

# orientation remarks by michelle behnke and paul connell

*On August 19 and 20, 2004, Marquette Law School held its orientation for new law students. The two days are a mix of the practical and the high-minded. Students have a chance to meet some new classmates and faculty even before the first law class and to accomplish such tasks as getting a student ID card. There is also an opportunity to meet some lawyers and to be welcomed into the legal profession.*

*The following are the remarks that two lawyers shared with the new students, one at the beginning of orientation and the other at the end. Following the Marquette Law School tradition that he revived last year (as recounted in these pages), Dean Joseph D. Kearney invited the President of the State Bar of Wisconsin, Michelle A. Behnke, to share some of the time reserved for the “Dean’s Welcome and Address” the first morning of orientation. Ms. Behnke’s speech is reprinted here.*

*Dean Kearney and Professor Daniel D. Blinka also wanted to provide the new law students with an example of a fairly recent Marquette Law School graduate to whom the new students might listen with advantage. Accordingly, they asked Paul W. Connell, L’98, to give the concluding remarks at orientation—the closing argument, as it were—the following evening, before the Dean’s Reception at the Milwaukee Public Museum. Mr. Connell’s remarks follow Ms. Behnke’s.*

**Remarks of Michelle A. Behnke  
Marquette University, Johnston Hall  
August 19, 2004**

It is my pleasure, as the President of the State Bar of Wisconsin, to welcome you to the legal profession. You may not think of yourself as part of the legal profession just yet, but you are. Your legal career does not begin when you become an associate with a firm or when you open your own law office or when you join the DA’s office. It begins here and now as a law student.

I thought I might share a few thoughts about how to have a successful law school experience. I was going to use the David Letterman “Top 10” format, but my friend Dean Kearney is ruthless about time limits! So you’ll get the top 5 things I think you need to do to have a successful law school career.

**No. 5—Maintain ties with family and friends.** This seems simple and obvious. But when assignments start rolling in, it is easy to forget an important date or to call to check in. Family and friends are a large part of what got you here today, and you need to maintain those ties. These are the people on whom you can depend when things get tough (and they will). These are the people on whom you can depend to keep you focused on your goals. These are the people on whom you can depend to lift you up and celebrate your victories.

**No. 4—Respect the diversity that each of you brings.** Naturally, when I say the word diversity, people automatically think about race. While the racial differences are certainly part of what I mean, I think of *diversity* as broader than that. Each of you already has had many different life experiences. None of those experiences is right or wrong or more perfect than someone else’s for the legal career on which you are embarking. This variety of experiences and backgrounds simply gives each of you a different perspective. It also gives you the chance to share those experiences and perspectives with others. Looking at things from several perspectives will make you a better lawyer.

**No. 3—Be flexible.** One of my favorite poets and authors is Maya Angelou. She once said: “Each of us has the right and the responsibility to assess the roads which lie ahead, and those over which we have traveled, and if the future road looms ominous or unpromising and the road back uninviting, then we need to gather our resolve and carrying only the necessary baggage, step off that road into another direction. If the new choice is also unpalatable, without embarrassment, we must be ready to change that one as well.”

You may have ideas of what law school and the practice of law will be like. Keep an open mind and be flexible. The road that you think that you will take may not in fact be the road that you travel. Be open to the possibilities around you. Be aware that



**Remarks of Paul W. Connell, L'98**

**August 20, 2004**

**Milwaukee Public Museum**

there is no one perfect way to make it through law school or to practice law. Don't be afraid to revise the plan.

**No. 2—If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well.**

Sometimes I find our society more concerned with the "quick fix," the easy solution. Look at the ads for cough medicine and headache remedies. If fast is good, faster is better. Throughout law school and your legal career you must remember that if it is worth doing, if it is worth your time, it is worth doing well.

**No. 1—Remember who you are.** You will be changed by this experience, but remember who you are and why you came here. Try to keep your perspective, but be open to other perspectives. Keep a sense of humor. If you can find humor in something, you can survive it. Law school is hard and it takes a great deal of time. If you don't keep a sense of humor and maintain some of your normal routines, you won't "survive" this experience. The things that you usually do—work out, talk to friends, read for recreation—are part of the things that made you who you are and the success that you are today. Don't give that all up today as you begin law school.

My top five suggestions for having a successful law school experience and legal career are my suggestions. I arrived at them in a very unscientific manner, but nineteen years ago, when I was sitting in a similar place, my father shared some of these tips with me. They are the tips that I rely on even today.

You will be changed by your law school experience. Try to enjoy it.

Good evening. Thank you, Professor Blinka and Dean Kearney, for the invitation to speak tonight. As you all know from Dean Kearney's address yesterday morning, Marquette University Law School has been around for many years, and there are hundreds of graduates who could be here speaking tonight, so I'm both honored and humbled to have this opportunity.

Before I begin my remarks let me say a few words about myself. Although I am not a big fan of talking about myself, I am told that one of the reasons I was asked to speak tonight was that my career path, even six years into it, has been somewhat varied.

I came to Marquette in 1995 with big dreams and with a plan. I knew that after graduation I wanted to clerk for a federal judge or at the Wisconsin Supreme Court, that I wanted to experience life at a large law firm, and that I always wanted the option of being a state or federal prosecutor at some point in my career.

Based on how my career has turned out so far, I guess you could say I've accomplished those goals. As I was preparing my remarks, I was discussing my speech with my wife (a Marquette Law School alum herself) and she said that, at least to her, even more interesting than the jobs I've had were all of the things that I did to get them. But more on that later.

Let me talk briefly about some of the jobs I've had since graduation in 1998. First, I had the privilege of clerking for a United States District Judge, J.P. Stadtmueller, here in Milwaukee. As almost anyone who has clerked for a judge will tell you, there really is no better job in the legal profession (except, perhaps, being a tenured law professor). Being a law clerk was everything I thought it would be, and in large part that was due to the fact that I got to work alongside a terrific judge. The clerkship was also useful because it allowed me to observe and review the work of the law firms that I always figured I would practice with, and it therefore helped me figure out where I thought I should seek a job as an associate at the end of my clerkship. ▶



After spending two great years clerking, I actually decided to accept a job not in Milwaukee, but in Washington, D.C., with a large international law firm called Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering. At Wilmer, I defended corporate clients such as Enron, Worldcom, and Citigroup, and practiced in three areas of the firm: securities enforcement, general litigation, and a specialized area doing internal corporate investigations.

Being an associate at a large law firm is in many ways a great experience, but it is also very demanding on your time and personal life. So after spending two and a half years at the law firm and having lived through 9-11 and the D.C.-area sniper shootings, my wife and I decided to return to Wisconsin. I was fortunate enough to find a job as a federal prosecutor in Madison, where I handle a variety of cases ranging from drugs to fraud to computer crime.

In this present job I am not only lucky to have the greatest client in the world—the United States of America—but also lucky because my job is to seek one thing and one thing only: justice.

That is enough about me. Tonight should really be all

about you. And so I felt it would be most appropriate to focus my comments on the things that will impact you in the short run: first, what the first year of law school will be like; second, why Marquette was a great choice for law school; third, a few thoughts on building a career while you are still a student. All of these topics are certainly related in many respects, but hopefully I'll succeed in not intermingling them too much.

It was just nine years ago that I was sitting in your position, ready to start law school, wondering if I'd made the right decision, wondering how I would stack up against my classmates, and wondering if it was true that at least some of us would flunk out. As I stand here before you this evening, I can assure you that, as to that last question, none of us flunked out, although the number of hours spent at Hegarty's Pub on Wells Street and on Water Street on the weekends suggests that some may have tried.

Let me turn then to this first topic: what the first year of law school is like.

The first year of law school can be a daunting and ominous experience. There will certainly be days when you will not really understand exactly what is going on, and then just when it seems to make sense, it begins to puzzle you again.

There will be days when someone will answer a question and you'll think to yourself, "I never would have thought of that. What am I doing here?"

Or, even worse, a time when the professor asks a question and you have no idea what any answer is, much less the correct one.

I am here to tell you tonight, that in my experience, these occasions are normal, and while I hope they never happen to you, it should not be a surprise if they do.

Another difficult part of the first year is getting over the angst that your entire grade will be determined by one exam at the end of the semester. Generally speaking, it is this matter that I have found causes law students the most stress. To be sure, it is a grind to be responsible for read-

ing and understanding four cases for Prof. Kircher's torts class, five cases for Prof. Edwards's Contracts class, and five cases for Prof. Grenig's Civil Procedure class, and for completing a legal writing memorandum, all for the same day of class. But the more daunting fact is that there is no way of knowing how you are doing in your substantive classes until you sit down to take an exam in early December.

**W**hich leads to my first big point tonight. All of you are here because you are smart and high-achieving college graduates. Generally speaking, all of you enjoyed substantial academic success as an undergraduate or presently enjoy success in your current occupation and are interested in furthering your education.

I'm certain that many of you had semesters in college where you got perfect grades. Yet one of the first things I would encourage you to accept is that many of you will simply not enjoy that same level of academic success that you had as undergraduates. And by that I don't mean that you will not get a great education here at Marquette, but the cold reality is that 90 percent of you are going to finish outside the top 10 percent of the class.

For some of you, this will prove very upsetting. But I found that my law school experience here was most satisfying after I accepted the fact that there is a substantial amount of subjectivity in grading (and there was nothing I could do about it), and when I figured out that grades have little bearing on how good of a lawyer I could become.

Ultimately, whether your report card shows an A or a B in any class will not matter to a judge and will be of little consequence the first time you step into court or try to

counsel a corporate client into not suing. What will matter is how much you really learned about the law when you were here, the principles of law that you take away from each reading assignment, and the other practical experiences you take advantage of as a law student.

And this is why, for at least some students, it is necessary to provide them models of the professional behavior of a lawyer that are rather more direct than a professor standing before a classroom.

**L**et me skip to my third point, and save my comments about Marquette for last.

I thought it would be appropriate for me to at least touch on the topic of career development and the opportunities available to

you to develop your skills as a lawyer while you are enrolled as a law student. I believe this topic is particularly important because, after all, each of you has chosen to dedicate the next few years and a substantial amount of money in this endeavor.

Your education here is obviously the first component to building your career. But the education inside of Sensenbrenner Hall is only part of it. One of the best parts of a Marquette education includes all of the opportunities such as internships and clinics in that place known as the real world. What I mean by that is that as second- and third-year law students at Marquette, by virtue of the fact that the law school is located in the largest metropolitan area in the State, you will have countless opportunities to develop very real skills as a lawyer while enrolled here.

Let me give you just two examples from my time as a student here. When I was a second-year law student, I had the privilege to intern at the Wisconsin Supreme Court for one of the finest Justices ever to serve on the Court. I'm not sure if she is here tonight, but it was my great honor to intern for Justice Janine Geske, who has since rejoined the Marquette faculty as a Distinguished Professor of Law. In the spring of my second year, I interned with the United



States Attorney's Office here in Milwaukee. And as a third-year law student, I took advantage of other opportunities such as interning for the federal judge for whom I would later clerk after law school, and serving on the editorial board of the Law Review, and so on.

I have found that all of these opportunities served me in my career in numerous ways. Though my studies and these outside opportunities kept me busy, I know I'm a better lawyer now, and I was more prepared for some of the challenges in the legal profession, than I would have been otherwise. Not only did these outside-the-classroom experiences introduce me to people whom I otherwise would not have had the chance to meet, but they were an integral part of helping launch my career in the direction that I wanted. As I look back now, I see that had I not interned with the U.S. Attorney's Office, I would not have been in a strong position to seek a judicial clerkship. And I know that had I not clerked for Judge Stadtmueller, I would not have been in a position to seek employment with my former law firm in Washington, D.C. And so on.

So my point is this: your legal education in the classroom is vital. But learning to put those legal principles into use while you are still a student is important as well. Therefore, I would strongly encourage you to seek out the opportunities that interest you while you are a student, for not only do they enhance your resume, you actually get to see the law in action, and this will serve you well throughout your career.

Let me turn to my final and most important point tonight: why Marquette is a great law school. As a trial lawyer, I would like to believe that it is rare that words fail me. But when I think about all that I owe to this wonderful institution, I really do find it hard to put my feelings into words. Nevertheless, I will do my best.

So what is it that makes this a great law school? I believe it to be a combination of two things.

First, Marquette is blessed with a great faculty—from a Dean who clerked at the United States Supreme Court, to a

nationally recognized expert in punitive damages, to professors who are widely published in the areas of negotiation, Indian law, and civil procedure, to name just a few. This place truly has some remarkable lawyers, who have so much to offer you.

However, I believe this faculty is unusual not only in its substantive knowledge and teaching abilities, but also in its accessibility to you, the student body. And it is on this latter point I'd like to focus for a moment.

There will be times in your career as a law student that the material just flat out won't make sense. It is at those times that you will be glad you are at a law school where the faculty not only cares enough to make itself available to the students, but also is willing to take the time to help clear up the material that you have found so confusing. There also will be times when you will need advice on something not directly related to anything in class, perhaps advice about a job opportunity. I have always found that there is not one person on the faculty who isn't willing to take the time to help you sort it out.

Second, this is a great place because Marquette is blessed with a wonderful location, and by virtue of that location the legal and business community here has many opportunities waiting for you upon graduation, and to take advantage of while you are a student. I've already mentioned some of these; whether it is a clinical opportunity with the district attorney's office, or an internship at the court of appeals, these real world opportunities are plentiful and go a long way toward making this law school more than just a place to read textbooks and take exams.

I've now reached the end of my remarks. I hope all of you can take away at least one suggestion from what I've had to say tonight. But mostly I'd like to welcome all of you to Marquette. And I look forward to each of you joining me in a few years, as a Marquette lawyer. Thank you. •