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Class of 1979 Fifteen Year Report Alumni Comments

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RESPONSES FROM THE MEMBERS OF
THE CLASS OF 1979
TO THE LAST QUESTION ON SURVEY ASKING FOR
"COMMENTS OF ANY SORT ABOUT YOUR LIFE
OR LAW SCHOOL OR WHATEVER"

* * * * *

I was disappointed to see the level of professional and personal dissatisfaction reflected in the comments returned as part of the five-year survey. It is my hope that those who encountered disappointments following law school simply had more to write about and more reason to write it than those, like me, who found professional success and a rewarding family life. Certainly there are drawbacks -- such as high levels of stress and long hours away from my family -- but overall, my career as a lawyer has been better than I had reason to hope or to expect. Therefore, I write these thoughts so that the readers of these comments will see more bright spots against what may appear to be a disturbingly dark background.

I didn't realize that I enjoyed law school until considerably after I graduated.

Although I'm glad I had the experience of working for a large law firm, I wish that there had been more emphasis on alternative career paths and less peer pressure to line up a job with a prestigious law firm during law school.

For the workaholics in the crowd, it's not too late to discover that there's a lot more to life than the practice of law!

My only concern/criticism of law school was that few of the professors seemed to love teaching and student contact. Many seemed too busy researching, publishing, et al. I felt my best instruction came from my Real Property professor (Smith). He seemed to truly love his students, teaching and subject matter. I was impressed by Professor Smith and will always hold him in the highest regard.

Though not a criticism of the Law School (per se), I did not enjoy my law school experience. I felt like a very small, insignificant cog in a very large, complex machine.

Life is too short. Go climb a mountain. Do not let work get to you.

Law school classes did virtually nothing to prepare me for the practice of law. The cursory, short-shrift treatment given to legal writing (taught by uninspiring 2nd and 3rd year students) is amazing in hindsight since most work for young lawyers is research and writing.

Michigan's corporate emphasis was not surprising given our society's general tendency to value things that make money. The restriction on the number of credit hours for clinical courses is counterproductive since those are the only portions of law school that provide any hint of what life after law school is likely to be (other than law school teaching).

My husband/law partner and I have been out of law school for 15 years and have kids 11, 8 and 5. We both do a lot of criminal law and family law, and have both been amazed at the insights we have gained as parents and how often they help us deal with our clients (who often behave like overgrown, immature children).

I was not asked to answer Part E because I am not currently in practice but I want to comment on gender discrimination. I do not currently experience it because I teach in a law school with a female dean and a faculty that is over 50% women. During my years in private practice I experienced a lot of gender discrimination primarily from other lawyers but also from lawyers within the firm and from clients.

As an African American male, my view of the Law School is greatly influenced by my feelings about how I was treated while I attended. Since several of my law professors either specifically stated or demonstrated through their actions that they thought I did not deserve to be there (simply because of my race), I feel I was deprived of the law school experience I deserved and paid for. However, with the help of God and the intelligence, will and integrity that he has blessed me with, I have become a very successful, well-adjusted attorney.

If I were to provide any suggestion to the Law School, it would be that the School monitor all law professors for the attitudes I described above. The study of law is difficult enough without having to combat racism at the same time. My experience during the fifteen years since I completed law school confirms something that I believed while in law school; that is, it matters not the circumstances under which you entered law school, but whether you can be a good law student, graduate, pass the bar exam and become a successful attorney. Since thousands of African Americans accomplish those goals every year, they demonstrate that they deserved to be in law school. When the Law School decides that it truly wants to teach all admitted students (regardless of race), it will have taken an important step in the right direction.

Although I am not actively practicing law, I work with the law and lawyers all the time, and I find my life's work rewarding and fulfilling.

What I enjoy most about my work is serving in the role of confidant and advisor to clients with whom I have developed a close relationship.

What has dismayed me most about the practice of law is the cutthroat competition, the pressure to aggressively market my services and the pressure to increase hours and billings. Law seems much more like a business and much less like a profession than it did 15 years ago when I began my practice.

Revamp civil procedure to reflect reality. I knew little, although I had five hours of it, until I got into practice and learned the interrelationship of the rules.

There is life after law school.

Try to enjoy school and life more -- life is too short.

On a profundity level, 1=Einstein/Plato, 10=Beavis 'n Butthead; I rate the above comments/observations an 8, but hey, they are true.

Law school seemed like a very cold and sexist place when I was there. Very few professors gave any indication whatsoever that they cared about the students. I suppose it was a good transition for life in a big firm, but it was very stifling at the time.

God damn, well I declare! Have you seen the like? Their walls are built of cannon balls, their motto is: "DON'T TREAD ON ME!"

I think the placement office was totally passive in dealing with students. They needed to do more education about how, why and what. Not just supply a place for interviews. I had no idea of the importance of summer clerkships and missed this in the law school "culture" somehow. Also alternative careers.

Do you still assign grades based on one exam at the end of a semester? Doesn't this seem nonsensical?

The single biggest disappointment and shortcoming of law school was lack of substantial faculty contact.

I did not enjoy law school and do not feel that it contributed much more than a paper degree to my personal and professional development. The problem, as I experienced it, was less the content of courses but more the way in which courses were taught. Most professors were not competent in using the Socratic method, and it degenerated into rigid, uninteresting role-play. The lack of reality was shocking -- e.g., my business law professor had never seen a proxy statement! And, lastly, the absence of intellectual congeniality between professors and non-law-review students was disappointing.

I really miss the opportunity to think creatively and deeply about legal issues -- too much of my practice is end-oriented, fax and phone driven. The pressure seems enormous at times.

My law school years were some of my best. I met great friends, was intellectually challenged, and enjoyed the social side of school.

The economics of practice have taken much of the satisfaction out of the practice. When I take a low fee/no fee case, I feel guilty because it's not the economically smart thing to do. When I don't take such a case, I feel guilty because I turned someone down who could use my help.

In law school, students should be taught that law is a business not an academic discipline, and qualities such as efficiency should be stressed. Clinical skills should be taught. Law firm economics should be explained. Law school does not prepare the student for practicing law, practically, intellectually or, most important, emotionally. Law is, at the bottom, a trade, and not a particularly interesting one. Students who are taught otherwise are done a grave disservice.

Lawyers desperately need skills in law firm administration, acting as employers and co-workers ("inclusional psychology") and attracting, satisfying and otherwise dealing with clients. This includes, but isn't limited to, ethics, manners and listening skills. It is criminal to allow students to graduate from law school as naive and unprepared as they are. It does a disservice to the clients, to the employers and, most important, to the student. TEACH YOUR STUDENTS TO GROW UP!

Since law school, I have attended seminary. I experienced a marked contrast in academic environment. Seminary was every bit as academically challenging as law school but the professors in Seminary generally cared about me as a person. I never felt that in law school. I think that is a shame since law schools should be turning out good people and not just good lawyers. More than ever, society needs lawyers who are first of all honest, compassionate people. Ethics must not be reduced to a set of rules or rights or ways a lawyer can protect himself/herself from a client. More attention to the personal maturity of law students is warranted.

It was a great intellectual experience, invaluable in many non-practice activities.

I believe that my current dissatisfaction with the practice of law is due in large part to the effects of the recession and I expect things to get better as the economy improves.

The School did little to lessen the isolation that I as an ethnic minority experienced.

Regarding the question on "discrimination": I believe I have been fortunate in my employment in not facing any overt discrimination, harassment, etc. A former employer (a private law firm) negotiated with me to work out a part-time arrangement,

the first for that firm. I believe that my choice not to have children (and the attendant lack of child-care worries) greatly enhanced my ability to negotiate; I have seen many women colleagues with small children encounter far more problems than I have experienced. Because the firms are so hours-dependent (both in their accounting practices and in the still prevalent view that a young lawyer must prove him/her self with masochistic billing practices), women will continue to have a harder time than the men.

The "discrimination," or lack of respect, has come far more from opposing counsel. When I started practicing, one lawyer asked my boss to "send his gal over" to pick up a stipulation on a discovery dispute (referring to me). Fourteen years later, I experienced a lawyer telling me in a deposition that "no girl attorney is going to tell me what the rules are." Perhaps the intervening years have simply made it easier for me to let such things roll off my back, and into the lap of a discovery magistrate (fortunately, a woman!).

I entered law school and became a lawyer without a clear idea about my career goals, but it's worked out well.

Litigation is emotionally and financially inefficient on parties (clients) and their attorneys. I'd like to see U of M be at the forefront of alternatives on changes to the traditional adversarial system. The goals in the modification on substitute would be to save court time (and other public resources), make it less taxing on the emotions and assets of the disputing parties and take less time to resolve.

Michigan Law School prepared me professionally much better than I appreciated at the time. The faculty and my fellow students were the most important factors in my preparation.

What is striking to me now is the lack of self confidence my fellow students and I had. That lack of self confidence was manifested in high anxiety levels that may have interfered with learning and professional preparation.

In my profession, legal search, I find many people who are very dissatisfied with the practice of law; I feel very lucky to be able to put my legal experience to good use in a related, but more personally satisfying profession. All I need now is to make it part-time and it will be perfect.

I found law school intellectually stimulating and an indispensable supplement to a liberal arts education. The ability to articulate the other side's position on an issue and to understand "process" has been of great benefit to me in my career.

I'm not sure I would want to develop the curriculum, but, for persons interested in pursuing a transactional practice, I'm not

convinced the traditional litigation-oriented law school approach is best. It doesn't really address the types of issues that transactional lawyers deal with.

Law school would have been enhanced by several courses oriented toward actual practice as opposed to Michigan's highly theoretical and academic bent.

I. I am concerned that I may seem unappreciative of Michigan. While U-M Law School was an extraordinarily difficult time for me, the majority of the blame lies with me. It took me some time to distinguish between a lack of self-confidence and a lack of intelligence.

If not already in place, I would encourage the Law School to considering implementing programs to ensure anyone who needs it, that one does not have to be a rocket scientist to graduate from even UM Law School! It seemed frequently that law school had more people interested in the failure of their colleagues than their successes.

II. The rather high number of jobs I have had, with one exception, have been in public service or government relations. With a single exception, I left each position of my own accord and a solid, if not excellent record.

Nevertheless, for my age, education and experience, I believe I should probably be employed at a higher level. Part of the failure to be at that "higher level" was because of a) interest in acquiring knowledge in other areas; b) impatience (grass has got to be greener on the other side); c) failure to realize my ability to contribute at a higher level; d) race, particularly during the Reagan administration, a time of difficulty for many qualified African-Americans (by the way, I am a registered Republican and worked for two Republican offices on Capitol Hill for a total of five years).

As a person who has elected to change from a legal career, I'll admit my response is likely to come from a different perspective.

First, I'd like to say that, even though I don't practice law, I strongly feel that I was given an excellent legal education. U of M Law School has consistently attracted and held some of the best legal minds available.

Second, as a Black female, I'll admit the environment could be quite "white male oriented," however, during my years of training, an effort appeared to be made to rectify this. Review of current literature seems to support that view.

Third, upon completing my first year, I was given the impression that my legal writing and research was not strong. This was contrary to feedback given during undergrad, where I was a

liberal arts major who graduated with honors. More support of these skills could have been a significant factor for me.

Finally, my law degree has opened many doors for me, even in non-legal settings. However, with the current difficulty of obtaining employment, law school students should be advised more about job search procedures, the range of legal jobs besides legal practice, etc....

As I now see things:

1. The average lawyer does a mediocre job, often to the client's detriment.
2. Far too many people go to law school, and far too many graduate and gain admission to the bar.
3. Law school should be made more demanding, particularly by increasing the volume and variety of reading and frequency of tests and writing.
4. Most "clinical" programs are useful only for persons who want to handle commonplace litigation.
5. More useful clinical work would focus on negotiation and drafting of agreements and settlements.
6. The great proliferation of statutes, rules, and regulatory agencies is extremely burdensome to the economy and society and makes compliance absurdly complex and expensive.
7. Almost all litigation is wasteful and most is conducted in bad faith. Much business negotiation is done with the aim of seeking unfair advantage.
8. Most law graduates have a woefully inadequate understanding of business and finance.
9. We are overly litigious. Many causes of action now recognized are spurious or poorly conceived. E.g., RICO and most class actions are easily abused.
10. Far too little attention is paid to a) the poor quality of judicial decision making, particularly in the state systems, b) the effects of ignorance and perverse incentives on bureaucratic policy and action, c) adverse effects of poor lawyering, and d) the difficulty of remedying errors and poor judgment.
11. Although unfashionable to say so, the legal system is intentionally and properly designed to discourage exercise of rights and enforcement of remedies where only a little is at stake. Persons should bear disincentives to press claims and utilize the judicial and similar systems, which are scarce public resources, and the time and costs of obtaining legal advice and seeking redress are transaction costs equivalent to taxes. Everyone needs to carry a large "deductible," so that minor or inconsequential disputes do not harass others or clog the system. This is one reason why the spread of fee-shifting statutes and rights is unfortunate.

Marketing is a function for which law school provided no training. Now it is very important in my practice.

Both my children could sing 'Hail to the Victors' before they could really pronounce "valiant." I enjoyed law school, I

treasure my memories of it, and I give UM lots of money every year.

I practiced law full- and part-time for nine years before leaving practice to care for my four children. Combining law practice and caring for the two children I had then was enormously difficult and it was with a great sense of relief that I left. The time pressures and stress of private practice left me with too little energy and time to be an adequate mother. Contrary to my expectations, I found this to be increasingly true as the children got older. Infants and toddlers adapt to day care fairly readily; once they are in school and have more activities of their own, their need to have someone available to parent them at all hours of the day increases. Full-time household help with driving is expensive and hard-to-find for the income I would make above and beyond the cost (including the cost of missing my children during 50-hour work weeks and nights and weekends that I need in which to recharge). I decided I'd rather mother my kids myself. Admittedly I can afford to do this only because my husband (also a Michigan Law graduate) has the skills, capacity and drive to support us all. So for that and for the superb education I received (including the ability to go back to work if necessary) I am very grateful.

I view myself as a person who kept going to school until he ended up an attorney, rather than a person following a life goal. Although I enjoyed the work I did as an attorney (energy exploration), I became disillusioned with "real world" law practice within 18 months of graduation. The pay was good, so I kept practicing, and became miserable. Circumstances and personal growth led me to a career change beginning in my sixth year of practice, and I became the technology administrator of a 130-attorney firm nearly six years ago. Both temperament and interest are better matched to my work today than ever when I practiced law. By staying in law as a support person, I still find uses for my law school training and experience. My career change was difficult emotionally and financially, but having gone through it, I feel it was the right thing. Perhaps with the changes occurring in the practice of law today, with fewer new jobs and longer waits for partnership, there is a greater need for support after graduation (Lawyers Helping Lawyers Bail Out) as a realistic option available to graduates.

Regardless of career choices, I can't imagine any experience other than law school which offers such exposure to an incredible quantity of intellectual power such as I saw during my three years at UM Law School.

My dissatisfaction with family life is due to the difficulty of balancing two busy careers while caring for two small children and managing a household.

I worked for a federal government agency in my first job after law school. I raised substantive professional and ethical

concerns related to my job responsibilities. After raising these concerns, I was fired. I have had to expend a great deal of professional effort in an attempt to seek a redress. I have a case pending in federal court and have testified before Congressional committees. This experience has had a profound effect on my professional opportunities. It has also affected my perspective of the role of lawyers in our society. I believe there must be much stronger efforts to encourage and support attorneys to express their ethical concerns. Having a strongly held professional or ethical belief should not by itself be destructive of one's professional standing.

I spend most of my time working with the victims of negligence, wrongful employment termination, abuse of governmental power, or accidental injury. I find that law school provided me with very few of the skills that I needed, and have subsequently acquired, to perform this work successfully. In particular, I do not recall learning the interview skills, knowledge of substantive law, or counseling skills that I need when I meet with prospective or new clients. Certainly I did not learn any of the litigation skills that I need to simply complete the technical aspects of a lawsuit. Neither did I learn any of the real-world skills needed to convince managers, adjusters, opposing counsel, judges or juries that the lawsuit should be resolved in my clients' favor.

I did learn to read cases and research creatively. I did learn some very basic counseling and litigation skills in the two clinical law courses that I took. However, in an age of protracted litigation, these brief courses provided students with only a very narrow range of experiences.

To more effectively prepare students for the type of practice in which I am engaged (plaintiff's litigation in a small firm), far more clinical, real-world education, and much less focus on intellectual skills and gamesmanship, would be most helpful.

In my work, my clients often litigate claims of supervisory liability based upon a failure to adequately train subordinates for the tasks that they were to perform on the job. If the training that I received from most of my professors at U of M Law School was measured against such a standard, in light of the work that I currently do, I have little doubt that there would be a quick verdict against the school and staff. In fact, I cannot imagine a police department, school or medical facility defending a training program that has as little focus upon the realities of work as the law school curriculum has for the work of litigation attorneys.

The whole process made me a good technical attorney, but did not prepare me to assist my clients by being a creative "deal maker." It also stifled creativity, passion and compassion, pushing all of us to the "mainstream" of big firm life, lifestyle and pressure.

The questionnaire should be redesigned to capture the experiences and perceptions of those graduates who chose public interest/legal services. Although I value my law school education and benefitted from it, the U of M Law School experience in the late 1970's was not particularly relevant to those who wanted to practice in public interest/legal services law. To some extent, the questionnaire reflects this bias. For example, question number 9 of page 8 does not even provide a category that would describe the work of most legal services lawyers.

During law school, I found that some of my most valuable experiences were outside the traditional curriculum: an externship with a public interest law firm for a semester, an independent study course with Professor Chambers, teaching a class with undergraduate students. No one discouraged me from pursuing these activities, but I had to discover that these alternatives existed. I found that there was little support for exploring an alternative law practice.

I believe the University of Michigan is a great school, and I am pleased to have had the opportunity to attend its law school. However, I regret that I did not develop more useful and lasting relationships with fellow students and teachers. I recommend that more effort be made to facilitate informal student-teacher interaction. I think this would be especially beneficial for minority students, such as myself, who may not be as assertive in making such relationships happen. Along these lines, student and teacher mentoring programs might be expanded.

Also, I recommend that you carefully compare the percentage of minority graduates who enter private practice to the non minority percentage who join and become partner in private firms. The University should energetically prepare minority students to be marketable to private firms, and concomitantly encourage moderate sized and prestigious firms to interview and hire minority graduates.

Since I have been a trial judge for the last 1 1/2 years, the last set of questions are not applicable to me. I would volunteer, however, that I have experienced moderate amounts of gender discrimination in all three categories listed in Q.11. In my experience, the most critical factor in preparing women graduates to cope with discrimination is to simply build their self-confidence. A capable, confident female attorney will experience discrimination as an annoyance, but will not be disabled by it.

From an intellectual and professional perspective, I have the highest praise and gratitude for the Law School's contribution to my career. My training stood me in good stead through 14 years as a litigator (in large firm, small firm and government settings) and my more recent appointment to the bench. Although

I had no plans or aspirations to become a judge until the last few years, that step has turned out to be the most fulfilling I could ever have imagined. Q.15.h did not have any category higher than "very satisfied" with one's career -- I am as "satisfied" with my career as it is humanly possible to be!

After 4 years with a large firm (100 lawyers) and 10 years with a corporation, I now have my own private practice. I did this (private practice) in order to take control of my schedule and to be available to my 3 children. I still find myself working too hard and too long. Whoever said I could do it all? But -- I look back fondly at law school and feel well trained.

Life at law school is an oxymoron.

I felt that law school was a stimulating intellectual experience, and could have been even more so had I had a better notion of how it all fit in with the practice of law. While that period of my life was not particularly gratifying from a social perspective, I didn't have problems much different from any 22-year old. In the end, while I believe what I learned at the law school (as well as attending Michigan) afforded me a range of career opportunities for which I'm grateful, what I have learned and done since graduation is much more important. I would expect that this is not unusual.
