**So You Want to go to Law School**

**Part 4**

March 2, 2020

I’ve been talking to quite a few students recently that have expressed an interest in going to law school. So I thought I’d let you know the gist of what I tell them on a couple of their most asked questions. I want to warn you that there is something less than satisfying about my answers - we will call them my non-answers.

**Question 1:** How do you pick a law school?

Next question please. Okay, I’ll try to answer this, but it really depends on you and how you answer the following questions. Where do you want to practice? What kind of practice do you want to do? What’s your GPA and LSAT? How much money do you have or how far in debt are you willing to go?

If you want to practice in Texas, it might be a good idea to go to school in Texas. The school will at least have available all the courses that will cover the material that will be on the Bar Exam. Many schools also have a review after graduation of all the material you had in Law School that will be on the Bar: civil procedure, contracts, torts, etc. Although you can go to any ABA approved law school anywhere in the country and probably be able to take the Texas Bar exam, you may have a harder time passing it. Historically, people from outstate law schools don’t do as well as in-state students. I will admit, however, that I do know two very successful, young lawyers that went to an out-of-state law school. They passed the Texas Bar on the first try.

If you want to work for a big Wall Street firm, maybe a New York or Ivy League school. Do you want to practice in D.C? May a good school in D.C. or UVA. Want to practice Admiralty Law, go to one of the schools have the best programs in this unique field. I always considered four programs the best: one in Florida, one in Louisiana, one in Maine, and the best one in Rhode Island. But, most other schools, especially on the coasts, offer Admiralty courses. You get the idea. But all of those suggestions are not requirements. You can practice any kind of law anywhere no matter where you go to school. It might be harder to make the necessary contacts to get an internship or land a job if you aren’t local.

I was always told to go to the best law school you can get into. Welllll…maybe. I don’t really buy that since it may not have the programs you want, be too expensive, or be out-of-state. Plus you might not ‘fit’ into the culture of that school. And we haven’t even mentioned the culture shock that you might experience if you’ve lived all your life in the Houston area and rarely traveled out of state. So you decide to go to Michigan Law School in beautiful Ann Arbor. Do you know anyone in Michigan? Do you have a support group up there for when you get sick or down from all the schoolwork and the feeling of impending doom as finals approach? And my God but it’s cold there in the winter.

What I would recommend, and what I did, is to pick out four schools. One school would be your dream school to go to [but maybe you don’t have a really good shot to get into it, say with less than a 50-50 chance]; we have to dream, and someone has to win the law school lottery – why not you. The second choice should be a school that you have a good chance to get into and you’d be very happy going there; but since nothing is a shoo-in, we’ll pick a couple more. So your third and fourth choices are good but maybe not great law schools and the odds are you will get into both of them. Many Tier IV law school provide an excellent education in law and have good Bar pass rates. I also recommend that you have four more school on standby that you’ve scouted out. These should be schools you will get into if you miss calculated and didn’t get into any of the first four. These may be out-of-state, small, little known schools. Or may a school in Texas that’s not ‘great’ or has a lower than most Bar pass rate. Going to one of these will put a little more pressure on you to learn the law and prepare for the Bar exam.

If your attitude is ‘I’m going to my first choice or I’m not going’, well then you really don’t want to be a lawyer. Someone that really wants to be a lawyer would go to law school in North Dakota if it was the only one that accepted him and earn money to pay for school shoveling snow all winter. Don’t be a snob about law schools. You told me you wanted to practice law not earn a Harvard tie.

All of the above doesn’t necessarily apply to a few of you with very high GPAs and LSAT scores, assuming you haven’t killed anyone recently. You can get into almost any place you want. The great schools may even try to recruit you to come to their school. Your troubles are different than most of us. The question for you is really not how do I get into a good school but which offer do I accept.

I little honesty about me: I did the four school thingy, as described above, and went to my second choice. I was probably lucky NOT getting into my first choice. Oh, and as for going to a school where you plan to practice? Well, I never practiced in the state in which I went to law school even though it was the state in which I was born and raised. I also hadn’t lived there for five years before I started law school and haven’t lived there since I passed their bar. But that’s another story – I have a bit of wanderlust.

Bottom line – where do you THINK you want to go? Go to the school’s web page and find the ABA required Standard 509 Information Report. This report contains a wealth of information about the school, the student body, acceptance rate, and on and on. I’ve attached UH’s as a sample. However, every school is required to make this information available to all students/applicants. Some schools make it easy to find, some don’t, but it’s there. If you can, visit the school. How does it feel to you?

**Question 2:** How do I know what area of the law to practice?

Does anyone have an easy question? Many student’s think they know in what area of the law they want to practice. For some it was an event that emphasized the good or bad of the law – an event that made a lasting impression on them. I hope they find that the area is a good fit for them and are satisfied with the choices they made to practice in that area.

However for many students, well, I think they have been watching too many TV shows or movies that show the lawyer as HERO: fighting the man, overcoming obstacles to help their client find justice, leaping tall building in a single bound, all they while disguised as a mild-manner lawyer. While I will admit many of us lawyers fit that description, most don’t have the opportunity. Yes, they are doing vital legal work, helping their clients, and hopefully making their city and country a better place while making good money. But they are practicing corporate law; tax law, family law, or any of the dozens of types of law out there. Few get to have the fiery courtroom scenes such as Al Pacino had in “And Justice For All.” And it’s just as well. He was probably disbarred after his outburst. Remember my warning from an earlier missive, very few of you will ever try a case in court.

How did I decide? By trial and error. I’ll admit I went to law school not having any idea in what area of the law I wanted to practice. I took the required courses the first year and a hodgepodge of elective courses the last two years that sounded interesting. My work as a clerk on a court of appeals, pushed me toward criminal law but I wanted to do more, not just criminal prosecution. After graduation, different employers sent me to various law schools for two to four-week courses in specialized areas: environmental law; tort law; business/government contract law; international law, and one or two others I’ve forgotten. I didn’t find the one I really liked until the international law courses. I had finally found my second legal home about five years AFTER I graduated from law school. And no, I didn’t take an international law course in law school. The two main areas I practiced in were criminal prosecution and international law. Yes, I know they are nothing alike but was able to move back and forth between the two. I loved them both.

You may already know or you may be turned on to an area of the law in law school that points you to where you belong. Good luck. Too many new lawyers are hired by firms to work in a specific area of the law – and after a while the new lawyer finds out they hate or at least dislike that area but can’t really change because they have bills to pay and don’t want to start over in a new area. I was lucky.

**Question 3:** What should I start doing NOW to get into law school?

And easier question, finally. If you want to start in the Fall 2020 semester, punt. You should have had you application in already or almost everything together for those few school that have later closing dates.

If you want to start in the Fall 2021 semester, do the following four things:

**1. Recommendations:** Start identifying three or four people to write recommendations for you in the fall.

a. The people you select should be able to talk about specific skills you possess that will transfer to law schoolwork – research, writing, determination to overcome obstacles, etc. If they can give examples of your abilities, even better. Often people select professors/teachers or bosses that don’t understand exactly what you want. You want specific examples not “Mary was a good student and got an ‘A’ in my class” and not ‘Johnny makes a good cup of coffee and makes copies with the best of them at work.”

b. No relatives that just talk about how cute you were when you were little and that you were always such a nice child and often set the table without crying. I’d suggest no relatives, period.

c. Probably not your religious leader, unless you did special things that can show overcoming obstacles and dedication to completion of a task – a hard task. These people probably should be avoided for a recommendation because you probably haven’t done the kind of things that readily transfer to success in law school.

**IMPORTANT NOTE**: you need to see the recommendation before it goes in to LSAC so that you can catch the unhelpful ones, as described above, or the bad one. YES, people sometimes send in bad recommendations. According to LSAC, about 10% of the recommendations that they receive for students can only be called negative recommendations. You need to weed these out. If I wrote a recommendation for you, please check it for grammar and punctuation and tell me so I can correct my errors.

**2. Personal Statement:** Start writing your personal statement. More on personal statements in another missive. But this is something you don’t want to just slap out in a day or two. You need to draft it, let it percolate, rewrite it, more percolating, and rewrite it. Continue. Your English and grammar should be perfect.

**3. Resume:** Make up a new resume and keep updating it. People shouldn’t have just one resume. Sure your resumes will all have the same basic information, but every resume you prepare and send out should match the job or schooling for which you’re applying. Each job or activity can be looked at several ways each emphasizing the traits needed for the hoped-for job or school. Don’t use the resume you used to get a job at Walmart to apply to law school. The skills needed at each are slightly different.

**4. LSAT:** Start your LSAT prep. I’ve already discussed the method I suggest in a previous note. Dig it out of your deleted email box and read it.

**Now I have a favor to ask of you.** If you make an appointment to see me, please keep the appointment. Some days 50% of the appointments don’t show. I sit in my dark office and cry when a student misses and appointment, feeling unloved. More importantly, you are keeping another student from having an appointment. Bad show on your part and not a habit of which you want to acquire. Employers don’t like employees that don’t show either. A time or two of that and you won’t be an employee anymore.