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The value of doing

It goes without saying that I, like most people, came to law school because I wanted to be a lawyer. Shocking, right? I am attending law school with the hope that I will eventually learn how to practice law professionally.

Having spent my entire academic career gauging my level of success on an alphanumeric grade scale, I approached law school in a similar way.

The first year is set up this way. You are told not to get a job and grades are stressed above all else. If you're at the top of the class, you have the opportunity to be on law review, you'll have the chance to apply for a judicial clerkship and then you'll be beating potential employers off with a bat. If you're at the bottom of the class, well, you don't have to go home but you can't stay here.

The first chance I had to apply any of that knowledge I worked so furiously to obtain was the summer after my first year when I began working at a private plaintiff's personal-injury firm. This was a perfect place for me to get my feet wet in the legal profession. My job consisted mainly of doing legal research, writing memos and writing motions to be filed in court.

It was great to learn more about tort law and civil procedure and I got the chance to pick the brains of some truly brilliant trial attorneys. Even better, I felt like I was actually getting a chance to help people who suffered catastrophic injuries.

While I enjoyed my work at the firm immensely, I wanted to do more. I knew I was getting beneficial knowledge but I wanted to expand my skills.

In early August, I heard about a program that would give me the opportunity to represent homeowners facing foreclosure in

mediations with the bank that was offered through the pro bono program at my law school and Chicago Volunteer Legal Services (CVLS).

The Cook County Mortgage Foreclosure Mediation Program was created to deal with the growing number of Cook County residents facing foreclosure. The number of homeowners facing foreclosure climbed dramatically over the past few years, particularly in Cook County, and the Chancery Court has been overwhelmed with foreclosure filings. The program allows senior law students to obtain their 711 license and work with attorneys from CVLS to help these residents navigate the process.

I was excited to take part in this. Not only would I be assisting in performing a valuable service, but I was also interested in learning more about the alternative dispute resolution process. In addition, I would get a chance to deal directly with clients and handle the mediation process to its end. When I got the case file, it was made very clear that this was my sole responsibility.

And I didn't just have myself to worry about. I had to make sure the client understood the process and the deadlines. This interaction was an equally priceless exercise. It was both revealing and helpful when I needed to figure out how to deal with difficult personalities or approach complicated situations. The mythical "client" that receives periodic or passive mentions in law classes is much different than the real thing.

My first mediation was nerve-wracking for me. I compensated for this by preparing everything.

I brought nearly 8 pounds of paper with me for easy reference. It soon became clear that I didn't need any of it and that my hyper-

preparedness did not make me any better off when a situation that no one expected arose. The great part about being a 711 is that a licensed attorney is nearby, acting as a safety net. It was comforting that she was there to jump in to guide me through an event that hadn't been covered in my training session.

By the time we enter our final year of law school, we're all intimately familiar with academia.

As 19th graders, we know how to do well on tests. We know how much work we need to put into exam preparation and we know how hard we need to study in order to get an A. What we don't know, unless we've had prior experience, is how to translate that knowledge into practice.

As a law student, I've had some moments of frustration when I've felt that a lesson steered well beyond the point of being practical; much like the calculus I'm still not certain I ever needed to know.

While substantive knowledge is highly crucial to success, I think some kind of apprenticeship should be a mandatory part of the legal curriculum. I'm glad my nerve-wracking moment of uncertainty happened while I had guidance, if I needed it, rather than if I had been on my own.

Since I began the program, I have completed two mediations with two different clients. Each has been an incredibly distinctive and invaluable experience. I went into my second mediation much more confident. I knew what I needed to do and was looking forward to doing it. My ease with the process paid off and I walked out of the mediation room not only excited to get the chance to do something similar in my career, but secure in the belief that I would be able to as well. ■

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