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Dean's Desk: IU Maurer alumni, students exemplify hard work, integrity

Austen Parrish April 23, 2014



DEAN'S DESK

Austen Parrish
Indiana University
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This is my first Dean's Desk column for the *Indiana Lawyer*, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to contribute. This past week, I had the privilege of welcoming four of our graduates into our Academy of Law Alumni Fellows – one of the highlight events of the deanship since I joined the law school in January. I was sufficiently moved by the ceremony that I thought I'd write about it in my first column.

Induction into the Academy is special. The award is the highest honor the Indiana University Maurer School of Law can bestow upon its alumni. It consists of an elite group that includes U.S. senators, federal judges, successful business leaders and distinguished practitioners. This year, we honored an entrepreneur and conservationist (Lowell Baier '64); an international lawyer and business executive (Sara Yang Bosco '83); a veteran and criminal defense attorney (Don Dorfman '57); and a longtime Indiana practitioner and judge (Patricia McNagny '51). All four of them grew up in Indiana, and yet their impact has gone well beyond the state's borders. When giving remarks during the induction, each of them had uplifting messages about how they used their education to make a difference in the world.

Our inductees' positive messages stood in stark contrast to the relentless negativity we hear about law school in the national media. Not only is the economy tough, we are told, but things have fundamentally and permanently changed. Good jobs are now much harder to find, and the path to professional success is no longer guaranteed. You should only go to law school if you can assure yourself of immediate large financial rewards, often tied to working only in the largest Wall Street firms. Law school, it seems, is for chumps.

What bothers me is not that the national media or the law blogs – our own Perez Hilton wannabes – are so down on law school. They are paid to peddle overwrought sensationalism. It's that so many of us seem to buy into it and discourage the next generation's best and brightest from pursuing higher education. As we oversell how things have radically changed, we downplay our own accomplishments and hard-fought achievements. We also feed the very worst caricature of the current generation – that they are all spoiled rotten, self-absorbed narcissists who are consumed with an intense sense of entitlement. We capitulate to the myopic idea that a legal education is not worth it unless we can see immediate results.

What's troubling is that so little of it is true. The economy has been bad for sure, and new lawyers face

stiffer challenges in the job market than before the recession. The rising cost of education is also a serious issue. But professional success was never guaranteed. Not one of our Academy fellows had life handed to them on silver platters, expected immediate rewards or saw their careers as one of entitlement. Their achievements were their own, won through grit, hard work and deep integrity. Pretending differently is insulting to their legacies.

And it's not just these four. Since I joined the law school in January, I've met with more than 400 alumni, many of them practicing or sitting on the bench in cities and towns throughout the state. And not one has told me that they thought it would be easy or that they wouldn't have to pay their dues. They went to law school motivated not by avarice, but by the intellectual challenge and for wanting to make more of themselves, to better provide for their families, and often because of a heartfelt desire to contribute to society. I've met many alums who had to hold down multiple jobs to make ends meet, who hustled for their first cases, and who lived leanly in their early years. Those who found financial success did so based on their own merit.

As a result of this hard-work ethic, our graduates have left their mark. The Maurer School of Law, as the state's flagship law school and one of the oldest law schools in the nation, has been the place where public officials, diplomats, leading lawyers, entrepreneurs, and the top business people have cut their teeth. Our alumni include giants like U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sherman Minton, U.S. Rep. Lee Hamilton and U.S. Sen. Birch Bayh. Our graduates are trailblazers, and they certainly didn't have it easy – consider the first elected female African-American trial judge in the country and the first to serve on the supreme court of any state (Juanita Kidd Stout); the first woman on the Wisconsin Supreme Court and its current chief justice (Shirley Abrahamson); the first Japanese-American admitted to the bar in the United States (Masuji Miyakawa); and influential Latino practitioners and federal District Court judges (José Villarreal and Gonzalo Curiel, respectively), to name just a few.

It's worth underscoring that this legacy of alumni excellence isn't one of a distant past, although we know we stand on their shoulders – well-known graduates like Hoagy Carmichael, Wendell Willkie, William Jenner or George Craig. Our alumni ranks are filled with the most important leaders in business, law and public service of the day. In Indiana alone, the Maurer School of Law can proudly claim more than 100 federal or state judges; more than 80 corporate executives, including CEOs, presidents, CFOs, COOs and executive directors; 81 general counsels; 88 deputy and assistant prosecutors; 21 county bar association presidents; eight public defenders; five assistant U.S. attorneys; and a justice on the Indiana Supreme Court. Indeed, more of our graduates have served in the past half century on the Indiana Supreme Court than graduates from any other law school in the nation. And this is just Indiana. Many of our graduates do not stay in the state, with a large number practicing in Chicago; New York; Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles and elsewhere. Also, don't be misled to thinking a law degree is only for those wanting to practice law. Over the last five years, less than half of our graduates have chosen to pursue traditional law-firm employment.

This generation of law students is also not as entitled or as naïve as the simple stereotype suggests. Maybe it's different in other states. But the law students I know aren't lazy and entitled; they are inspiring, entrepreneurial and resourceful, and they understand the key role they will play in the globalized world of tomorrow. Students now at the Maurer School of Law – like their predecessors – will go on to do great things. Students such as Mahja Zeon, who will work at the Marion County Prosecutor's Office, but who also does tremendous human rights work with our Center for Constitutional Democracy and the Liberian Law Reform Commission. It includes Christina Abossedgh, a third-year student on the executive board of the Business Law Society, who spent her last summer in New Delhi, India, working at one of the more prestigious law firms in that region as part of the school's innovative Stewart Fellows program. The value of the J.D. degree is underscored by students such as

David Frazee, Alaina Hobbs and Jonathon Hitz who are competing in the ABA National Moot Court Competition, after placing as finalists in the regional competition in Seattle. And students like Sedric Collins, who is the president of the school's Black Law Student Association that won the regional chapter award for the third year running. It includes the dozens of students who participate in our clinics and volunteer for hundreds of hours of pro bono service, each day helping people in Indiana live better lives. I'd put our students up against any graduate over the past 50 years – their lawyering skills are exceptional.

The future is in good hands: Our current students have the same mettle as those we honored at our awards induction. They come to the profession not with a sense of entitlement, but as hard workers, willing to roll up their sleeves to get the job done. They know that the road to a satisfying career can be tough. But they also know that for those who are willing to dig in, work hard and build connections, the investment in a legal education can reap enormous personal and professional rewards. The transformative value of higher education remains. It's the certainty of their future achievements, like the achievements of the four alumni we celebrated recently, that makes me feel proud and privileged to be dean of this great law school. •

Austen L. Parrish is dean and James H. Rudy Professor of Law at the Indiana University Maurer School of Law. Opinions expressed are the author's.