry. The Russian taps me on the shoulder and asks me to help him translate the poem from Russian to English. All I want is to be left alone. Reluctantly, I say "sure." Halfway through he says, "I am sorry. I didn't tell you my name. My name is Yevtushenko." The poet laureate of the Soviet Union!

I almost decided I would say, "No, leave me alone," but I would have missed that incredible opportunity.

**So be open to all opportunities?**

Absolutely! Be willing to get out of your comfort zone. Try new things. Have a wide variety of friends. Explore, learn, be curious. Have passion for what you are doing, and above all, in some way be of service in the world. I think we need to give back and make contributions to society. The world is bigger than we are and we think it is. A question I ask all the time is "How do you want to be remembered?"

## **George Kaufman Résumé Highlights**

### **Education**

Columbia College, B.A., 1959  
Yale Law School, L.L.B., 1962  
The Barristers' Union

### **Work Experience**

Director of Resource Development, Omega Institute, 2000–present

Vice Chair, Omega Institute, 1999–2004  
Chair, Omega Institute, 1995–99  
Vice President, UniDev, LLC, 1997–2000  
President, MPC Associates, Inc., 1991–96  
Of Counsel, Arnold & Porter, 1990–96  
Partner, Shereff Friedman Hoffman & Goodman, 1971–90  
Partner, Berlack Israels & Liberman, 1970–71  
Associate, Berlack Israels & Liberman, 1969–70  
Partner, Newman & O'Malley, 1968–69  
VP and General Counsel, Treib Beckerman Associates, 1966–67  
Associate, Rosenman & Colin, 1962–66

## **Informational Interviewing**

Informational interviewing allows you to learn about different practice areas and gain an understanding of professional demands and expectations from a practitioner. Your career services office should have resources about informational interviewing and guide you through the process. NALP has published a brochure, *The How-Tos of Informational Interviewing*, that your career services office should carry. (If not, you can order it at [www.nalp.org](http://www.nalp.org) by clicking on “bookstore.”)