

# Strolling memory lane

By Ari Kaplan SPECIAL TO THE NATIONAL LAW JOURNAL

**A** PROSPECTIVE LAW student recently asked me for advice about law school. Speechless, I just laughed and told her to read Alex Wellen's new book, a funny memoir of a young lawyer's struggle to graduate from law school, get a job and pass the bar. *Barrman: Ping-Pong, Pathos, and Passing the Bar*, (Harmony Books, New York 2003) tracks the gestation of a lawyer, broken down into: foreplay, conception, first trimester, second trimester, third trimester, birth and afterbirth. It opens with Wellen in his second year at Temple University James E. Beasley School of Law, panicked about finding a job, and ends with Wellen's leaving the practice of law after two years to become a television producer.

From the first line, Wellen sets his book apart from other classic, and all too serious, books about law school and the life of a lawyer. Take his sole reason for going to law school: to patent a glove-like double-sided ping-pong paddle. He highlights the frenetic pace of a legal education, the comical side of the bar exam and the neurotic aspects of legal practice; it's a bit like traipsing through law school with Jerry Seinfeld.

Leaving the law gave Wellen the opportunity to celebrate it. While a law degree used to be viewed as the key to a respected, lifelong vocation, it is now often a means of securing an array of employment opportunities. Wellen, for example, spent less time practicing law than he did training for it. This trend certainly diminishes the importance of the outdated, hierarchical system on which much of the profession is based.

At the outset, Wellen pokes fun at the law school pecking order and designates every school mentioned in the book by the tier it occupies in the *U.S. News & World Report's* annual graduate-school rankings. His school, Temple, is tier two.

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One of his girlfriends (Wellen did pretty well in finding—if not keeping—law school girlfriends) attended Columbia University Law School, tier one.

Wellen admits his personal quirks, such as his problem with mixed metaphors. When breaking up with the girlfriend from Columbia, he comments that he was breaking up with her “with a heavy hand.” She replies, “it’s heart. Heavy heart.” He plants seeds like that throughout the book and connects them with hysterical chains of events that prompt the reader to laugh and exclaim, “you cannot make this stuff up.”

Perhaps it is that trait, the ability to laugh at oneself, that distinguishes the legal profession of today from that of generations past when the law unquestionably was an elite institution. It may also be this characteristic that prompts young lawyers to pursue more exciting opportunities, such as the mass exodus we saw during the dot-com boom. Money is always an issue, but today’s lawyers are interested in having some fun, too.

*Barrman's* main focus is on Wellen's experience with the New York state bar exam. He recounts the drama of taking the bar review course and following its rigid study schedules. He takes you with him into the exam by providing the actual questions he had to answer and his angst in answering them. At one point during the test, Wellen heard imaginary voices coming from the person sitting next to him.

Then there is that dentist in Tuscani and the Japanese guy towel-flossing on his post-bar exam backpacking trip to Europe, and did I mention the women. (oh, the women!) he dated? Back home, Wellen even details the answering-machine messages he received once he learned that he passed.

When he finally passes the bar, Wellen does many of the things that lawyers laugh about. With one of his first paychecks, he spent \$3,000 on that Sharper Image massage chair that most mere mortals sit in, but never buy, at the mall. He also completely screws up his billing during his first month at work and receives an irate, but classic, call filled with expletives from a senior partner.

The lavish purchase and the tongue-lashing detail the great dichotomy in the life of a young lawyer. While a six-figure starting salary certainly has its advantages, its cost can occasionally be too high. And it is the profession that pays the price when talented young people leave.

I often describe my life as perfectly imperfect because I believe it is the imperfections that make us who we are and, of course, make us laugh. Wellen's story is the essence of perfect imperfection because ultimately, on a road laced with slapstick reality, he gets a great job and passes the bar, but leaves the practice after only two years. I guess the problem with graduating from law school, passing the bar and getting a job is the reality that never leaves—like Seinfeld's annoying and ever-present neighbor Newman: After you graduate, you actually have to practice. **NDJ**



SCHULZ

...e you can make me feel more guilty!