Why Law School is Still a Worthwhile Endeavor for People of Color

You have read about the decline in new associate hiring and the commensurate drop in law school applications. However, attending law school now still provides one with opportunities of advancement. Don’t believe me? This issue contains essays from law students, law professors, and law school admissions officers discussing the merits and detriments of attending law school in this climate.

Table of Contents
Meeting the Demands of Communities of Color During Economic Downturn: A Case for Individuals of Color to Pursue a Legal Education During Recession by Khaled A. Beydoun .......................... 1
What Advice Would You Give an Individual of Color Who Wanted to Attend Law School in the Current Legal and Economic Climate by Aasia Hux ................. 3
Law School: How to Get In and Stay In by Julius Maina ...................... 4
Why Law School and Why Now? by Yvonne Cherena-Pacheco ............... 9
Deliberately Pursue: The Talk by Angela Mae Kupenda ...................... 12

Meeting the Demands of Communities of Color During Economic Downturn: A Case for Individuals of Color to Pursue a Legal Education During Recession

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“The poor don’t know that their function in life is to exercise our generosity.”

1. Jean Paul Sartre

Trying circumstances are a common catalyst that drives people of color toward pursuing a legal education. Indeed, the transformative nature of a law degree empowers individuals of color to not only improve their own lot, but also shapes the insight and skills to these trying circumstances. This public interest mission is enhanced by economic downturns and recessions, and in many instances, sounds a louder alarm for individuals of color to enter law school. This alarm is not just for any individual of color, but those who heed the mission and possess the generosity to serve the proliferating needs of those most impacted by a plummeting economy.
With the number of legal jobs diminishing and the number of unemployed lawyers climbing, matriculating into law school may seem a risky proposition for individuals of color. This is particularly salient for individuals of color from indigent or working class backgrounds, who must assess whether taking on the considerable costs of attending law school is worth entering a hyper-competitive professional market. While most experts highlight the cautionary tales, there are a number of distinct opportunities availed by today’s economic impasse that have not been discussed.

Marginalized communities become more vulnerable during economic downturns. A drive through the Westside of Detroit, my hometown, or any indigent or working class community in the United States, will reveal signs of increased economic exploitation, enhanced police profiling and abuse, shortage of adequate housing, and shrinking public defense resources. Thus, while jobs at top law firms are in shorter order, the legal demands of indigent, working class, and of color communities are skyrocketing – and not being met. These communities are in dire need of lawyers that represent their genuine interests, and individuals of color primed by a desire to meet this demand will find the present the ideal moment to pursue a legal education.

However, individuals of color with a developed professional mission are ideally suited to pursue a legal education amid the current recession. Indeed, the economic challenges present individuals of color with less room to experiment with different areas of the law – particularly since the range of professional opportunities has narrowed – but provides a comparative advantage to those with a defined professional trajectory with the platform to excel during and beyond law school.

For example, a student of color interested in a career in civil rights litigation may choose to attend the UCLA School of Law because of its Critical Race Studies Program, where he/she can tailor an academic program, participate in aligned clinics, and build a professional network narrowly tailored toward civil rights litigation. This focused education will provide such student with an intellectual and practical upper hand that will resonate with employers within the civil rights sphere, and prime the student to flourish as a practitioner.

Public interest needs and civil rights concerns still thrive while the economy suffers. Individuals of color, particularly those that hail from communities in dire need of attorneys, will find that the present is the most opportune time to pursue public interest legal careers. With stop-and-frisk and economic exploitation of the poor on the rise, affirmative action and race-conscious opportunity programs on the decline, the demand for lawyers of color has never been higher. In order to effectively meet this demand, individuals of color must first meet the burden of shaping a defined and clear, strategic and well-planned pathway toward their professional goals.
However, this challenge, much like the range of heavy buried carried and met before, are nothing new for individuals of color within the realm of the law.

**What Advice Would You Give an Individual of Color Who Wanted to Attend Law School in the Current Legal and Economic Climate?**

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If you’re a minority that has successfully completed your bachelor’s degree, then you should have already been told at least once in your life time from a mentor, advisor, or someone that has been around the block a few times that it is not enough to be smart and work hard. We have to be the “smartest” and work the “hardest.” When I say the smartest, it doesn’t necessarily mean in academia, but it’s in your day-to-day decision making, choice of peers and association, the people with whom you seek advice, and these examples of course are not exhaustive. When I say the “hardest”, there is a level of discipline that one must attain when attending law school that makes undergrad feel like summer camp. You must be willing to sacrifice those things that become a distraction, which can include a relationship if it falls within that category. While there are more professional opportunities for minorities in the current legal and economic climate, the competition is fierce, and the wrong decision, however slight, can devastate your legal career.

Your first year of law school will weed out those individuals who are unable to achieve the appropriate balance of the above-mentioned. Law school is all about strategy. Find the work-life balance that works for YOU, and follow that plan religiously. Once you have mastered this, then you begin to weave in other important aspects of your law school career such as networking, extra-curricular activities and seeking job opportunities. Your law professors and prospective employers can sense those individuals that have done the grunt work because there is a level of maturity and work ethic to this profession; either you get it or you don’t.
LAW SCHOOL: HOW TO GET IN AND STAY IN

If you remember nothing else about anything I write, remember this: the most important advice I can give you as an aspiring law student is to cultivate your success habits before law school and prepare for success and not for failure.

It sounds simple and in many ways it honestly is, but in practice it requires a lot more un-learning than learning. You have to un-learn all your bad habits that have lingered with you since childhood, all the unhealthy ways of communicating you learned from bad relationships, forget all the bad professors that wasted your time, forget all the times when you were not acknowledge for doing something exceptional, or how even how you were able to graduate effortlessly from your previous schools because of how amazingly brilliant you are. It sounds extreme, but none of it matters. Instead, you have to be completely open and available for what could be a wonderful experience and undoubtedly, 1L of a ride.

If you are yet to take the LSAT, do not, I repeat, do NOT take it unless you are prepared to take it. From a purely economic standpoint, it costs money and the score you get will determine, not might determine, but WILL determine how many schools you can get into. So why would you waste your time and money sitting for an exam that you are not prepared for? Moreover, contrary to popular belief, it is not encouraged to take the LSAT more than once. Although there are plenty reasons why people retake the exam, the main one being to bolster their score, NEEDING to take the exam again speaks volumes about your potential work ethic as a student. Bottom line is that the exam fundamentally stays the same each year, prior year exams are not hidden, and there are a countless proven ways of preparing for the exam that others have found to be effective. So there is simply no excuse for not being prepared for the exam the first time. For those that might blame external factors for their lack-luster performance the first time, law school might not be for you. It sounds harsh, but like I stated earlier bad habits die hard and at some point being honest and simply acknowledging what keeps you from being successful is the first step to actually achieving success in everything you do. For those that might say all the proven ways for preparing for the LSAT are reserved for the privileged, law school might not be for you either. Yes expensive crash courses have been proven to be effective but there are other ways at arriving at the same point. Nothing beats good old work ethic, accountability, consistency and a public library. Finally, for
those of you who might say that they simply did not have enough time to prepare, law school might not be for you either. I say this because learning how to manage the time you have, the same time 24 hours in a day that everybody has, is one of the most important skills to adopt before you get to law school. Bottom line is if you are willing to invest the money, make the necessary adjustments, find the time and push through all the walls you have set up in your life that keep you from being a complete and utter success story.

For the people who fully understand the gravity of the LSAT, I have some good news and some bad news. Good news is, if you take the exam seriously from preparation to test day, you will most likely, never have to take it again, ever. Bad news is, not everybody will and can get a perfect LSAT score. I know, shocking right? Wrong. It’s a statistically proven fact. We all learn differently, interpret information different and therefore, test differently. So, in the event that you do not get a perfect score but you took the time to earnestly prepare for the exam, hold your head up high, smile and be proud of your score. This is an important lesson that you must hold onto. As long as you put in the work, you will always have something to be proud of, even if the desired outcome isn’t what you expected.

So at this point, you are probably wondering so does your score really matter? Simply put, yes. Yes it does. Even if you have a personal statement that is so moving, so unique that nothing like it has ever come across an admissions desk, it will not be read if your LSAT score and/or GPA do not meet the prior year averages for admissions. You might be an individual but law school is a game of numbers, from admissions to graduation. It is not personal, its business.

However, there are ways around the system. First, if you are exceptional enough based on your numbers alone, people will take notice and your personal story will matter. So prepare well and work hard to present exceptional numbers. Second, you have the power to control or predict your admission or rejection to any law school you apply to. I repeat: you have the power to control or predict your admission or rejection to any law school you apply to!!! How is that possible you might ask? Well, if you are honest with yourself and you prepared for the exam by testing yourself repeatedly, you should already have a rough idea of what you score might be. Based on that rough idea you should have already researched all the schools that you are interested in and reviewed their admissions standards. It is rare that law schools deviate from their averages in terms of admissions, so instead of having delusions of grandeur; do your research and realistically determine what schools
you have the best chance of getting into before applying to any schools. Then, once you have realistically determined the schools that will most likely accept you, strengthen your application. For purposes of law school admissions, all things listed as “optional,” by any of the schools you are interested in, should always be regarded as mandatory. You only want to do the process of applying once, so make it worth your time and worth their while. Exceptions are made for students with impressive applications, so keep in your pocket a couple of schools that might not be within your reach, statistically, and apply anyway. The goal here is not to simply be an exception, but rather to present an exceptional application.

If you make it to this point, then take the time to simply acknowledge how far you’ve come. Better yet, get a cookie jar, write down the date and time of each accomplishment, each achievement and all the reasons you want to go to law school on separate pieces of paper and close it. Refer to this cookie jar any time you lose sight of your goal at any point in your legal career and it will do wonders for your spirit. Trust me, I’m almost a lawyer.

*slaps knee in amusement*

Law school isn’t for everybody, the LSAT isn’t meant to be easy and the admissions process is intentionally meant to build anxiety on the applicant; but the process is doable and many before you have gone through it. So be prepared, take it in stride, cultivate your success habits before law school and enjoy the ride; because if you don’t, you won’t.

Race Does Matter, But Numbers Matter More:

It is safe to say that, based on numbers alone; there is still a wide gap in terms of education attainment and achievement amongst people of color. However, please note, underline and highlight this… In no way does that mean that it is impossible for you to achieve exceptionally as a minority. Race matters but in terms of law school admissions, your LSAT score and your GPA matter more. There is no free pass, no back door and you shouldn’t expect or want one. The test is the same for everybody and everybody has the same 24 hours a day to prepare for it. So above all else, when you do get in, and you will if you prepare earnestly, don’t allow anybody, to take your accomplishment of getting in away from you or make you feel like you did not earn your way in. And depending on where you choose to go to school, do your research and be aware of the minority enrollment but don’t let it deter you or scare you. If it’s low, simply be prepared to stand out and embrace that too, with all degrees of your preparedness.

Bottom line is that law school is expensive and talk is cheap. If you are not willing to back up your words and passion with
substance, sweat and consistency, nobody will pay attention to anything you talk about. Moreover, law school is not the place to get distracted by external factors, historic paradigms, or societal expectations. If you want to be the best, then you have to be prepared to work harder than everybody else in the classroom, no exceptions. Don’t strive to be the best minority in the classroom, strive to be the best student in the classroom. My advice: be prepared, make excellence your standard, stay focused, have fun and enjoy the ride.

Finally, diversity really is a wonderful thing. The melting pot that is America has been greatly marinated by the many great contributions of immigrants, minorities and people of color. So although disparities still exist, racism still exists, sexism still exists, barriers still exist, know that great achievements have been made despite those systematic constructs and attach yourself proudly to that history and adopt a visionary mindset. You are more than a person of color, so why limit yourself to a black and white lens?

Top Tier Schools and/or HBCUs: Does it Matter What School You Go To?

So, do tier’s matter? Yes and no. Yes because all of America’s higher education institutions are set up with a business like model. We pay for a service and they deliver with education and a promise. The promise: if you graduate with this degree you have a higher chance of getting a better job that will make you more money than you would make without that specific degree and that is why we are charging you for it. And, the more respected the school, the greater the likely- hood for that you will get a high paying job. Therefore, they can make their schools completely for profit, put on a high price tag, make attending those schools extremely selective and people will still fight to attend those schools, given the long term promise in attending those schools. It’s honestly capitalism at its best. Even more interesting is that this has been the status quo for quite a while and somehow, the schools that cost the most to attend, the ivy’s, also boast the lowest debt upon graduation. So somewhere, the business model works, for some people. So the decision falls upon you to answer the following question: how much debt do you want to incur, to learn fundamentally the same information and take the same state specific bar?

No because there are still only about 18-20% of Americans who hold a Masters or professional degree. Meaning that no matter where you go, if you have researched the school to make sure it’s a good fit for the area of law you want to practice, perform at the top of your class
and pass the bar, you should be able to leverage your degree in a plethora of ways. However, you have to start playing the marketing game early. Examples include, gaining some practical legal experience while in law school: externships, internships, clerking, clinics, and any form of diversity that is attached to high achievement is also great. Bottom line is that you are working to sell a product that is worth investing in. If you do not pass the bar, in any state, graduating from any Ivy will not matter in terms of securing you long term employment post graduation. Or, if you attend a HBCU law school and graduate at the top of your class, pass the bar, the first time; you should have no trouble leveraging your degree and the fact that you passed the bar. Why is this? The great equalizer is accreditation and bar passage. Accreditation ensures that all students at all accredited schools will learning fundamentally the same material and be prepared to pass the same state specific bar. The goal is to attend an accredited school, and most are, then set a high standard for yourself to learn what is required to pass the bar, no matter what school you attend. And no matter how people will try to slice the business model pie of higher education and achievement, in law school it is bar passage, practical legal experience, high achievement and meaningful networking that are more important than simply attending a top tier school.

There is however, a better than thou mentality amongst law students. No matter where you choose to attend, there will always be somebody from a different school that will scoff/turn their nose up because of the school you choose to attend. But work to give yourself choices and be proud of where chose to attend and whatever you do, do not buy into a less than mentality. Why do I say this? Because law school is not easy, at any school; if it was, everybody would be at that school. There are still people that don’t pass the LSAT, don’t get into any school and don’t make it past their first year. Don’t be a statistic. Instead, get in where you fit in, celebrate your achievement, focus on practically learning the material, brand yourself as a person of excellence, character and distinction; and pass the bar the first time, and like my mother says, the cream will always rise to the top.
“WHY LAW SCHOOL AND WHY NOW?” by Yvonne Cherena-Pacheco, Associate Director of Admissions, University of Denver Sturm College of Law

 Millions of articles and suggestions for prospective law students and those who are in the early stages of considering law school bespeak requirements such as solid academics with strong, undergraduate grade point averages (ugpas), competitive Law School Admission Test (LSAT) scores, and compelling personal statements complemented by letters of recommendation. In googling “Preparing for Law School” 44 Million, Seven Hundred Thousand articles surfaced. There are no original ideas left to share on this topic.

Some articles suggest that a competitive ugpa (undergraduate grade point average) is what you consistently work towards, while you are improving your grades. Thus, the ugpa should not be what you suddenly find yourself with when you reach your last grading period in college. Others may remind you that once you have completed and earned your Bachelor’s degree there may not be anything further that can be done with a mediocre ugpa but to include it with your application. Then there are those that give you the reasons “Not to Apply to Law School” and still others that say a competitive ugpa and scoring in the top 10th percentile on the LSAT will get top law schools to consider your file. There are even articles that encourage applicants with less-competitive ugpas and LSAT scores to continue with their applications as there are law schools that may be interested in those applications. The purpose of this piece, however, is not to discuss any of those articles but for individuals to raise questions that are central to considering applying to law school.

Although the above-mentioned requirements are closely reviewed by admission committees, a preparation-mindset for law school should be stimulated by what an individual may or may not include in the law school application. Among other things, self-examination of your values, likes, strengths, belief systems should precede your preparation for the LSAT and completing the law school application. Self-examination may, of course, lead you to answer the questions: “why law school” and “why do you think that you are now ready to apply and to attend?”

Perhaps your values and interests have always involved assisting others and “watching over those less fortunate than you.” Similarly, the extra-curricular section of your resume may be chock-full of organizations, both voluntary and paid, and experiences in which you have performed public service. You, therefore, believe that law school would be the perfect fit for a career in advocating for others. You know that you are “ready and willing” to assist others. However, the “able” part that remains for you to become the legal advocate is law school (the intensive path that you must steadily and artfully navigate). Your interests generally may not include reading (other than for pleasure) of
lots of dense, complex and time-consuming legal cases and assignments. Additionally, you like to be in control while using your problem-solving skills, but have you considered doing this in an environment that, at times, may be replete with confrontation and aggression? Will your self-confidence be challenged in that environment, or do you think that you will thrive? What supports your answers to these questions?

And what would you say are the strengths that you possess that are relevant to being successful in law school? Don’t consider them only to include them in your personal statement. Look closely at the skills and the lessons that you have attained through your undergraduate or graduate studies, your work and personal life experiences, volunteer and extracurricular organizations, etc. Or have you just drifted from position to position or experience to experience which have no common traits but have provided you with a steady income? Ask yourself how these opportunities have prepared you to think clearly, have improved your critical analysis, your writing, reasoning, logic, and communication skills? Do you relate better to others and to emergent situations because of where you have been and what you have done? Be able to understand it in your mind so that you can articulate to yourself first why everything that you have experienced and have brought to the moment will or will not assist you in answering the questions of “why law school” and “why now?”

Are your finances in order? In a tight-economic market do you move ahead to apply to law school now with the academic and non-academic debt that you may have acquired over the past years? Have you been able to reduce debts that have come out of making poor life choices? Have those lessons been learned or are you still in a whirlwind of accumulating new debt? Do you try to pay-down that debt before taking on further financial burden? Do you think you should do that before applying for next fall’s entering class? Are you competing for scholarships? Will your entering numbers (ugpa, LSAT) qualify you for scholarships—from a book scholarship, to thousands of dollars to a full tuition scholarship? What do you need to do now to compete for those scholarships? Are you aware that in order to keep that scholarship you must maintain the required law school gpa? What are you prepared to do later to keep that scholarship? How would you be able to continue in law school if you lose the scholarship?

Take a look at the informality or formality of your present lifestyle and how you identify with it. Will studying law impact on it? How does dressing up daily in formal work attire fit into your lifestyle? Or how might being groomed to cut off long locks and scruffy facial hair sound? I remember
a first-year law student who confided in me that although he loved the challenges of analysis, critical thinking, argumentation, and reading dense legal tomes, he wasn’t sure that he wanted to “give up” his relaxed life-style that included flip-flops and jeans. Two-years later I passed him in the hallway without recognizing him. He was wearing a double-breasted suit (I think an Italian-tailored one) with matching shirt, tie, and wing-tip shoes and short and beautifully-coiffed hair. The facial hair and long locks were shorn, and he told me that he was returning from an interview at one of the local, top law firms. He had never thought about future lifestyle or dress when he was applying to law school—his focus was just on getting in. Even when he was taught by professors in business attire, he never made the connection that their dress had anything to do with him and the profession that he was preparing for. He told me that the competition to be singled out for positive reasons was greater than being singled out for negative so he cut off his beard and long hair. I did not get an opportunity to see him again and to find out if those choices he made affected him later in his life and in his legal career. Another student, a young woman, was afraid that law school would make her change her focus on public interest work and that she would become more like “them” meaning those students and faculty who focused on corporate practice. She did not want to lose her identity as coming from a low-income family and also was afraid that this course of study would make her change her deepest commitment to her community. She was able to balance both her law degree with her personal identity. She told me that it was a challenge that sometimes got in the way of her studies. But she realized at the end after graduating and successfully taking the bar, that she was still who she was deep inside, although she had grown in other ways.

Before pushing the send button on your application to your favorite law school, one should have completed a thorough self-examination that would lead to answering the questions, “why law school?”, “why now?” While determining your future and perhaps not knowing what your next life step is, applying to law school in the meantime, without taking the time for self-examination and reflection, may not be a good enough reason for you to apply now. Reasons for attending law school will vary among applicants; just as the reasons are personal, so should the self-examination be.

Read and listen to what others say about planning and preparing for law school and take that information and apply it to your personal life and to your goals. If you choose not to do this now, you may find yourself after first year or during the remaining years of law school questioning
why you made the decision to apply and to attend law school. Being true to yourself in this process will pay off for you in the immediate future.

**DELIBERATELY PURSUE: THE TALK**

By

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Usually I have “the talk” with already enrolled law students of color who come to me when they are struggling with: law school academics, a conservative climate in and about legal education that seems less welcoming of diversity, economic worries about the future, or feelings of displacement or hopelessness because of others’ racism, sexism, classism, and all of the other isms present in law school and the larger society.

Thus I am delighted to talk here with future law students of color on the front end, before you are enrolled in law school and while you are initially considering becoming a legal professional. I congratulate you on even considering legal education and taking time to read this essay, in spite of the stories being told about the troubles in legal education or difficult employment prospects on the average. Some think this crisis about legal education is a natural adjustment to an increasing and over supply of law graduates and lawyers. I, on the other hand, don’t think we have enough lawyers from underrepresented groups. We especially do not have enough: who are community and justice minded; who are in touch with their unique identities and heritages; and who relish in the positive differences they can make in our world by focusing their passions and their legal
education.

So, I am happy to share this straightforward talk, using what I call my “HBCU voice.” You see, I teach at a predominantly White and quite conservative law school. At times with some of my students, we have to close the office doors and have a talk more in line with a talk I could envision myself giving to racially, gender and class conscious students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). I attended college at several HBCUs and I appreciate the direct, tell it like it is, conversations I had with some of my professors at HBCUs, some of my teachers at our racially segregated k-12 public schools during the sixties; and with my mother and others from my family and community who had wisdom to share and I had an open mind and heart to hear. My “talk” in this essay may not seem to you to be politically correct, but it is direct, unapologetic, and full of compassion and understanding, with a strong dose of reality.

Having said that, I implore you that if you only read one more paragraph of this essay, let it be this one with this thematic overriding piece of advice: You must deliberately pursue. The economic and social climate inside and outside of legal education, the assault against affirmative action and protections for people of color, others’ false claims that we live in a post-racial society, although our country has not required or urged others to get in touch with their conscious and unconscious racism, all mean that we people of color must be deliberate in all of our pursuits, and especially if one pursues to obtain and economically prosper from a legal education.

A deliberate pursuit means you don’t compare yourself to others and use what others are not doing as a personal excuse for your lack of deliberateness. If any others are not carefully preparing for the LSAT, if any others are not carefully considering their financial condition and spending habits, if others are not fully applying themselves in their college and law school classes, please don’t spend time claiming their choices as your excuse. Don’t be like them. Their choices and lack of deliberateness are irrelevant to our own pursuit. Because in order to be accepted into law school and graduate, in order to graduate and pass the Bar, in order to pass the Bar and obtain desired employment opportunities, in order to get the job and to be successful and reasonably happy, people of color must be deliberate and cannot be haphazard, casual, and mimicking of the poor modeling of some who do not face the same challenges that people of color face in obtaining a legal education and in practicing law.

Remember, you may be a first generation lawyer; you may not have contacts who are sure to get you into law school, sure to provide you funding, and sure to find work for you regardless of your performance in law school or your skills. Individuals of color cannot afford to be anything less than industrious. A carefree and reckless pursuit may be disastrous to you and to your future. So, my first piece of advice is that you daily embrace a notion of deliberate pursuit as to your legal education.
Having made this choice of the deliberate pursuit of your credentials, the second step is to carefully consider and document your reasons or motivations for this deliberate pursuit into the law. These reasons or motivations will help you apply yourself to law school as the full time job it is, even when more privileged classmates: take shortcuts, do not prepare for class, skip class, spend their student loan funds carelessly on travel programs unrelated to their employment interests, do not actively think about their futures, crudely alienate professors rather than making connections through professional, studious preparation, and so on. These reasons and motivations you identify will help you regard your education as a sacrificial process and important lifetime investment, and not an expensive, thoughtless lark. These motivations will encourage you to study and review throughout the semester and save any partying for the semester breaks, rather than partying throughout the semester and endlessly worrying over the semester break.

After you identify these personal motivations or reasons you discover from within yourself, be sure you carefully critique the motivations and reasons. Some of you may say all you want to do is to use your legal education to get rich, and quick. You may be sorely disappointed then if you have to work on an unpaid internship or volunteer your services to get experience, even after passing the Bar exam, to get a foot in the door of a position desired. Even if you become rich and if wealth is your only goal, you may also end up feeling empty and without purpose, and using any riches to overindulge in the substances that wreck havoc on many lawyers’ careers and personal lives....and cause some to lose their licenses. Simply attending law school for the money only may not be a good plan to sustain you if your first year grades are not where you hoped for them to be, of if you do not get one of the few summer big law firm clerkships that might lead to a job in a big law firm.

So, try to dig personally deeper. I had one Black female student who wanted to use her bilingual speaking abilities in some way in her future practice. She did very well, writing on this topic in law school, and nurturing her desire. She pursued an internship that helped her shape her thriving career. Several others have a great commitment to criminal justice. That drive and the desire to make his resume more distinguishable led one Black male to even give up his semester break to research, write and publish in the area. His publications and presentations accomplishment list for his last two years of law school exceeded that of most of his professors. All of this led to his obtaining an offer for a coveted federal clerkship, although he was not on law review or moot court. Others with a drive in international law, immigration law, or environmental justice continue in pursuit. Some are driven by the desire to get the best education they can and the desire to help mend relationships amongst people of various colors. Many of my students who have crafted their deliberate pursuit are Black, others are Asian, or of many other colors.

Even White students may benefit from this
talk of deliberate pursuit, especially if they are racially progressive and feel out of place in extremely conservative schools. One of my White students almost left legal education. He felt he did not fit with some of the Whites who openly made racist comments in his presence. He also felt he did not fit with Blacks because he was not Black. That was before the talk. After the talk, he deliberately pursued volunteer law related activities where he could engage with like-minded people of various races. This deliberate pursuit led him to several employment opportunities both on the prosecution side and with a plaintiff firm. Another White student who was a first generational lawyer and a first college graduate in his family deliberately pursued writing opportunities, published, and is presently working as an intern in a public defender office that will likely lead to a full time attorney position, and he loves his work. I could go on and on with the success stories of students of all colors who engaged in a deliberate pursuit. On the walls of my office I have pictures of many former students to point to and use as examples of success stories for my present students.

For me, being raised in the Deep South and attending separate and unequal schools, experiencing racism and sexism, gave me a drive on difficult days, including difficult financial circumstances and difficulties in a marriage, while in law school. I regarded former Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and the esteemed civil rights lawyer from my childhood community, the late Attorney R. Jess Brown, as my fathers in the law. Although they did not know me personally, their stories and pursuit of justice helped me to continue to move forward, and still help me today.

In this deliberate pursuit, thirdly, spend time also cataloging your strengths and weaknesses. Ask yourself are you in good condition financially, mentally, and in your relationships? Do you write well, are you organized, do you like to read, and are you self-motivated? Who are your contacts, do you know any lawyers and judges, or are you a first generation lawyer? Do you have a support system, people who care about you and can give you necessary reality checks? Note your strengths and note your weaknesses. Make improvements before law school where you can; and in areas that you cannot address prior to law school, make a plan to improve during your legal education.

Fourthly, a special word is warranted here as to financial issues. Plan to live like a student in law school. Some students live like, dress like, buy like, and eat out like a lawyer while they are in school....funded by student loans. Then they struggle when it is time to pay for the Bar exam, Bar review classes, and living expenses while they study for the Bar, await results and look for employment. Living like a student will ultimately decrease your stress, especially as you plan for the Bar exam and seek employment.

I want to go even more personally into your business. As you plan for law school, also evaluate your relationship issues, be realistic and honest. Child care and partner concerns are not solely determinative. But, they must be deliberately contemplated in
advance, or they will come up later in inopportune times during legal education. A supportive partner can really help you succeed, but a relationship that is shaky will likely become shakier while you are in law school. So, think clearly about these dynamics as you deliberately pursue.

Finally, have a rough outline of a plan for your education. Your 1L year should be dedicated to your studies. For every regular semester hour of a class per week, 3 hours of study is appropriate. So, for a 3 credit course, plan to study 9 hours each week (this includes class prep of reading and briefing the assignment, review time, and outlining time). Your second year should continue your deliberate study but should also include an assessment of what your resume is looking like and what you need to do to begin to plan for the Bar exam and for an employment search. Hopefully before or during the second year, you will get some experience (even if it is without pay). The third year is more of the same plus internships, working part time (with or without pay) especially in places that enjoy and that may hire you after graduation, honing your writing and research skills, participating in bar organizations, etc. So, consider the commitment and ask yourself if you are prepared to make that commitment to yourself and your future.

The major points are: yes, please consider legal education; yes, you can be successful; but you must engage in a deliberate pursuit, especially during these uncertain and turbulent times. When you do deliberately pursue, I believe you can carve out a career that is perfect for you and one where you can live out your mission with joy.

Now that we have had “the talk,” I do hope to see you in class!
2013 Youth Law Day at CUNY School of Law

Presented by:
CUNY School Of Law Center for Diversity in the Legal Profession
New York State Bar Association Youth Law Day Committee
Center For Latino & Latina Rights & Equality (CLORE)

KEYNOTE SPEAKER: