



President's Perspective

ACTUALLY, I ALWAYS WANTED TO BE A LAWYER

By Amy Noe Dudas

PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

When I first had the privilege of gracing this space about a year ago, I told you that I never wanted to be a lawyer. I never had a lawyer in my life who inspired me to such greatness or felt myself mysteriously called to the law by a higher power. I just kind of fell into it.

With the opportunity to lead this great organization, and faced with a rapidly evolving profession that some feel is robbing lawyers of their traditional role in society, I embarked upon a project to explore what qualities lawyers have that make us uniquely qualified to do what we do. But to answer that question, I rather sought to uncover *who we are*—not just as professionals but as human beings.

Lawyers work and live by a set of fiercely guarded ideals, many of which are codified in the Rules of Professional Conduct. We have committed to the highest of standards in our public and private conduct, even if no one is looking. Not only are new doctors of jurisprudence required to prove they actually learned what their degree says they did by taking one monster of a final exam, they also have the burden of proving that they have the requisite character and fitness to be considered a practicing attorney. Their lives before and during law school are scrutinized—not only do we consider convictions and

arrests, academic misconduct, and overall poor judgment, we also consider traffic tickets, financial slip-ups, and minor disclosure omissions.

Sometimes there just aren't enough of us to go around. And even in places where there are, too many people face legal problems without the financial means to get help. Because of that, many states have begun experimenting with ways to improve people's access to legal information, the justice system, and law-related assistance.

This will require redefining the practice of law. In addition, law school accreditation and admission are being examined for ways in which access to a legal education could become more equitable and accessible. The

bar exam is being re-evaluated for fairness and whether it's an accurate predictor of minimum competence to practice. Bar admissions requirements are getting new scrutiny for being too exclusionary and making "character and fitness" overly broad, especially considering that the rules are not always applied equitably to our BIPOC and LGBTQ+ friends.

Many lawyers have launched vigorous opposition to these initiatives, citing tradition, core values, and the need to protect the public. But as I emphasized last year when I started



this journey, we have to do more than register our opposition; we must do a better job expressing what the big deal is. What is it about what lawyers do that requires it to be so heavily regulated such that only a select few qualify?

Are we drawn to this profession by innate qualities and traits that end up making us good lawyers? Over the past year, I've narrowed it down.

CURIOSITY

As a kid, I was interested in everything, and I never stopped trying new things. When I saw someone doing something that looked interesting, I wanted to learn how. And most of the time, things came pretty easily to me. I've told you several times about how, at age four, I was able to immediately find the *Close Encounters* melody on the piano after hearing it in the movie. While I eventually spent years in music lessons and still try to cultivate that love of music, I was able to re-create music without ever being taught what a note was. I was born with it, and no one knows why.

(Well, I'm sure some pretty smart scientists know why. But I'm talking about the rest of us.)

Most other lawyers I've known over the last twenty-some years are naturally curious. They love this profession because they always get to learn something new with every case.

INQUISITIVENESS

When I started going to preschool a few days a week, I would wake up in the morning and ask if I "got" to go to school today. As I got older, even in those troublesome teenaged years, my parents never needed to bug me to finish my homework because I tackled it as soon as I got home from school and worked until it was done. I questioned everything. I wanted to know how things worked, and *why*. I loved to learn as a little kid, and I still do.

I've never known a lawyer who doesn't ask a lot of questions, not only when they're taking someone's deposition but also when they're chatting with a friend or meeting someone new. They want *details* and seek to explore the depths. We seek not only to know, but to understand. We work until the work is done (sometimes to a fault).

EMPATHY

Even though I am introverted and a little bit socially awkward, I got along with all kinds in school. I could hang with the nerds, the preps, and the stoners. I got along with my peers, and I was comfortable hanging with adults (who usually found me delightful). I somehow knew how to speak everyone's language, which made me authentic and trustworthy. I didn't learn how to read people and



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make them feel like I heard them, much less understood them. It was just there.

Really effective lawyers are great communicators and relate well to others. They write concisely and clearly, speak commandingly and persuasively, and establish relationships with a variety of people, many of whom don't even come close to having the same experiences and backgrounds.

Sure—as we get older, learn more about the world, take college courses called “Transcending Boundaries:

The Science of Synchronicity and Interpretive Dance,” and, above all, make mistakes, we learn by experience and example. But we don’t study how to be curious, inquisitive, and empathetic. For the most part, lawyers—*good lawyers*—just are.

As a result of what's driven you to this profession, you've developed and cultivated some really important qualities that are crucial for good lawyering: tact, self-control, emotional intelligence, prudence, self-awareness, flexibility, grit, resilience.

It's important to continue to scrutinize whether some individuals who have these qualities are kept away by the current system of law school accreditation and admission, along with bar admission requirements. We don't want to lose them, so let's find a way to catch them without compromising what's really important about who we are and what we do.

To wrap, I'm overwhelmed and grateful by how much I've learned from all of you, how much you've shown me about what really matters, and how inspiring being in your presence really can be. I started this series by telling you, “I never wanted to be a lawyer.” But I was wrong.

Turns out, I've always wanted to be a lawyer. And it's been my privilege. ☺