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Professional identity remains hallmark to being a respected attorney

Illinois Supreme Court Justice Anne M. Burke recently addressed The John Marshall Law School students and alumni on the topic of professionalism within the legal profession. In her February talk, Burke wisely noted that lawyers are expected to be lawyers 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

In sum, society expects lawyers — and therefore law students — to behave and function as professionals at all times.

Indeed, “professional identity isn’t just *part* of being a lawyer, it is the *essence* of a lawyer.” E. Scott Fruehwald, “Developing Law Students’ Professional Identities,” 37 U. La Verne L. Rev. 1, 19 (Fall 2015) (emphasis added).

How are students and recently licensed attorneys to learn the “essence” of being a lawyer? One avenue is mentoring. We are fortunate here at John Marshall to have been the first law school in the state to undertake one of the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism’s most successful projects — an attorney-to-attorney mentoring program that matches attorneys with more than six years of practice experience with recently licensed members of the bar.

Both parties meet regularly during the course of a year and ultimately receive professional responsibility Continuing Legal Education credit at the conclusion.

Many of the several hundred attorneys who have participated in John Marshall’s program since 2011 will likely tell you that the professionalism benefits went both ways in the relationship. More information on the commission’s important work can be found on its website, 2civility.org.

Defining one’s professional identity, indeed, requires reflection and thought, followed by

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years of dedicated work. Though professional identity can be somewhat malleable over time, many academics and experts agree that law students must develop a solid professional identity as soon as possible in law school, then strengthen and develop that identity regularly during the first and subsequent years of practice in order to truly be satisfied in their careers.

For students: Strive for excellence in school and focus on developing strong professional habits

A study several years ago by the Carnegie Foundation tied lawyer dissatisfaction, disciplinary issues and unprofessional conduct such as incivility to habits learned during law school. William Sullivan, et. al., “The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of

ter to make honest mistakes while in law school and learn from them. Avail yourself of your professors and other offices at the law school, such as writing resource centers, to ensure that you can always be confident, proud and satisfied about your work when in practice.

For students and recently licensed attorneys: Emulate the professionalism you see in attorneys you respect

Think about the attorneys you know or have worked with who have an enviable professional identity in your eyes. Likely, they espouse some of the same basic principles in their respective livelihoods: civility and collaboration with peers, competence and excellence, integrity, judgment and service to others. See, e.g. Susan L. Brooks, “Meeting the

ways that experienced attorneys comport themselves. Don’t forget that most, if not all, successful attorneys today once had a mentor, too.

For students and all attorneys: Practice, practice, practice

Experts agree that practical experience is the best way to solidify the skills that will allow most attorneys to become masters of their respective crafts and also thus be the most satisfied with their careers and professional lives. See Brooks, at 395-98.

Students working with actual clients and actual matters through school clinics or internships will gain not only the opportunity to sharpen legal writing and advocacy chops, but may open a path that will lead to a satisfying post-graduation job and career.

Attorneys encounter substantive work each day as a part of the work that they are paid to do, but sometimes the opportunity to learn a new skill may be fleeting in the course of a busy schedule, depending upon the type of law being practiced.

Why not kill two birds with one stone in this case and volunteer with a local bar association or not-for-profit to provide pro bono services to clients in need?

This leads us, in our eyes, to one of the most important parts of any attorney’s professional identity: that of service. Service to the indigent, to the client, to the profession, to the judiciary and to the community must be among the key hallmarks of any attorney, regardless of practice area.

Consider this quote from Abraham Lincoln: “As a peacemaker the lawyer has superior opportunity of being a good man. There will still be business enough.”

Just as the law provides that we utilize the rule of stare decisis, so too should you take the time to observe and model the specific ways that experienced attorneys comport themselves.

Teaching, Educating Lawyers: Preparation for the Profession of Law,” 28-33 (2007).

In practice, attorneys who misstate the law or fail to adequately represent or communicate with a client can face discipline by the Attorney Registration & Disciplinary Commission; it is far bet-

ter to make honest mistakes while in law school and learn from them. Avail yourself of your professors and other offices at the law school, such as writing resource centers, to ensure that you can always be confident, proud and satisfied about your work when in practice.

Professional Identity Challenge in Legal Education Through a Relationship-Centered Experiential Curriculum,” 41 Baltimore L. Rev. 395, 400 (2012).