

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin.



## Where have all those happy lawyers gone?

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Toward the end of my last trial, right around the time when the judge informed our trial team that the jury had reached a verdict, my palms began to sweat. As the jury filed back into the courtroom and took their seats in the jury box, my heart began racing. Some eye contact was made; I could not tell if it was favorable.

When the foreman finally rose to deliver the verdict, I'm pretty sure that to the casual observer I looked as if I just engaged in a competitive game of basketball. "This is crazy," I said to myself; yet, I would not have it any other way. I have to admit, I really do love that moment in a trial.

Later, back at the office, I checked voice mail messages, signed checks for vendors, met with associates regarding new cases and then hurried off to coach my son's basketball game. When it was finally time to lay my head on the pillow that night, I welcomed the much needed rest. Of course, that's exactly when my mind began racing once again: Did we submit my paper for the upcoming speech; have we filed a motion for summary judgment in that case, where are the settlement documents from that other case? Uh oh, accelerated heart rate again.

I am typically a pretty laid-back guy. I am confident in my abilities as a lawyer and carry that confidence with me when meeting clients, arguing motions, even interacting with other attorneys. But, I am human and I am trying to run my own business. Consequently, I am prone to stresses like anyone else.

Growing up, teachers promised that the best and the brightest could become lawyers and doctors, on the path to the good life where money and happiness were practically guaranteed. Is it still true?

I recently read the unhappy news that "a growing disaffection with the practice of law pushes 40,000 lawyers to leave the profession every year." Yale Journal of Health Policy Law and Ethics 357, 358 (Summer 2009).

In fact, lawyers have become a studied species, with psychologists focused on finding out why "lawyers ... are 3.6 times more likely to suffer from a major depressive disorder than the rest of the employed population." Id. 40,000 lawyers leaving each year?? Wow, that is the size of Park Ridge.

Let's think for a moment about what our jobs as lawyers require. Each and every day, clients depend on us to help them navigate through a tragic event that was caused or resulted from another person or entity. We vet the facts and legal issues, attempt to predict how badly things could actually go and then research every avenue under the law to avoid a negative outcome. We must wear many hats in our lives — from the warrior's headdress in court to the firefighter's helmet to put out office fires to the coach's cap at home. How can we successfully change gears moment to moment? Many cannot, which can lead some to feel depressed, turn to alcohol or drugs and suffer a battery of life-threatening health issues.

If you are a practicing attorney, you know what I am talking about. You may have already experienced heart palpitations, depression, high cholesterol — and yet you are under 40. Your doctor has told you that your lifestyle puts you at high risk for heart disease and other stress-related disorders.

This February, the ABA Journal's cover story read: "Why I Love Being a Lawyer\* (\*seriously)." Although acknowledging that many "wouldn't recommend their children become lawyers, [and] would rather be digging ditches or breaking rocks," the article took the glass half-full approach, providing many uplifting examples of lawyers connecting with clients, finding joy in "making a difference" and loving the diversity of work available. ABA Journal, February 2011.

The February issue also ran an article entitled "Law School? Bag it, Bloggers Say: More Disgruntled Grads Are 'Scramblogging' Their Job Frustrations" Anna Stolley Persky, ABA Journal, February 2011. As you might expect from the headline, the article doesn't paint a rosy picture. "The number of people employed in legal services has shrunk 7.8 percent since 2007 ... 34 percent of starting salaries ranged between \$40,000 and \$65,000 ..." Could we be in the midst of a great lawyer job famine?

Why, one may wonder, do we even practice law, a profession that does not guarantee employment, does not guarantee stress and could lead to one or all of the above-described dismal scenarios? For me, the silver bullet is competition and client interaction. I need a competitive outlet for my life to have meaning. I also love being able to help others. Maybe I am one of the lucky ones, but that does not make me Superman. Stress can be my kryptonite at times.

One of my favorite movies is "Parenthood." At the end of the movie, the main characters, Gil and Karen, argue about Karen's recent pregnancy and the overall complications of life. Grandma walks into the room, offering some sage advice:

Grandma: You know, when I was 19, Grandpa took me on a roller coaster.

Gil: Oh?

Grandma: Up, down, up, down. Oh, what a ride!

Gil: What a great story.

Grandma: I always wanted to go again. You know, it was just so interesting to me that a ride could make me so frightened, so scared, so sick, so excited and so thrilled all together! Some didn't like it. They went on the merry-go-round. That just goes around. Nothing. I like the roller coaster. You get more out of it.

Like Grandma, I happen to love the roller coaster. In fact, I believe that even if you have a proclivity toward the merry-go-round, you cannot completely escape the highs and lows of the roller coaster. The practice of law is no different.

What concerns me is the growing population of unhappy lawyers. This is especially true of those that are about to graduate from law school or are new to our noble profession. Is it the fault of elder attorneys? Have some made it look too easy? I don't think so.

Many of us would probably be in drastically different situations in life if someone hadn't recognized our potential as either a prospective law student or as a bright-eyed young lawyer. As if we didn't have enough on our plates each day, I think that we should all take some time to reflect on how we can make the practice of law more enjoyable. For example: (1) Figure out what your true talents are. Find an area of the law where you can use those talents effectively to help others; (2) When you are working, work; (3) When you are at home, be at home. In other words, leave your "bad day at the office," at the office.

Is it that things are changing — more lawyers are dying younger — or is it that I am getting to that stage of life where these things happen? I'll admit it takes me longer to loosen up the joints in the morning. Maybe I should work up a sweat playing basketball a little more often, just not while I'm wearing a suit.

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