



PREPARED FOR A CAREER IN THE LAW

I was told from a very early age that I should be a lawyer. Not by other lawyers, of course, and it was not an aspirational observation. I liked to be right, and I liked to let everybody else know when I thought they were wrong. I guess that was the opinion about lawyers held by those around me. I still like to be right, but, fortunately, I've learned that telling everyone else that they are wrong all the time is not the best way to go through life. There are infinite opinions about lawyers and what makes a good one, but enough people saw it in me at a young age. Of course, at the time, I told them they were wrong.

Certainly, there are plenty of people that led me to where I am now: the high school English teachers who wanted me to pay special attention to the ambiguities inherent in the English language, the college English professors who made sure I knew when and where to use all of my commas (fortunately, this column isn't an argument regarding the Oxford comma), and the attorneys I met after graduating from college who encouraged me to take the steps to go to law school.

I graduated from Rhodes College in 2008, and quickly learned that the combination of my failure to plan for post-graduate life, choice of degree, and lack of work experience weren't doing me any favors in the middle of a recession. I made a quick "transition," if that's the right word, from college graduate, to working the University of Tennessee's Department of Forestry, Wildlife and Fisheries, to unemployed, to working at Cornerstone of Recovery in Blount County in the span of about six months. I was neither prepared nor qualified to work with those seeking help for addiction: the disease had not had a major impact on my life or family, but I learned very quickly that addiction is a real, devastating disease that affects the addict and everyone around them.

I didn't know it, but that job was preparing me for a career in law. I had to learn how to listen to clients, to know when clients and others are not telling you the whole story, how to navigate the opaque nature of insurance, and, most importantly, how to give clients advice in a way they will be willing to listen to and accept. And believe me, sometimes the advice I gave in that context would not seem kind.

After gaining some invaluable experience in two different departments, I decided I wanted to seek a career where I could focus on writing. In perhaps one of the most cliched stories of all, at least for those of us who graduated from small liberal arts schools in the late 2000s, I decided to go back seek a graduate degree. The choice then became whether to pursue a Ph.D. or a law degree. Ultimately, at the encouragement of some of my co-workers, I pursued law.

Having made a choice in career, I had two goals: study abroad while in school and be employed by the time I passed the bar. I succeeded in the first goal easily and was helped along in the second goal. I enrolled in a study program in China for the first half of my first summer and planned to take the second half of the summer off, reasoning (correctly) that it would probably be my last true summer break. Despite my worst intentions, Professor Judy Cornett informed me that she wanted me to intern for the Tennessee Court of Appeals, and I realized the sensible thing to do would be to take the opportunity.

I spent the second half of that summer researching and drafting an appellate opinion, and I was hooked. Having finally found an employment goal to pursue, the process felt natural. I pursued classes I felt would bolster my abilities as a judicial clerk. I was able to get an internship with then-Judge Bivins on the Court of Criminal Appeals thanks to Penny White, and interned with the Criminal Court for Knox County my 3L year. Then I plain lucked out: just as I was graduating, several new judges were taking the bench on both the Tennessee Court of Appeals and Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals.

An application campaign followed that summer, and I ultimately had the good fortune to clerk in Memphis for Judge Kenny Armstrong on the Court of Appeals for two years. Judge Armstrong's insight into the litigation process was invaluable, and he allowed me to work on cases that touched on areas of the law I found interesting. Despite the excellent experience, I made the very difficult decision to leave Judge Armstrong's chambers after two years. I did not have a real desire to leave; rather, I decided that I had gone to school to practice law, and I didn't want ten years to go by without actually doing so.

Again, after the basic decision was made, timing and happenstance laid out the path: one of my co-clerks informed me that she knew of a Knoxville firm that was looking to hire a new associate. I submitted my resume immediately, returned home, and began working at Egerton, McAfee, Armistead & Davis as a litigation associate. I spent roughly a year and half primarily working on one copyright case in federal court. After that case concluded, Egerton McAfee has supported my branching out into all types of litigation.

I would not say that I have ever had the best plan to get from where I was to where I wanted to be. But I have learned that, sometimes, once you commit to a course of action, the work needed and doors to be opened will become clear. And I guess, just this once, I have to admit that everyone else was right, and I was wrong, because they did not predict the path, but they did predict the destination.

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