

Perfecting the A, B, C's of Successful Summer Clerking Plant Seeds for a Successful Legal Career

By: Cassandra Booker¹

The Louisiana State Bar Association hosted an informal networking reception for minority summer associates, law clerks, interns, and externs at the Louisiana Bar Center in New Orleans on May 26, 2010. Law students working in legal offices this summer were invited to network with attorneys and judges during this reception. 2009-10 LSBA President Kim M. Boyle (partner, Phelps Dunbar, LLP), as well as attorneys Allen C. Miller, Tiffany Delery Davis, Brandon E. Davis, Jaimmé A. Collins and Kelly McNeil Legier, gave the twenty one law student participants practical advice and information.

Topics of discussion included life skills, the keys to successful adaptability at firms of varying sizes, and tips on professional conduct. Ms. Boyle initiated the conversation amidst the eager, young law students with hopes that her words would increase their level of professionalism, work ethic, and determination in their pursuit of excellence in the field of law. Inclusive of this advice was the encouragement of all lawyers present to continue to attend networking functions, to join organizations, and to be socially friendly within these settings. Ms. Boyle advised that one never knows where or when a new opportunity may arise, so it is always important to extend one's self by lending information concerning one's interests, current places of employment, and hopes for the future in the legal field.

Ms. Boyle emphasized to students that a first impression is a lasting impression. In professional environments, one must mirror the occasion. It is unacceptable to show up to an event dressed inappropriately; attire should be conservative and not the main attraction of everyone's focus. However, she also reminded the attendees that the clothes don't make the man or the woman, but their intellect does; dressing nice is a valued characteristic, but it is also just "lagniappe."

Ms. Boyle stated that as an intern, extern, or summer associate, every chance to interact with supervisors and partners must be held in high regard. Even at office parties, supervisors are examining the behavior of their workers. She counseled that labels tend to last, and that students should know their limits and refrain from drunkenness at work-related functions. New Orleans bolsters a small, tightly connected legal community and word travels quickly. Inappropriate actions and behavior will follow a young attorney as they try to get hired for future positions, so everyone should always be mindful of conduct.

Allen C. Miller, a partner at Phelps Dunbar, LLP, expanded the dimension of this conversation to include the realm of social networking. He advised that in today's world, employers take advantage of technology; they consult Facebook and Twitter when trying to gage a view of any potential employees. Ms Boyle added that technological advancements should not consume the way in which one does business. For example, she revealed that sending emails to give thanks, instead of a formally written letter, is frowned upon by employers of older generations.

¹ Cassandra Booker, an LSBA summer intern, is a junior at Howard University in Washington D.C. She aspires to attend law school in the near future.

Tiffany Delery Davis, an associate with the New Orleans firm of Liskow & Lewis, informed the attendees that in order to learn the ins-and-outs of this profession, they should simply ask for help. She offered her assistance to the students and stated that the best way to learn is by “finding someone who’s already doing what you’re interested in doing or being.” With that point having been well taken by the group, Ms. Boyle added that mentors can be of a different race or gender than the mentee and still provide meaningful advice and guidance. Being mentored by a person of a background different from one’s own may be beneficial when considering the wealth of diversity in viewpoints and opinions that could be gained.

Responsibility was placed in the laps of the attendees as they were petitioned to reach back and help mentor young kids within their own communities. Promising the crowd that they were not busier than her, Ms. Boyle asked that the group mentor college, high school, junior high, and even elementary-aged students by showing them an example of what they too could be one day with the application of hard work and dedication.

Ms. Boyle quoted a frightening statistic that “upwards to eighty or ninety percent of law school graduates are not able to currently find jobs in the area of law.” This is mainly due to the fact that the nation’s economy is currently recovering from great turmoil. To ease that burdensome statistic, Mr. Miller and Jaimmé A. Collins, an associate with Adams & Reese, LLP, encouraged the students to work hard at their summer positions and to do more work than the others. Drawing from his personal experience, Mr. Miller attested that arriving to work early, working profusely while at work, and staying after hours allows clerks and interns to show their supervisors that they have what it takes to receive an offer to join the team.

Ms. Collins then remarked that the economy has put more of a “hustle” mentality into the attitudes of current summer associates because they are willing and hungry enough to prove themselves. Ms. Collins emphasized the value of demonstrating a good work ethic. Echoing Mr. Miller’s experience, she relayed how impressed she is with summer associates who arrive at work before her and are still working when she is leaving. Ms. Collins gives these clerks more projects because they are available to do the work. This is especially true when a summer associate has demonstrated the ability to do good work and complete it in a timely manner.

Attorneys Brandon E. Davis, an associate with Phelps Dunbar, LLP, and Kelly McNeil Legier, director of Member Outreach & Diversity for the LSBA, also reminded the students about the basics of professionalism. They include turning any and all work in on time, keeping one’s word, interacting politely with all associates (because they may be partner one day and decide to hire you or not), and honestly admitting if the work load is too heavy (for it is far better to communicate and lessen one’s load than to take on too much responsibility and not meet its requirements). Mr. Davis added the following advice, “First, strive for excellence in your work product, and if you don’t know what excellence is, ask Kim Boyle. Second, develop an insatiable desire for knowledge and become an expert in a particular area of practice.”

The wealth of information shared was on target with the paths now travelled by these summer associates, law clerks, interns, and externs. Continued hard work breeds impressive results, and with that knowledge in mind, the attendees left the State Bar Center with a renewed sense of their ability to succeed in the law field.