

A NEW Social Conscience

Eighteen years passed between my undergraduate degree from Columbia University and my initiation at the University of Maryland School of Law. Most of that time was spent as a journalist, and if there was any constant message that the news media sent out during this period, it was that the current generation of students had become selfish, mercenary and cynical.

So I entered law school expecting to find a “generation gap” that was the inverse of the one I had grown up with. Instead, I was stunned to find that the hearts and aspirations of 1990s students were not that different from what I saw two decades ago.

Let me narrow my holding a bit, because there is a difference. There is more pragmatism today. Twenty years ago, students wanted to change the world overnight. While there is still a desire to make the world a better place, it is recognized that change that comes easily or quickly is rarely change for the better.

Perhaps the pragmatism is the result of the problems being closer to home. Most significantly, when I was in college, there was still a South Vietnam, with Americans of my age under arms. But the fighting in Southeast Asia came no closer to most of us than the picture on the television set—and even that was often overshadowed by the Vietnam-inspired violence outside our campus windows.

In contrast, the problems that occupy the minds of my current classmates are ones that they know firsthand. Their concerns are manifest in class and out of class, often through law school-based organizations or activities. But where their feelings really come to the fore are in conversations over a cup of coffee, or over a beer, or in the hall between classes—and over time, it’s fascinating to see how legal education is influencing their views and their approaches to the problems.

We used to live under the gloom of possible destruction by nuclear warfare; today’s major fears of destruction are inspired by AIDS. I doubt that there’s anybody in the law school who has not known a person who has died, or is dying, from this

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plague, and its repercussions draw many students into the Law and Health Care Program.

The explosion in the number of homeless people in this country is another problem that couldn’t have been imagined 20 years ago. Now, you can scarcely go three blocks in any direction from the law school without encountering somebody with a cardboard sign, a plastic cup—and often a child in a stroller. To deal with this, food drives are organized on campus, as are neighborhood help programs.

One of the first students I met in my Legal Method section was drawn to the University of Maryland because of its environmental law program. Another came to law school because he wants to maintain a family tradition in the public defender’s office; his counterpart is a student who wants to be a prosecutor—a field that isn’t generally called “public interest” law but that should be, as it also aims at remedying social problems.

But many of us come to law school with the hope of practicing in the most overlooked field of “public interest” law. We want to make the system work efficiently and compassionately for people facing divorces or bankruptcy, for people who want to start businesses or stay out of trouble with the IRS, for people dealing with the death of a near relative or facing a problem at the workplace. Whatever kind of law one chooses to practice, it is almost by definition in the public interest.

I’m impressed and inspired by my fellow students. Lawyers and the students today have gotten a lot of bad press, but the fact is that I found more self-servers and opportunists in the news media than I’m encountering among law students. The study of law is proving to be an exhilarating experience, and no small part of it comes from being exposed to the dedication of the students. All the evidence shows that public interest law, no matter how it is defined, is alive and thriving.

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