

[ON THE LEVEL]

WHAT I DIDN'T KNOW IN 1985

Four Things Every Recent Female Law Grad Needs to Learn

by KATHLEEN J. WU

To the women of this year's law school graduating class, I say, congratulations! Hard work and perseverance have meant graduating during one of the worst economies in recent memory. Those who are really lucky hold offers from firms or legal departments with salaries that will enable repayment of law school debt. The merely fortunate received offers paying enough to make a dent in those student loans, although they will drive their old cars for the foreseeable future. Those for whom things have not gone as well — and they are far from alone — still are trying to find jobs.

Wherever recent law graduates are on the employment spectrum, they all have one thing in their favor: a law degree. No, it's not a really slimming pair of pants, but it's almost as good. It's the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval for smart people, and it's a testament to tenacity, intelligence and skills.

But enough about how great a law degree is. I'm here to share with the women of this year's graduating class what I wish I had known in 1985, when the George Washington University Law School sent me out into the world.

1. *Be grateful for bad luck.* New law grads won't appreciate this now, but graduating in a lousy economy — in



which grads will have to scrape and dig for every piece of work — is a gift. The creativity and resilience it fosters during those first few years of practice (fingers crossed) will pay dividends in professional development.

If grads can recognize that now, not only will it

improve their attitudes (“Boy, I hate doing bankruptcies, but I sure am learning my way around the courthouse!”), but they will be more likely to take advantage of the learning opportunities that come their way.

2. *Get real about balance.* Recent grads shouldn’t get their hearts set on “having it all.” The practice of law is demanding — exceedingly so. It is next to impossible to balance a full-time legal career with marriage, children and regular trips to the gym. It’s no coincidence that the two women most recently nominated to the U.S. Supreme Court — now-Justice Sonia Sotomayor and nominee/U.S. Solicitor General Elena Kagan — are unmarried and childless.

Is it possible to have a family and a legal career? Yes. Will there be sacrifices? Absolutely. Will they be worth it? That depends on who you ask and a multitude of circumstances too numerous to go into here.

I will, however, share one anecdote that fills me with hope: During a recent visit, a male doctor was chit-chatting with my son. I was with him, but my husband was not. “So, what does your father do?” the doctor asked. “He’s a lawyer,” my son replied, adding quickly, “and so’s my mom.” Afterward, my son was stunned that the doctor only asked about his father’s occupation. I was gratified at his surprise — and that he didn’t miss a beat before mentioning my profession.

Women think a lot about being great role models for our daughters, but it’s just as important to inspire our sons. The 16-year-old boys of today will be our daughters’ colleagues. If they are accustomed to seeing female co-workers as more than just mothers, our daughters should face less pushback than we did.

All that being said, it’s up to this generation of new lawyers (not me and the women who have already fought our own battles) to work to make the legal profession more amenable to lawyers with obligations outside the office. Yes, those of us who have spent several decades in the trenches will continue to push, but some of us had to sue just to get interviewed for a legal job. Many of us are ready to pass the torch.

3. *Own your future.* Understand that technical skills are just a portion of what new law grads must bring to the table. Developing business ultimately is the be-all and end-all of success in the firm world. Doing that requires the ability to inspire trust, which in turn demands exuding confidence. New grads — who, if they’re wise, should be aware of how limited their knowledge is — should never pass up a chance to learn something new, sit in on a hearing and get face time with a client.

4. *Advocate for yourself.* Finally, women entering the legal field should not sell themselves short. They should

speak up in meetings and find subtle ways to trumpet career successes. Women are notoriously bad about negotiating for money, and it’s one of the reasons we still make about 77 cents for every dollar a man makes. Yes, much of that difference is because many women tend to leave the work force during childbearing years, but that only accounts for part of the gap.

According to a May 14 piece in *The New York Times*, “A Toolkit for Women Seeking a Raise,” “Academic research on gender and negotiation suggests that part of the unexplained gap may be tied, at least in part, to the negotiating process itself. It may be that some women have lower pay expectations. Men, on the other hand, have been found to be more likely to negotiate higher starting salaries.”

Granted, most firms have stair-step compensation, but they also offer bonuses, which are based on subjective and objective data. That means responsible self-promotion can translate into dollars.

The *Times* piece, which should be required reading for all women in the workplace, notes that not only is negotiation more difficult for women, but supervisors measure women by a different yardstick than they do men. When females use the same tactics and strategies males do in negotiation, men and women perceive them negatively.

“[W]omen are more likely to be successful if they explain why their request is appropriate, but in terms that also communicate that they care about maintaining good relationships at work,” according to the *Times*.

These four tidbits barely scratch the surface of the things I wish I had known when I got out of law school; in fact, entire volumes could be filled with what I didn’t know in 1985. But I’ve spent the past 25 years filling those volumes, and I’ll fill many more over the next 25.

Now it’s your turn.



Kathleen J. Wu is a partner in Andrews Kurth in Dallas. Her practice areas include real estate, finance and business transactions. “On the Level” appears periodically in Texas Lawyer.