

Can You Run a Forklift?

By Edward J. Walters, Jr., 2025-26 LSBA President

So it's 1969. I just took my last final exam at LSU. I walk back to the Married Students Apartments and my wife, Norma, hands me this envelope, saying, "I didn't want to give you this while you were taking your last set of finals, but . . ."

It was my draft notice.

I thought my world just ended.

The Vietnam War was raging.

What do I do?

Choices were either "go to Canada," get drafted into the Army, or join the Air Force. I enlisted in the Air Force for four years.

I thought my world had just ended, but, instead, it was just about to start.

Why am I telling you this in my President's Page? Shouldn't I tell you something inspirational or beneficial to your practice?

Hold on.

It's coming.

Part 1

So I'm in the Air Force and my boss, Sergeant Asa P. Alexander, gave me the best advice I have ever received, and which I have used in my law practice to this day.

He said, "Walters, if someone comes up to you and says, 'Do you know how to run a forklift?' The only answer you should give them is YES. Obviously they need someone to run a forklift more than they need someone to do whatever the hell it is that you are doing right now. Then go figure out how to run a forklift before you show up."

Great career advice.

(He also said for me to do this: Grab a clipboard, scowl and walk fast wherever you go. People will think you are on an important mission and they will leave you alone. He was right. That might still work for you today.)

When I was in law school, my future employer, Charles "Chick" Moore was considering whether to hire me as a law clerk. After my interview, and when I was driving home, he called my house and asked my wife, Norma, "Can Ed type?"



Norma, of course, said YES. I got the job and the rest is history. (He didn't ask her how FAST I can type.)

I'm not suggesting that you lie about your credentials or take on legal matters you are not qualified to handle, but what I AM SUGGESTING is that you keep an open mind about your capabilities. You are a smart person. After all, you got INTO law school, you got OUT OF law school and you even passed the bar exam.

DUH!

Widen your net.

What is everyone talking about right now? AI. How will the use of Artificial Intelligence change our profession? You know it will.

I have practiced long enough to have seen many lawyers resist the use of computerized legal research, saying, "I enjoy researching in the stacks." How did that go?

I have seen many lawyers resist the use of email communications. How did that go?

I have seen many lawyers resist the use of electronic case filing. How did that go?

We are now in the AI world. If we resist it or decide that it is not something we want to get involved in, we are advocating "researching in the stacks."

Get with it.

It is the future of our profession. It will be great, if handled properly.

You cannot ignore it or walk away from it, no more than you were able to resist electronic filing.

It's 2025.

Get with it.

I tell my students at the LSU Law School that probably the most important person in the firm after 5:00 p. m. is the associate who knows how to electronically file pleadings in court.

Why?

The real experts (the staff) usually go home around 5:00 p.m. As you know, you may have until 11:59:59 to electronically file that pleading. If you are the person that can perform that task, your stock in the firm will rise, no matter the size of the firm or the type of practice. You will be the go-to person after 5:00 p.m.



A great many battles I have won are those that I have walked away from.

They have strengthened my character, helping me learn that, in life, it is not always necessary to prove you are right.

Know that there are people you can never please and questions you simply don't need to answer.



—Dodinsky, *In the Garden of Thoughts*

Part 2

When I was in the Air Force, aside from running a computer as big as your house (but which would now probably fit in your watch), I learned another one of my greatest lessons in life and I'm going to share it with you.

I grew up in New Orleans, went to all the right schools (don't ask those Jesuit grads), did well.

But now I am an ENLISTED man, not an officer. You see, I didn't complete the ROTC course at LSU because my eyesight was so bad I knew the military would not take me. Boy, was I wrong. It's 1969.

We all make big mistakes in our lives. This was a big one for me. Had I finished ROTC, I would have been able to go to Officer Training School and have a different life for my family.

Anyway, in this environment I am the lowest man on the totem pole. I was given the worst jobs and I was treated like a second-class citizen, and, in that environment, I was.

I learned what it is like to be a victim of discrimination. Something new for me. I was moved out of my nice air-conditioned office with my friends, to a hot warehouse because it didn't look good that I was an enlisted man "fraternizing" with the officers in the nice air-conditioned office where I was working. We were all about the same age and all had college degrees. Mine, of course, was better than theirs. Anyway . . .

Being discriminated against. Didn't care for it.

It gave me a new perspective on life.

I am not suggesting that the discrimination I experienced was anywhere near or even close to the discrimination many of our members, their clients and family have experienced.

I only put this here to say that even this sort of discrimination changes a person. I was moved from a nice, air-conditioned office working with my friends, to a hot warehouse moving giant truck tires from one truck to another, only because I was a second-class citizen.

I never experienced anything like this.

Didn't care for it.

It gave me a new perspective on life.

I only suggest that whether you are dealing with your staff, the courthouse staff, your clients, your associates, the people who clean your office, or whomever, you put yourself in their shoes for just a little while and think about how you are treating them. Ask them how they are doing. They have worth. Ask them about their family. Find out who they are. What is their passion? What are they really good at? What

do they do on weekends? Ask their opinion. You may be surprised at how they treat you when you do that. And you may treat yourself better, as well.

Aside from my wife, Norma, and my "third-son" Darrel Papillion, the MOST important person in my legal career was our secretary of over 25 YEARS, Denise Simon.

She had the ability to look at things from a different perspective, and the ability — with just a look, an askance look, of course — to tell me, WITH NO WORDS, "Ed, this not a good idea. Don't take this case" or "Ed, you're not really going to do this, are you?" I often disagreed with her. After all, I AM the LAWYER! I usually regretted that decision. I shoulda listened. My bad.

. . . but I always asked and I ALWAYS valued her opinion.

You DID get into law school, and you DID get out of law school, and you DID pass the bar exam, but you may not be the smartest person in the room. It may be Denise Simon . . . but she only makes you a better lawyer if you find that out.

End of sermon.

Picture of me and Denise and Darrel (now Judge Darrel):



Edward J. Walters, Jr., Darrel J. Papillion (now Hon. Darrel J. Papillion) and Denise Simon.