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Be true to your school: reflecting on the legal education experience

By James McManis

I was recently given the honor of delivering the commencement speech for UC Berkeley School of Law's L.L.M. program's graduating summer class. The task afforded me an opportunity that most busy trial lawyers rarely have, which is to reflect on the effect their law school experience had on them all those years ago, and how individual alumni, after years of pursuing their craft, may still "give back" to their alma mater.

In speaking to future members of the legal profession, I felt unqualified to impart important lessons in philosophy or comment on the state of society and the continuing challenge of solving social problems. As I faced the students, I also understood the economic crisis affecting law schools across the country. All I could offer was what I had learned from my life as a trial lawyer.

While reflecting on my career and considering the graduates whom I was to address, I realized that everything I accomplished in my professional career could be traced directly to my law school days.

Since graduating from what was formerly UC Berkeley's Boalt Hall School of Law more than 40 years ago, I have tried hundreds of jury trials and numerous bench trials, attended countless hearings and argued many cases. I have worked hard and I have taken to heart my duty of zealous representation of my clients. I am proud of my work. While reflecting on my career and considering the graduates whom I was to address, I realized that everything I accomplished in my professional career could be traced directly to my law school days.

What was Boalt like when I gradu-

ated in 1967? I arrived in the fall of 1964, following what was commonly known as Freedom Summer, a campaign to register African American voters in Mississippi, a state that had historically excluded most blacks from voting. Many Berkeley students had participated in that campaign and were disturbed to find upon their return to campus that the administration had a very narrow view of students' right to speak out and of their greater role in the college community.

Thus was born the Free Speech Movement and the radical student politics of the 1960s. It was a time of turmoil, but also one of possibilities. My classmates were predominantly white and male, with women accounting for less than 5 percent of the class. There were almost no minority students. A year's tuition cost only \$256.

And yet, despite the obvious differences, much was the same. Berkeley was Berkeley: exciting, diverse and unique. Down Bancroft Way, the City by the Bay (or Baghdad by the Bay, as Herb Caen called it), San Francisco glistened in the sun. The Golden Gate Bridge on the horizon somehow seemed both far away and within reach at the same time. The summers were cool and wonderful. Those memories stay with you forever. They have for me.

The Beach Boys wrote a song in 1963 called "*Be True to Your School*." The vocalist sings of his "letterman's sweater" for "football and track"; that when he cruises "around the other parts of town," he has a "decal in back." He sings that on Friday, he and his friends will be "jacked up on the football game...and ready to fight"; that his "girl" will be working on her pom-poms, and will "be yelling tonight."

The song concludes: So be true to your school now / Just like you would to your girl or guy / Be true to your school now / and let your colors fly / be true to your school.

In delivering my speech, I implored the graduates to preserve, protect and increase the value of the institution that has shaped them into the lawyers they are today. In other words, I told them to be true to their school.

To accomplish this, you must first stay involved. An alma mater is a



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Sproul Plaza on the University of California, Berkeley campus.

homestead. Wherever those exhilarating, challenging and invaluable three years were spent, one will always remain part of the law school community. It must be kept that way by staying in touch with classmates, faculty and all the others you met during those formative years. This may be accomplished through involvement in the school's alumni association. I have had the privilege and honor of serving on the Boalt Hall Alumni Association Board and as president. It has been a rewarding and deeply fulfilling post, and is one of the duties I take most seriously. I urge everyone to continue their law school experience by attending alumni events, subscribing to alumni magazines and maintaining active roles in alumni networks.

Second, I encourage all to become donors. There are many ways to stay connected to the school. If you are unable to visit campus or attend alumni events, make an impact through financial contributions. Attorneys have been blessed with an extraordinary launching pad, a platform upon which they have been perfectly positioned to achieve their

dreams and aspirations. They have received the gift of education. And in return, they should give back and give generously.

Finally, spread the word. If graduates have enjoyed their law school experience, they should tell others. Alumni have the power to help their institution grow and flourish. Attorneys should envision what they would like to see as the next generation's legal landscape and help their school recruit the fine lawyers who will make that ideal come to fruition. Several years ago, a candidate for district attorney in Santa Clara County campaigned on the slogan, "Honor the Office." Everyone

should do the same for their alma mater. "Honor the School." Graduates are its best ambassadors.

In closing, there is nothing more suitable than the words of Justice Benjamin N. Cardozo, inscribed on the west wall of Boalt Hall, words intended to welcome new law students, but words that are equally fitting for recent graduates, fledgling associates, veteran attorneys, revered members of the court and everyone in between who has been handed the gift of a legal education: "Here is the high emprise, the fine endeavor, the splendid possibility of achievement, to which I summon and bid you welcome."



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