LAW SCHOOL MEMOIR

Strolling memory lane

By Ari Kaplan

Prospective law student recently asked me for advice about law school. Speechless, I just laughed and told her to read Alex Wellsen's new book, a funny memoir of a young lawyer's struggle to graduate from law school, get a job and pass the bar. Borman: 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 Wellsen in his second year at Temple University James E. Beasley School of Law, panicked about finding a job, and ends with Wellsen's leaving the practice of law after two years to become a television producer.

From the first line, Wellsen sets his book apart from other classes, 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 glovellite double-sided ping-pong paddle. He highlights the systemic nature of a legal education, the comical side of the bar exam and the neurotic aspects of legal practice. It's a bit like trapezing through law school with Jerry Seinfeld.

Leaving the law gave Wellsen 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. Wellsen, 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 This trend certainly diminishes the importance of the outdated, hierarchical system on which much of the profession is based.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, Wellsen pokes fun at the law school pecking order and designates every school as a member of a tier they occupy in the U.S. News & World Report's annual graduate-school rankings. His school, Temple, is tier two.

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Today's lawyers want to have fun.

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

Wellsen admits his personal quirks, such as his problem with mixed metaphors. When breaking up with the girlfriend from this tier, he was so preoccupied 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 the metaphor of every law school 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 great dichotomy 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.

Borman's main focus is on Wellsen'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 test, digesting the actual questions he had to answer and his angst in answering them. At one point during the test, Wellsen interprets the questions coming from the person sitting next to him.

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

When he finally passes the bar, Wellsen does many of the things that lawyers laugh about: buying a new BMW, buying the first car, buying a new TV. 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. I love the imperfections that make us who we are, and, of course, make us laugh. Wellsen'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.

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"Yes, I know I was guilty. But I'm sure you can make me feel more guilty!"