

LAW FIRM CLIQUES: HIGH SCHOOL WITH NICER CLOTHES

by KATHLEEN J. WU

As any mother or father of a tween or teenager knows, parents want more than anything to spare their children the horrors of adolescence: the insecurity, the bad skin, the raging hormones and, most of all, the social terrorism of high school cliques.

If only parents could put their kids into a deep sleep and whisk them magically through the years between 12 and 18 (give or take, depending on their precociousness or lack thereof), thereby sparing them from having to walk by the cool kids and feel self-conscious about their weight, sexuality or, worst of all, off-brand shoes.

But that's not possible, and cliques aren't just for those under 18. Lawyers can't avoid the fact that, even as adults in the rarified world of elite firms, the social stratification that provoked so much anxiety in high school is still very much a part of life. So lawyers who are moms don't just need to worry about their kids. It's often important for women to understand their current playground.

True, all lawyers have, by definition, graduated from law school, so it's a fairly self-selecting, homo-genous bunch. There aren't many stoners — unless you count Lunesta, Xanax and Ambien — and one would have a hard time finding any gang members. But jocks, cheerleaders, nerds, bullies and drama geeks — firms have them all. They just wear nicer clothes now.

To see them in their native habitat, let's take a campus tour at Bigshot & Snooty, the most selective fictional firm in the country. The tour guide is Newby Associate, a typical overachieving law school grad who's looking to fit in, stand out and generally excel at her first job in the real world.

But, before she gets too comfortable, she needs to



get the lay of the land. She doesn't want to buddy up with the lawyer everyone secretly hates or find herself allied with the firm bully, the partner who considers it his job to make every associate who works for him cry.

And, to be honest, she wants to find out who the popular kids are. Newby was a bit of a geek in high school. Now that she's matured a few years and has a better wardrobe, she figures she has a shot at being one of the cool kids. After all, aren't firms filled with brainiacs just like her?

Yes, more or less. But it turns out that brainiacs can be just as socially exclusive and cliquish as everyone else. To make matters worse for the socially insecure, some of those cute jocks and gorgeous blonde cheerleaders also had the brains and discipline to make it through college and law school and end up at Bigshot & Snooty. It turns out that being attractive and physically fit is a plus in employment matters.

The popular kids have a knack for finding each other. They're the ones who do Starbucks runs together, hang out after work and take cool group vacations. They somehow find the time to lunch together every day, regardless of how much work they have. Instead of lording over the school cafeteria, though, the popular kids at Bigshot & Snooty take over trendy restaurants.

Newby will find that former jocks and former cheerleaders still hold some sway at Bigshot & Snooty, but so does another group: the geeks who came into their own. They took the brains and discipline that got them great grades in high school, sifted out some of the social awkwardness that turned off the opposite sex, added a decent salary and a nice car and, *voilà*, instant confidence.

At Bigshot & Snooty, confidence plus competence equals clients. And, for lawyers, clients are the social capital that keeps on giving.

But there's a twist here at Bigshot & Snooty called The Business Cycle. In bull markets, the corporate lawyers tend to be the popular kids, and in bear markets, the bankruptcy lawyers get their turn. Litigators are a bit of a crapshoot, although the swagger that Bigshot & Snooty's best litigators display can serve them well in any market.

There also are the geeks (tax lawyers) who didn't come into their own but who have nevertheless made themselves indispensable to the firm's clientele and the teacher's pets (the associates who not only jump at the chance to work over the weekend but also make sure their colleagues hear all about it).

The drama kids are still around, and they get to indulge the theater bug at their local bar association's annual show and at Bigshot & Snooty's ill-advised karaoke night. But they also get plenty of opportunities during the workday. Every time they have too much work, have to come in over the weekend or are annoyed in any way, they let the drama flow.

Adult Homecoming

Newby may have thought she was past having to stress about finding a date to homecoming, but she forgot about Bigshot & Snooty's firm parties. These are typically high-dollar shindigs at a posh hotel or restaurant

in the right ZIP code, and her choice of date can earn her points or cause her to be written off as socially hopeless. The big difference between homecoming and Bigshot & Snooty's parties, of course, is that instead of smuggling booze into the party, the lawyers proudly hold their drink in one hand and their taxi vouchers in the other.

Not that Newby is allowed to get drunk. As a first-year associate, she needs to limit her alcohol consumption, lest she end up making out with a colleague (or colleagues) in the coat closet. Bigshot & Snooty's gossip mill is at least as vicious as the one at Newby's old high school, and she doesn't want to give it any additional fodder.

Here's the good news about Bigshot & Snooty (and the firm world in general): The parallels to high school only go so far. Yes, it can be catty, vicious and cliquy on occasion. But, for better or worse, the real world lasts longer than four years, so the humiliations of 2003 are long forgotten by 2010. Social capital is won and lost and won again, over and over. Redemption and second acts always are possible.

The beauty of being an adult is having the perspective to brush off social slights and learn that the quality of one's work — more than anything else — is the key to getting ahead. Nice clothes, being in the right clique and having the right date to the firm party don't add up to much if the work doesn't stand on its own.

So Newby can rest easy in the knowledge that her obsessive attention to detail and maniacal work ethic may not have won her many dates in high school, but they're a potent recipe for success at Bigshot & Snooty. **END**



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