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Class of 1984 Fifteen Year Report Alumni Comments

University of Michigan Law School

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**Responses to Open-Ended Question:
“We would like your additional comments of any sort
about life or law school.”**

I would have appreciated more counseling about career alternatives other than private law practice.

Fifteen years of practicing law has taught me: (1) Many lawyers either never learn to practice law on a “sophisticated” level or give up after doing so. It becomes a “job” or a task to be managed without any real intellectual or moral excitement in most instances. (2) Most Lawyers believe they are honest and are by their light, but the practice of law deadens what little impetus people have to examine themselves or their ideas critically, although many lawyers are very self-critical. (3) It pays off in happiness and in results to trying to find something to like about everyone even the most obnoxious adversary. Reflecting on law school after practicing law has shown me: (1) Law school, like any school, can overemphasize getting good grades at the expense of more interesting learning, or more creative thinking. See law review, etc. (2) U of M is much too elitist for its own good. (3) U of M was still a great intellectual experience for all its inevitable imperfections.

I think you need to broaden your inquiries about job/career satisfaction. In the insurance defense practice, job satisfaction has increasingly lessened as corporate mergers create incentives or reasons to decrease our pay while at the same time increasing work (and stress). Also the change in society’s attitudes has made it increasingly difficult to compete in the practice (and admission into) law. Diversity is difficult to maintain or increase, as it was 16 years ago. I feel sorry for any law student who comes out feeling that corporate America will treat him or her fairly. I feel worse for those who are minorities and/or females.

(1) There are timeless values, including those in the Ten Commandments, that will serve each of us abundantly well in life. Having faith in an eternal, omniscient, loving god makes any stress I have felt manageable, refreshes me, keeps me caring for others and humbles. (2) Those of us who are married parents should remember to love and compliment our respective spouses, not just our children. (3) Michigan Law School can be inspiring and illuminating. May it return even more closely to key substantive courses in law. We have more multi-disciplinary, soft/BA-type courses than we need. I have a BA, and BAs are wonderful. But in law school the very predominate offerings need to be substantive courses on areas of law.

Michigan opened several doors for me. I am grateful. I have come to learn that work and family -- if you really love them both -- take up a full 100% of one’s time. There is no time left for personal, let alone charitable pursuits. I believe that many of us will do our “life’s work” giving back to the community when we are 50 +, in semi or full retirement.

Law school is a weak trainer for the business/law world.

I went to law school believing that an intelligent lawyer was a powerful person and that an ethical person could use that power for the good of society. I have found the first to be generally true. I have found the second to be true with two caveats. There is little good to be done for society through the practice of law other than in public settings such as the judiciary and legislature. The temptations and pressures to succeed financially drive most intelligent ethical lawyers to fields which subvert any altruistic aspirations. Living in one of the wealthiest counties in the world, where intelligent and un-intelligent lawyers alike routinely earn six figure incomes, I must constantly remind myself of the higher value of personal integrity and justice.

U of M Law School successfully prepared me for a productive legal career and also helped me find the courage to learn to litigate. My law skills are extremely helpful in day-to-day life and help me be an effective leader in an important charitable organization.

Though I no longer practice law, I feel that the discipline I learned in law school serves me very well as a writer. I also found Michigan an extremely positive environment – not just for learning, but also for nurturing developing self-images. From the many friends I have made who were graduates of other law schools, I have found very few who felt as similarly strong about their law schools. Only my friends from Stanford and the University of Virginia seemed to have had as positive an overall law school experience as I did.

I enjoyed Michigan Law School very much, and do not regret having gone there. Unfortunately, I have not managed my career very well at all.

Some advice for lawyers/non-practitioners with children who want to work part-time: (1) Work hard to develop a niche or expertise in the early years of your career. (2) Stay in your niche and cut back hours – you can accomplish a lot when you know your stuff and you can supervise others so work is getting done that you don't have to do! (3) Hold your ground! It's worth it.

Several times over the years I've had conversations with attorneys who worked for firms representing private interests to the detriment of the public interest. They have seemed sad, stressed and jealous of the things I have worked on in the public interest: passion for my work, peace of mind, a

compassionate work environment that supports flexible hours, etc. for parenting, peace of mind, freedom in framing my work strategies, etc. I earn far less than they do but have successfully secured much better wages than non-profits used to pay. I would never trade the joy I have at a public interest organization for a for-profit environment, regardless of the pay. (And yes, I did pay off big loans.) Please share this message with students at UM Law School. Also, please, find a way to educate the students about the urgency of more students pursuing public interest careers and rejecting jobs that work against the public interest. It saddens me that my alma mater undoubtedly plays an important role in blocking urgently needed environmental protections. Lawyers for polluting corporations have used their enormous skills very effectively to prevent crucial toxic standards through lobbying and litigation and through intimidation (the threat of suits). I urge you to sponsor speakers, conferences, debates, classroom discussions, etc. on pollution and other issues. Dr. Theo Colborn (World Wildlife Fund), for example, could speak about the signals from wildlife and human studies, that have brought scientists around the world together in urgent calls for pollution prevention.

In general, I enjoyed law school. My career has followed opportunities created by the emergence of the technology industries as the economic driver of the US and, to some extent, the global economy. It would have been nice if the law school had more courses back in 1982 - 1984 that dealt with technology issues. I tried to take all there were, and there were few. I assume many courses have been added in the last 15 years. My most lasting impression of law school is that too much time is spent trying to train lawyers – law school is a good education but it doesn't have to be a trade school for lawyers – I liked my 5 years of legal practice, but the ability to think helped me become a pretty successful investment banker and now the founder of a very high profile LBO firm. It would be interesting to see how many of my classmates still practice law.

Law school was a wonderfully stimulating experience. It broadened my view of the world and permitted me to know and appreciate an enormous number of exceptionally capable people. It has given me friends I would otherwise never have known and exposed me to ideas far different from those in my prior existence. It gave me far more than I gave in return and I hope that my current involvement in community service will help repay some of the indebtedness I feel to the University of Michigan Law School. Even though I practice medicine and not law, the knowledge I gained in Law School has enhanced my life and helped me to become more effective as a community member. Please express my sincere appreciation to the administration and the faculty. Thank you.

I must say that I thoroughly enjoyed and will always value my law school experience. The vast majority of my professors worked diligently to get me to appreciate the process of the developing law, both from a legislative and judicial point of view. I was taught to learn a client's business better than the client, and that advice alone has caused my stock to rise. I was challenged to think creatively, and that has kept me in good stead during negotiations. I will remain ever grateful for the accessibility of my professors. Those with whom I met were sincere, concerned, and interested in my success. Michigan is a fabulous place to receive a legal education. I entered a bit naive and mystified, and exited a competent, confident practitioner. My Michigan education enabled me to become the first African American female

University of Michigan Law School Graduates of 1984: Responses to Questionnaire Item F, "We would like your additional comments of any sort about life or law school."

partner at [firm name], where I worked for 15 years and 9 months prior to starting my own practice.
Thanks,
Michigan!

The clinic was a great experience in law school – should be mandatory. Also need more emphasis in law school on ethics and other dilemmas of real-life practice. For intellectual challenge and fun, UM Law School was fantastic.

I'm not cut out to be a lawyer. I love working as a sign language interpreter.

Although I only practiced law for a short time, the skills I developed at Michigan have served me well in my business life. As a financial and estate planner, I use my legal skills almost daily. As a business owner, my legal skills help me analyze business opportunities and deal effectively with out lawyers. My only regret from law school is the lack of focus on opportunities outside traditional law jobs.

I left a nationally known law firm after nine years of employment after the firm refused to offer me partnership. I feel my gender was a factor. I was quickly offered equivalent employment, but decided to take a job at half the pay that guaranteed that I only had to work 4 days a week, 8 hours per day.

Interesting going to medical school after law school.

I practiced for 5 years and then obtained an MBA. Since then I have worked in executive management culminating in a purchase of a manufacturing company. I enjoy my life outside the law far more than when I was practicing. The primary advantage is the ability to make my own business decision and succeed or fail financially on those decisions.

I have enjoyed the lifestyle of an in-house counsel much more than life in a big law firm. I do occasionally miss the excitement of "big case" litigation but find the trade-off to be worth it.

A first year law professor told my class "you can live greatly in the law." I believe that is true, but

difficult. As with many discipline, "the game" becomes paramount in legal practice especially trial work – often obscurely "the law" and "the client." That is one of the main reasons I gave up active practice to pursue legal research and writing. I consider myself fortunate to have made a living at the part of the law that I enjoy.

If I had it to do over again, I would still make the decision to pursue a law degree. The mental training and discipline I received have served me well. It is an education that forever changed how I approach issues and decisions. Being "a lawyer" has also given me many more career options than I had before.

At the same time, however, I regret that law is now more of a business than a profession, and that the decline of civility in the practice of law seems to mirror that in our society.

This survey appears well-intentioned, but it fails completely to consider grad's diverse life/work experiences. In fact, it's very surprising that there are no inquiries relevant to discrimination faced by gay/lesbian attorneys; I know of so many who have come out since graduating from the law school. The experience of being gay/lesbian presents unique challenges – especially for those like me, who began their careers pursuing corporate law positions. In my experience, coming out at work made me a less valued member of the legal staff. That's hardly surprising considering my immediate superior's initial reaction was "I had no idea when I hired you." Of course, pursuing a discrimination claim, even when there is legal protection, isn't really an option if one wants to remain a part of the local legal community. Discrimination contributed to my decision to leave the profession and return to graduate school to pursue a different career altogether.

I have no particular comments about life but will share my impressions of law school (though it's now 15 years in the past) and the practice of law.

I found law school to be a difficult and occasionally brutalizing experience. It took me a long time to get past my resentment and catch on how to play the game. I think part of my resentment then (and a good part of my continuing feelings about the school) had and have to do with my sense that we were not given the skills we needed to be lawyers. I appreciate the school's mission to inculcate patterns of thought and analysis (though I'm not certain how well that worked with me), but I have often found myself wishing I'd learned the skills that other people who attended other law school seem to have had from the start of their careers. For example, my former boss went to the University of Wyoming, where he learned to draft contracts, deal with the evidentiary rules in a practical everyday sort of way, think on his feet, and in general apply the law (as opposed to merely thinking about it). After 10 years of practice, I had nowhere near the level of practical skills he had relatively early in his career. Furthermore, I'm not even sure how much I learned about the general aspects of law which the school prides itself on teaching. If it hadn't been for the bar review course, my knowledge of general legal principles would have been pretty much limited to those I picked up during my post-graduation clerkships. During law school, I could have used some real role models to identify the necessary skills and help me learn them. The people in the Child Advocacy Clinic were very useful in this regard, but that experience was quite limited, and the law schools' treatment of the clinic as only ancillary to the actual mission of the school encouraged students in general to perhaps take it less than seriously.

On the other hand, I do have a few positive thoughts about law school. My wife says my analytical skills increased during and after law school. She's probably right. I did enjoy my work with Jerry Israel, and I also enjoyed the grad school poetry course I took during my third year. I appreciate the law school for having provided the setting that allowed me to run into a newly appointed federal judge who visited the law school informally and hired me to come to [state] and be his first law clerk (regardless of my middle-of-the-class academic standing). My experience as a federal law clerk with him and then another judge was very enriching.

My feelings about the practice of law are mixed. (As you can see from my questionnaire, I worked for 10 years at two firms that handled general business and regulatory work with public utilities. When I quit and left my practice almost two years ago, I had a bunch of good clients in a growing area of law). During my practice, I enjoyed researching law, writing, advising my clients, and the satisfactions of getting favorable results. Those things were actually quite gratifying to me. I did not enjoy the pressures of increasing responsibility; the constant conflict and especially the automatic resort to battle when other approaches might have produced more justice for everyone; the public disdain for lawyers that now appears to be contributing to deteriorating relationships between lawyers and their clients; the tendency of law practice to divide people rather than to bring them together; the increasingly adversarial nature of my practice and the system in general; the sense that my work was not particularly useful to society as a whole; the pressures my work put on my family life; and finally what appeared to be the on-going disintegration of the state court and regulatory system here.

During my last year of practice, something happened that impressed me deeply. On two separate occasions, I ran into highly successful lawyers nearing retirement who told me, with a great deal of emotion, that they had worked so hard for 20 years, put in so many hours, and had given up so much of themselves that they didn't know their own children, who are now grown and gone. Although the lawyers had had successful (by most standards) and lucrative practices for many years, they said that they would give it all up in a flash, and everything that went with it, if they could somehow go back and spend more time with their young children. Neither one had had any idea, as his kids were growing up, that he was missing something important. They both said they couldn't imagine how this had happened to them, how they had gotten so disconnected from what was important to them. Their emotionality struck me very forcefully. I couldn't imagine letting that happen to me or to my 4 year old son.

What ultimately drove me out of law is the sense I had that the system is largely indifferent to the real human needs of the people who keep it going (not to mention the needs of other people not in the system), and that many lawyers are ultimately worn down to the point where they too become out of touch with their own needs and indifferent to the needs of the people around them. I believe this process starts in law school and is reinforced by law firm practices and the amount of money on the table. The law school seemed to do very little if anything to help lawyers with this aspect of the practice. I have little doubt that both legal education and much of the way law is practiced would have to be completely overhauled if this state of affairs were to be changed in any serious way. Frankly, in my view, the likelihood of this occurring is laughable. Too many lawyers – not to mention all of the other people, professions, and private and public institutions connected with the legal system – are making far too much money and enjoying far too much power.

Perhaps I'm being too cynical. All the same, I wish I had known some of this when I decided to go to law school. It's frustrating to me, in a way, that I had to go to law school to learn that I perhaps shouldn't have gone to law school. Perhaps that's life. (Oops, I guess that's a comment about life, after

all!) In any event, I am comforted somewhat by what I've learned about the political and legal structure of this country since I left law school, generally as a result of my clerkships and my subsequent practice, which learning would not have been possible without law school.

I should write a book, though none of this seems to me all that new, and potential law students are probably disinclined to hear such messages, much less to pay for them!

I am now trying to figure what to do next, as I am not yet ready to retire. The thought of resuming work as a lawyer is not a happy one for me, as you can imagine, and I'm hoping I can avoid it. I have lately settled on elementary education, and I'm giving real thought to becoming an elementary-level teacher. The thought of working with rather than against other people is very tempting.

Thanks for your time and consideration.

My career has been non-legally focused since 1986. Law school training was useful for various post-law firm occupations.

Regarding question C.15, I think I have been a significant influence in the lives and careers of several lawyers, but it is hard to say whether they would call me an important mentor. I know I have been a role model to a number of female attorneys, because they have told me so. However, I did not reach the point at my law firm where I had the kind of long-term relationship with a younger lawyer that I would count as "mentoring." Here, my subordinate attorneys are on 2-year clerkships. Again, I have an influential role, but it isn't long enough to be a mentor relationship.

In more general terms, I write this as a very differently situated person from the one you surveyed 10 years ago. My life changed completely when I freed myself from the bonds of large-firm private practice and became a supervisor in the Office of Staff Attorneys for the [court name] Court of Appeals. That was five years ago. Not only is it a humane environment with reasonable expectations, but I am serving justice and the public good. The pro se appeals my office works on receive considerably more attention than they could if overburdened judges were forced to handle them without our assistance. Although I make far less than I would in the private sector, I am well compensated, so the sacrifice was not extreme! I left behind the posturing, backbiting, and hustling for business that inevitably accompanies big firm partnership. Make no mistake – I could do it, and did it well (I tried not to back bite). I walked away a successful partner with a bright career. And the number of partners senior to me who wistfully expressed their envy made me sure of my decision. The only unpleasant aspect dissolved last year as my boss up and quit and I was appointed in her place. I am outrageously happy and content in both my personal and professional lives. My sympathy to those who are still unhappily trapped.

Law school life is not something I would do today if I knew then what I know now. I experienced racial discrimination at the law school.

Clinics or other work experience should be part of 2nd and 3rd year course work and should be mandatory because law firms do not properly train young lawyers.

Also – people/communication skills should be made a part of law school curriculum – counseling and dealing with clients is so critical to any kind of success.

Also – flexibility & work/life issues for lawyers should be a part of curriculum and law schools should play a part in changing or helping to change law practice so it is more accommodating.

1. I wished law school classes would have been more discussion-oriented. I found the Socratic method alienating, nerve-racking and absurd. By far I learned more reasoning skills arguing about issues with my classmates into the late hours than I learned from our case books.

2. I have not yet contributed to the law school significantly because the school, its professors and administration made me feel as though I was unworthy of my place there. I did very well in terms of grades in law school and was popular among my classmates. But I found the institution to be intolerant and arrogant; I believe it treated the minority students in my class in a more insulting manner than private law firms do. If the purpose was to create a meritocracy, I believe it failed miserably. Dean Sandalow said it exactly right on our first day when he said, "Welcome to the aristocracy." He just left out the alienation, hypocrisy, racism, sexism that are an inherent part of the aristocracy, and, in my case, the Michigan Law School experience.

I'm pretty happy as in-house counsel. But don't make enough money to buy a house or put my kids through college, or retire – so I'll be going back to private practice. Ask me again in five years if it's worth it.