

TOURO LAW JOURNAL OF RACE, GENDER, & ETHNICITY**MY 1L EXPERIENCE: FELT LIKE I WAS RUNNING A MARATHON GOING AT A HUNDRED MILES AN HOUR****LOUIS COLLINS***

I had heard many horror stories about the first year of law school and what it entails so that naturally I was very excited and nervous at the same time about my first year. I was excited because I was finally going to be pursuing a life-long dream of mine – being a lawyer. I was nervous because I was not sure if the horror stories about the 1L experience of law school would happen to me. I was in for the surprise of my life.

I was a paralegal for several years before entering law school and so I was exposed to the law and certain legal terms. I thought this would make life for me a bit easier and different from most students. To some extent it did. What I was not prepared for, though, was the amount of work that was involved and the depth of analysis that the work required. Nor did my paralegal experience make me feel confident that the rumors about the first year of law school were a myth or over-exaggerated. My paralegal experience definitely helped, but it was not enough.

I knew there would be a lot of work, but I thought I could manage it because I have worked hard all my life. Orientation was a sign of what was to come – this was not your regular welcome session. It was let's jump right in. Everyone was wide-eyed and eager to go. Some people looked tense, focused, while others just looked plain scared. But I was still excited because here I was in law school. This was where I wanted to... no, where I needed to be. Orientation week was just a taste, a flavor of what to expect and things moved so quickly that it was all a blur.

Orientation was now over and so now came the real reading assignments I knew this was it. I had arrived. I was surrounded by so many books, and supplements to those books and I was excited. But not for long. It was now Sunday and I realized that I had only gotten through half of the material I needed to know for the upcoming week. I wanted to be prepared. To make matters worse, I had watched "The Paper Chase" and I was terrified that I would be called on in class and freeze-up because I was not prepared.

I understood some of the cases, but some made no sense. The language was archaic and from a period where people spoke, and judges wrote in a way that made them look and sound smart. At least that's what I thought. Nevertheless, the case books were filled with these old cases and it made reading them very difficult. You need to read each case more than once to understand what was going on and the rule that the case stands for.

I always thought that being a paralegal was just one step below being a lawyer. This is the kind of thinking that is a common among paralegals. Most of us believe that because we can do research and write memos and do other general legal work we can or should be lawyers. The feeling is usually, "I'm doing all the work and the lawyer gets all the credit."

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My first year put a stop to that kind of thinking. I realized that what lawyers do was the important stuff – legal analysis. Legal process was an eye opener as far as that thinking was concerned and made me realize how little I knew. First, it dawned on me quickly that researching case law is quite different than using that case to persuasively convince a court that your case is similar and it should rule in your favor. Second, a lawyer is trained to think a certain way and to use elements of the law to make a case. This is quite different from mechanically producing documents. In fact, most of things I thought I knew were all wrong. This was my wake up call. And I was wide awake after that, literally and figuratively. I struggled to understand the method of legal analysis and how to use it effectively. This skill would come with time, but time is something you do not have in law school, especially your first year. It's a very steep learning curve and you better be prepared.

Keeping up with all the required reading and outlining and studying as you go along takes up more time than one can imagine. It is even worse when you have a full time job that is demanding. During my first year of law school, I was involved in one of the biggest acquisitions that my company had ever undertaken. The integration project after the acquisition took months and I was in the middle of it. At times I thought I could not continue to do this. My workload at school was killing me. I had no time at work to do anything, but work.

This was not how I had planned things. I thought I would have some downtime at work to do school work but the stars were aligned against me as my company decided that its growth plan meant acquiring other companies. It became apparent quickly that my workplace could not be counted on as the place to get important assignments completed, not even on my lunch break. So now all school work had to be done at home and maybe, I could try to finish up at work if there was time or get it done at school before class. Some nights I got only two or three hours of sleep. If I got four hours of sleep, I was well rested. My entire first year was like this. I guess it's clear by now that I'm a night student.

I still wonder how I was able to make it through my first semester because it was very difficult. The excitement faded really fast. It was replaced by constant nervousness and the fear of not making it past my first semester. The one good thing about this was that everyone in my class was in the same boat. We were all terrified at the possibility of being at the bottom of the class or worse, flunking out of law school. I tried suppressing this thought but it was always in the back of my mind, a constant reminder that I'm the first in my family to go to law school and I have to make it. Failure is not an option.

I put on my face of confidence at all times, but deep down I was running a marathon I did not train for. At times, it felt like I am running a hundred miles an hour and no matter how much I tried, I could not slow down. My classmates were not slowing down. I always thought that this was because they probably all had less demanding jobs than I did. I thought they had more time to study and so I had to make time.

I got creative. I recorded all my classes and I obtained recorded supplements and listened to them on my long commute to and from school. I listened while in the shower, while mowing the lawn, and while working out. I constantly was listening to lectures. I took Fridays off to spend time with my two girls and my wife, who I barely had time for over the weekend because there

was not enough time in the day to prepare for class and have family time. I did not speak to family members unless I was driving to school and I could only spare maybe ten minutes if they were lucky. I declined all invitations to parties and lived in my attic at home, which became my office and study. It was my war room-- books and papers everywhere. This was the kind of self-discipline I had to enforce to make it through my first year of law school.

Yes, this was what I wanted – to be in law school – but I was certainly not prepared for nor did I understand the amount of work, dedication and time that it would require.

Looking back it was quite an experience and one I believe all law students go through with varying degrees of emotional and physical distress. My first year, I was filled with a constant fear of not being adequately prepared and not doing well. These fears motivated me to stay focused even through all the distractions at work, having to say no to my friends, and just working my ass off. Through it all I have come to have an enormous respect for lawyers and the legal profession. I did not flunk out. I did well enough to be in the top half of my class and now I am a third year law student. What a ride it has been so far and my 1L year was quite an experience.