

To a Young Lawyer, On Becoming a Judge

by Hon. Nicole R. Laurin

Becoming a judge changes your life forever. People nervously address you as “judge” even during casual lunches. You are immediately treated as though you possess great wisdom which ironically went sadly unrecognized only a week before you took the bench. And every one of your relatives feels the need to share *even more* lawyer jokes with you at Christmas. Internally, becoming a judge challenges every bit of your patience, compassion, courage and creativity.

Great. So how do I get there from here, as a young lawyer?

Instead of preparing to get selected, prepare yourself to *be a good judge* when the time comes. Too many focus on the selection process, the political connections they can hobble together, or the number of bullets on their resumes, which is like trying to prepare for a marathon by filling out an application and buying nifty socks. There are professional and personal qualities that will not only make you a stronger judicial candidate, but will inherently make you a *better* judge. In the meantime, they may even make you a better lawyer—in any court. As a young lawyer, cultivate these qualities every single day, regardless of what type of law you practice. Without further small talk (see *infra*, “Efficiency”), here are a few of these qualities:

Respect

Aretha Franklin spelled it best. Or, in modern psychobabble, you only get the amount of respect you give. Although this point seems both preachy and obvious in print, it too often is ignored in practice. I am constantly dumbfounded at the lack of basic respect and dignity lawyers display in court—toward the court staff, opposing counsel, the public, and even toward the bench. The legal culture is becoming too tolerant of abuses. Respect for the court goes much further than simply standing when the judge enters. Personal attacks against opposing counsel, nastiness toward judicial assistants and court reporters and arguments that drone on long after the court’s ruling have become commonplace. In the courtroom, too many lawyers conduct disruptive conversations in the back of

the courtroom while court is in session, unabashedly judge-shop, and make repetitive, frivolous objections. This behavior doesn’t advance justice, and it doesn’t help clients.

Your ability to maintain (and display) patience, dignity, and courtesy under stress is being watched and noted every time you appear in any court and will probably affect your strength as a judicial candidate. It is surely no accident that most of the judges I know formerly practiced law in the very court they now oversee. Actively practice respect and professionalism toward everyone with whom you come into contact, and you will not only have more to offer as a judge, but, as an officer of the court, you will actually make the justice system work the way it was intended to work.

Efficiency

Judges, like lawyers, generally are asked to handle far more cases than they think they can handle. But unlike most lawyers, most judges get just as many new cases all over again the very next day. While it is heady and rewarding to take cases under advisement, do independent research, and write elegant opinions, there are simply not enough hours in the day to do this as often as most judges would like. Judges have to think—and speak—on their feet. Usually, they must speak *with fewer words* if they are ever to survive the morning docket.

As a lawyer, remember your audience. Judges—like most clients, jurors and other humans on the planet—do not want to read the same sentence three times just to locate the verbs. They want (and need) straight talk. They want arguments that hit them between the eyes. Think of what persuades you. Where would *you* like to see the point? Page 1? Or page 28 (footnote 7)? If you communicate efficiently, you’ll be a better lawyer and a happier judge.

People Skills

As a former psychology major and current victim of modern American pop culture, I hate the term “people skills,” but no other title quite covers this topic. The daily job of a judge is to listen to problems, emotions, demands, opinions. Then, after allowing everyone to have their say,

judges must find a reasonable, practical, legally appropriate, just, socially responsible resolution that changes lives for the better—all before the courthouse closes for the day. To do this well, a judge must understand people, or at least be able to ask the right questions on the spot. So, get out into the community and work with as many different kinds of people—people of different social strata, ages, cultures, careers—in any way your various skills allow. The variety of their problems and solutions, of their norms and expectations, of their skills and concerns, will challenge your mind far more than law school did, and reward you with an ability to make better decisions about those people's lives. And the lessons you'll learn about compassion, tolerance and patience won't hurt either.

Experience

The only real preparation for the bench is to be on it. Even the teenagers who preside over our local Teen Court will tell you that. Every court has a list of *pro tempore* judges, who continue to practice law, and who are called into court on an as-needed basis. If you are truly serious about being a judge someday, find out what it takes to get on one of these lists in the court of your choice and, whenever your schedule allows, take on a few cases. Over time, try to handle every type of proceeding that occurs in that court at least once—a jury trial will give you a very different judicial experience than an injunction hearing. Experience always counts, in any walk of life.

Remember, as you begin your legal career, that whether you walk into court as a lawyer or judge, you will always be preceded by your reputation for doing justice. Craft yours carefully. Good luck in whatever career path you choose to follow. Be just. 🏛️

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