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**Truth or Consequences**



## Sidebar

# To Graduates, Including My Daughter

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I never wanted to pick up fetid garbage in the sweltering sun. Or tiptoe on iron 40 stories in the air. Or get the finger after I ticketed some yoyo doing 80 on the BQE. I taught high school English to tough, listless teens and then attended law school at night because I needed credits above my bachelor's degree to maintain my teaching license. Of course, it wasn't until I finished my first semester that I learned that the Board of Ed wouldn't accept law credits for licensing purposes. Had I checked, I would never have entered law school, been a lawyer, or been called the F word by a federal judge.

After screaming at bored bureaucrats about the catastrophe and unfairness, I almost quit law school but was convinced to continue by Arthur Soman and other veterans at John Jay High School whose insight into literature and life was unique. This experience taught me the magic formula for a successful career—check the facts and be nice to clerks.

My son became a lawyer because his roommate's dad, Robert Creedon, told him: "I don't care if you sell pencils on the corner, Kenny, go to law school. It's a great education." And it is. Expensive, too. Well, not when I attended. Luckily. Now my daughter will graduate in May, and unlike my son and me, she always wanted to be a lawyer. I think. As a member of the mock trial team in high school, she crossed witnesses in the courtrooms of the Southern District of New York.

She and her classmates were poised, intelligent, and clear. In high school, I could barely complete a sentence. Especially in front of a girl.

Now she and her classmates are graduating, taking the bar, entering the big, bad world of law where even the Supreme Court gets dissed by the president. So I figure this is when I can bestow the wisdom of my many years, the knowledge and guidance I never had except from those weary high school teachers. With a thunderbolt and a baritone, I can supply a road map to a thriving, rewarding, happy career. It exists, doesn't it?

**Get a job.** Not easy today. Especially with constant layoffs and jobs as scarce as an adjournment in the rocket docket. As friends remind me, it was never easy for us either. Having our kids struggle and work like pack mules is good for them, my Brooklyn buddies growl. Builds character. "You want sympathy," my mother would snap if one of us didn't make the team, was wronged, "don't look to me; you can find it in the dictionary."

And now that white-shoe firm you dreamt of since you were six is not hiring. In-house jobs have evaporated faster

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than the value of my 401(k). Your life, so carefully planned, is a mess. OMG. Well, swallow your pride and take what you can get. Times will improve.

If you're shut out of the legal biz, use your talents elsewhere. Easy to say after practicing for decades. Painful, especially if you yearn to try cases, do deals, argue appeals. "Adversity is only an opportunity to grow," Jim Baron, basketball coach at Rhode Island, teaches. Don't sit around praying for the perfect position. Do something, anything. It won't kill you. You may stumble into a career that will make you content, even happy.

**Don't regret law school.** I know, I know. Most graduates are in hock to their eyebrows. Why law school tuition is so outrageous is for another day. If I was in my mid-20s with a mountain of debt and few job prospects, I would be cursing my delusional decision of law school. But 30 years from now, you'll be glad you attended.

Remember the counsel of Senator Creedon—rarely mentioned in this era where the sole motivation is the almighty buck—it's a great education. You learned to read and think and speak, and, if you're really lucky, to write. Sure, you had to survive first-semester boot camp and ivory tower professors whose only contact with the real world is their daily commute. But except for that dopey bar exam, it's in the past. And you're better for it. Well, mostly.

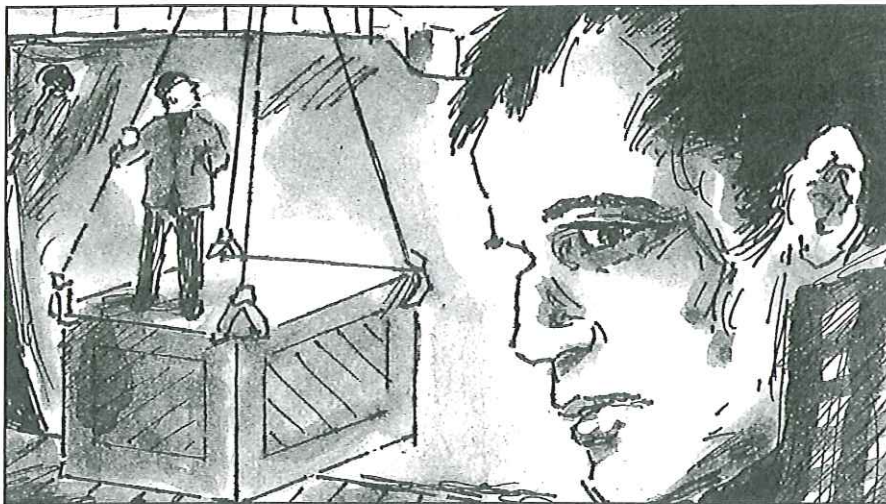
You don't have to practice. Knowledge of the law and the legal system gives an advantage others lack. Many CEOs are admitted, as are stay-at-home moms, chefs, artists, and firefighters. Recently, a good friend's dad passed away, a longshoreman on the Brooklyn docks. You want to know what it was like, he told his grandchildren; watch *On the Waterfront*. He made sure his kids studied and learned so they wouldn't have to break their backs to buy bread. Law provides alternatives. You can use muscles, mind, or both.

**You don't know it all.** Most difficult for a baby lawyer is to recognize limitations. Sure, strive to learn different areas, but you can't master everything. I recently received a phone call from an experienced attorney who was representing a French domiciliary who was injured on an international flight. He tried to settle it, couldn't, and then started the action in the local federal court. Only one problem. Pursuant to treaty, jurisdiction is not in the United States, but abroad. Defendant's motion to dismiss was made after the statute had run. Moral: Ask for help, early and often.

Seek the knowledge of white-haired fogies. Sure, she might give the "what are you, an idiot?" look. So what? You'd rather screw up? Whether in a gastropub or the office, don't advise unless you're absolutely sure. "You probably have a case, but consult someone who does this stuff everyday. I'll e-mail you some names. Call them." Don't be a hero. Even today, my first question is always: When did this happen? Don't want to blow a statute of limitations. Or miss a written notice requirement.

**Be honest.** It's sometimes difficult. Easy to tell a client, your partners how you're going to win, kick some plaintiff butt. Difficult to announce: The case is problematic, flawed; we might get hit big time. That's your job—to analyze, provide guidance. Don't sugarcoat. Tell the truth, both good and bad. In your papers, too. So many lawyers ignore harmful precedent, distort facts, or exaggerate the impact of a favorable decision. A savvy judge will spot the charade and never believe a word again. Admit weakness, then distinguish.

And stop pretending you're Superwoman. Learn to say no. "I don't have time to take on this assignment and complete it this evening. Two other projects will keep me here till daybreak. . . . No, I really don't understand what you want;



can you go over it again?" Yeah, I'm not easy to talk to either. But we old guys are always grouchy. We can't help it.

I belong to a neighborhood bar association that does good work—monthly CLEs, toy collections at Christmas for the soldiers at Fort Hamilton, occasional cocktails where young lawyers mingle with judges. Yet, every few years another member is indicted, usually for stealing from escrow or other sacrosanct account. All good people—people I know and trust—never in a million years would believe it. The story is the same: Others have the four-bedroom home, three cars. I deserve it.

It can happen to you. Just read the blogs: insider trading, looting an estate, bribing ambulance personnel or a judge. All to live a bogus lifestyle. I grew up in a very strange world. If you couldn't afford a baseball mitt, a car, a house—guess what—you didn't buy it. Who doesn't want to be one of those hedge fund guys with the private jet, Monets in the living room, mansion on the lake in Eagle River. But all these fools are caught and disgraced. If you want to gaze at water lilies, move to the sticks.

**Be yourself.** You're smart, beautiful, talented. Impressive with enviable qualities, both academically and socially. You even sound like Sinatra, but only to those who have had three or more shots. Don't try to be someone else. If you're slow and methodical, fine. It's OK that you're not as eloquent as Barack. Heck, even he used a teleprompter in an elementary school. Determine what's effective—for you. You have distinctive and valuable strengths. Use them.

Initially, you will believe everyone is so knowledgeable, so accomplished. After 30 years, even I know a little law.

With a dose of experience, you will realize that you're just as bright, capable. Preparation, attention to detail breed success. And if someone mocks you for being deliberate, for fumbling around, take a mint out of your purse and pass it across the table. That'll shut him up.

Don't be a phony. John Edwards, successful trial lawyer, wanted to be president. Except he didn't like people. "I know I'm the people's senator, but do I have to hang out with them?" he was quoted as saying. Sure, you can fool some, but eventually they'll whisper, "See that guy. He's an SOB. Don't believe a word he says."

**It's a wonderful life.** It is. The blogs are littered with complaints: tedious research, long hours, layoffs. Stop whining. Nothing's perfect. Not even my golf game. I've enjoyed my career—frustrating at times, but intellectually stimulating. Every now and then, I've helped some person or family when they're desperate. Law has taken me to the Red Hook projects and the Champs Elysées. I've handled cases before mostly fair, considerate, pleasant judges. I've litigated against clever, yet principled adversaries, whose word is gold. I've met amazing people, now friends, from Buffalo, Los Angeles, Chicago, Tampa, Lexington, Honduras, Scotland, Italy.

Yes, you'll wake in the silence staring at the ceiling as your mind races. You'll smart from the occasional elbow to your kisser. You'll lose. Everyone does. But you're a better person having survived law school. You're joining a valued and essential profession. With a touch of hard work, you'll support yourself, a family. You will laugh and occasionally weep. But you'll have fun. A lot. □