

Professionalism

For a competitive edge, be known for your excellence and effort

By Lori E. Shaw

Lori E. Shaw (shaw@dayton.edu) is a professor and assistant dean for student affairs at the University of Dayton School of Law.

With the school year drawing to a close, most of you find your thoughts turning toward the future. Soon-to-be grads are anticipating their first job as an associate with equal parts fear and delight, while first- and second-year students are taking their first tentative steps into the real world of lawyering. None of you can wait to get out of law school—until you do. Then it hits you that you're more than a little scared about what the world beyond law school holds.

I'd like to end this year by providing some advice that I hope will make the world a little less scary. "Professionalism" has become a catch-phrase within the legal community. Everyone talks about its importance, but few provide a meaningful definition. I think that in the final analysis, being a professional is about making good choices. If you can master the art of making good choices, your future is bright.

Here are some basic principles to keep in mind when you face these choices.

Remember what being a professional means. You have opted to enter a profession, not a trade. In its simplest terms, being a professional means it's not all about you. It's about the client and the justice system; it's about filling a vital and unique public role. When we succeed in our role, society prospers, and when we fail, society is harmed. When you have a choice, always consider its effect on others.

After putting so much blood, sweat, and tears (and so many dollars) into your legal education, it becomes easy to say, "I've earned the right to practice law." But, in reality, the practice of law is more a privilege than a right. As lawyers, we enter into a contract with society—our license to practice law grants us a monopoly on the practice of law. The consideration for that monopoly is our service to society.

Being a professional means making a genuine commitment to excellence. As a law student, sliding by in your courses isn't enough. You owe it to your future clients to learn as much as you can. You are taking your classes as much for them as for yourself. This doesn't mean that you have to graduate at the top of the class. Rather, it means that you should know in your heart that you've done your best, that you have chosen excellence.

In the words of basketball great Michael Jordan, "Some people want it to happen, some wish it would happen, others make it happen." Even the best lawyers don't win every case, but it's not for lack of effort.

Lest all this sound a bit too pie in the sky, know that being a true professional serves your own interests as well as those of society. Almost every good thing that has happened in my professional life has happened because someone, who I didn't even know was watching, saw me do some little thing or make some little choice that impressed them. Life is a job interview.

Being known for your excellence and your effort gives you a competitive edge. A potential employer recently called me to inquire about a former student. Like almost every employer, she was interested in—above and beyond the student's academic performance—whether I would want to work with this person. The thing that stuck out most in my mind, and the thing that really impressed the employer, was that I could honestly say this student was extremely well prepared for every class. His diligence made him memorable and marketable.

Play well with others. Being a professional also means treating your clients, your colleagues, your adversaries, and the courts with the respect they deserve. It means choosing civility over drama. I cannot deny that there are some utterly obnoxious lawyers who have achieved some measure of success, but they rarely make it to the top. Who appealed to the electorate last year? "No Drama" Obama, a person known for his calm, measured responses.

Civility should never be confused with weakness or indecision, nor should its value to the lawyer be underestimated. Having the respect of your clients will make you a better counselor. Having the respect of the bench and the bar will make you a better advocate.

Know and follow the rules. Being a professional means adhering to the spirit and letter of the profession's rules. Choose to know the rules. You will be faced with ethical questions on a daily basis, and no one will be watching over you to make certain that you make the right choices. Help and advice are available from your more experienced colleagues and from the bar, but you need to know when to seek them out.

And, by the way, don't be afraid to ask. No one will fault you for undertaking due diligence. I've had lawyers who have been in practice for 30 years seek my advice on ethical issues.

Read the ethical rules for your jurisdiction before your first day on the job. Ask your supervisor what safeguards are in place relating to potential conflicts of interest. (And, yes, law students can create such conflicts.) For those of

you as yet unlicensed, be aware of what your jurisdiction considers to be the unauthorized practice of law—know what you are allowed to do. And always, always take care to safeguard client confidentiality.

Manage your finances with care. Being a professional means keeping your financial house in order. Choose to be in control. Five years ago, I would not have thought to issue this warning, but countless young professionals are now paying the price for ignoring financial reality. Some have been denied the right to sit for the bar based on their financial mistakes, and some are trapped in a financial morass from which they may never escape.

Most of us graduate from law school with massive debt. When you finally start earning money, there is a tremendous temptation to live beyond your means. You want the nice car now, the big house now, and in recent years, easy credit has made it all too easy to get in over your head. Choose to live within your means. Try to accumulate enough savings to tide you over for a year or even 18 months, if necessary.

Educate yourself on financial matters. Take a class on personal finance. Hiring a financial adviser is a must, but it is not enough to protect you. You will be dealing with large amounts of debt and large amounts of income. You need to know enough to choose wisely from among the options your adviser presents.

Law students, whenever possible, should step away from the credit cards. Try paying with cash for a month. See how it changes your spending habits and your bank account.

Don't lose yourself. Being a professional means finding a balance in life. The law is incredibly seductive. I've watched its siren call destroy families and ruin lives. To love what you do is a wonderful thing, but to define yourself by your job is unhealthy, particularly in these days when no job is safe. Professional success is only one component of personal fulfillment, and frankly, without personal fulfillment, professional success itself is usually fleeting.

The other day, one of my students mentioned how many wedding rings had disappeared from the fingers of her classmates. Not every law school marriage fails—it is possible to achieve a balance, but it takes real thought and commitment.

Make the choice to find time for family, for friends, and most of all for yourself. The well-documented problems within our profession of mental illness, substance abuse, and divorce relate directly to our failure to make healthy choices. Sometimes work must come first, but not every time.