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HEADER: An Independent Spirit

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Law School Learning
Leaves Solos In Cold

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Recently, I met a young female lawyer at an awards dinner. She had been working for a large firm for the past seven years as a litigator. She was ready to start a family, but her employer was not amenable to her cutting back her hours. When I asked what she would do, her response amazed me. “I guess I will have to leave the profession,” she said.

My jaw dropped. Here was an intelligent, sophisticated, experienced litigator who had graduated at the top of her class from a reputed school and she assumed if she couldn’t work for someone she would have to sacrifice her \$90,000-plus educational investment in herself; lose her seven years of litigation experience, not to mention her self-esteem.

Starting her own practice on her own terms, orchestrating her own professional future was an alien concept. It should have been one of the many options outlined for her in law school. For law schools not to celebrate the financial and emotional independence a law degree provides; not to honor the 51 percent of all private attorneys who have struck out on their own, is diminishing to those who have and short-sighted.

If more than half of all lawyers in private practice are solos, why don’t law schools teach how to hang a shingle? If 72 percent of all lawyers in private practice are in firms of four people or fewer, why don’t law schools show how to run a business? When a candidate passes the Bar, the state says, “you are now qualified to practice law.” Then why do most grads feel as if they are barely qualified to take the bar exam, never mind creating a rich professional and personal future of their own design?

I teach a course at Quinnipiac University School of Law geared towards helping those with the ambition and drive to open their own law practices--a nuts and bolts course on exactly how to get started. And I do so for a personal reason. When I went to law school I knew being my own boss was my loftiest ambition. A J.D. was my ticket to personal and financial freedom. But I never understood how the school treated my ambition: when I voiced what I was going to do I was met with, well, incredulity.

Why? Most law schools have a different agenda. Their aim is to attract students with the lure of landing a job with a prestigious firm. It satisfies their much scrutinized placement requirements. Look at their marketing tools, glossy photos of a handful of students who have landed the coveted clerkship, or have become an associate with a mega firm. Soon-to-be lawyers are not encouraged to define what professional success means to them.

Career counselors will spend hours teaching law students how to conduct a proper job search, counseling on writing the perfect resume; prepping on successful interviewing

techniques; courting firms to visit the campus and look at their shining stars. Yet no time--never mind equal time--is given to discussing the risks and rewards of self-employment. This flies directly in the face of reality, since most graduates don't get these much lauded jobs. But more importantly, by designing their curriculum and counseling around the minority, they are denying the needs of the majority.

There are isolated courses on Law Office Management, or Accounting for Law Firms, or even clinics that give training on being a lawyer. The clinics, especially, are vital in that they provide actual "skills training." (Why, by the way, is "skills training" a dirty word in law schools?) But there remains an unspoken attitude, a non-recognition of those who want to venture forth on their own; a conspicuous absence of a truly proactive curriculum encouraging private enterprise.

Remember, there was once a lawyer named Day. There was a Berry and a Howard and a Wiggan and a Dana, who didn't buy into working for someone else, but believed their future lay within themselves. Armed with their law degrees and an overwhelming desire to be their own boss, they defined success on their terms and created their own legacy. Yet their heritage is no more impressive than the lawyer who has defined his success as a low-key one-person shop, catering to a small town population, who leaves his in-home office at 3 p.m. to cheer in the bleachers for his son's first homerun. Riches come in many forms.

The formula for success is a personal equation. A law degree offers professional and personal freedoms other degrees can't offer. Law schools should recognize and honor this and all those who have followed the road *most* traveled.