

The Young Lawyers Section Is Equipped to Take on Change

By CINDY M. CIESLAK

Even though my term as chair of the Young Lawyer Section did not commence until July 1, 2020, like many leaders before me, I started planning ahead for the 2020-2021 bar year at least six months in advance. I proposed an annual budget, and I had substantial conversations with other bar leaders about new and restructured series or programs that the YLS could offer. When the CBA went virtual in late March, I was initially disappointed that the year I was looking forward to for so long—the year I was going to lead a group of talented young lawyers—had been upended.

I am a creature of habit, and I did not immediately welcome the changes that came with life during a pandemic. While I follow social distancing, wear a face mask, and practice other cautionary behaviors, and while I felt fortunate to be able to work remotely, I was initially extremely eager to get back to what life was before the pandemic grounded it to a halt. Working from home full-time without childcare was exhausting and overwhelming. I never really felt like I was giving 100 percent to my family or my work, but I was completely physically, emotionally, and intellectually depleted. I used to think that I struggled with work/life balance, but once all of my responsibilities were hovering over me 24/7, my life knew no boundaries like never before.

As the YLS immediate past chair described in her first Young Lawyers column last year, “[s]ometimes a young lawyer’s life feels a little like keeping 100 spinning plates in the air,” and the burdens young lawyers face certainly did not

decrease when emergency orders were issued in Connecticut. Suddenly, young lawyers had to juggle full-time work, managing a household when stores and facilities had limited hours, often home schooling or caring for children because schools and daycares were closed, all while maintaining their own health and well-being, among other things.

I still have not mastered this juggling act, and I was concerned that section engagement would decrease since participation in bar association activities is voluntary and young lawyers faced increased career and personal demands during a pandemic. But my concerns were quickly dispelled—several young lawyers reached out to offer assistance with virtual events and to discuss new and revamped programming that our section could offer.

I was impressed by the eager young lawyers with whom I spoke. While many areas of life have slowed down or otherwise changed courses in order to combat the spread of COVID-19, young lawyers face a unique challenge: they are still in the early stages of building their legal careers. Yet, many young lawyers are

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working from home or in a reduced office setting and thus, they might be deprived of critical mentorship from more experienced attorneys or supervisors in their office. Additionally, in-person networking events have been canceled. Therefore, young lawyers are finding new ways to make connections, such as Zoom happy hours and LinkedIn messaging.

Connections and mentors are critical to success in the legal industry, even without the additional burden of a struggling economy, and if fewer connections are made today, it may negatively impact the career growth for a young lawyer. However, true mentorship is difficult when working remotely, and changes are being made to cope with the effects of the pandemic. I regularly read legal columns and articles explaining how the economic downturn during the pandemic has affected the legal industry, and specifically, young lawyers. Bar exams have been postponed, summer associate programs canceled, and associates furloughed or laid off. According to one recent article, “[l]ess than half of attorneys and legal industry professionals feel positive about the future of the industry ... with the big-

gest concerns being technology, economic uncertainty and the industry's ability to adapt to change."¹

Despite these headlines, the 2020-2021 Young Lawyers Section Executive Committee remains as engaged as ever. Half of our section's Executive Committee chairs are brand new to the Executive Committee, but I have had both returning members and new members reach out to express their excitement for this bar year and to inquire how they can start the year off on the right track given the circumstances, even before we held our first virtual meeting to plan for the year. I am truly honored to be able to work with some very engaged and creative individuals.

Nonetheless, I have had the opportunity to speak to many active members of the CBA, many of whom were former leaders of the Young Lawyers Section. Some of the challenges young lawyers face have not changed, despite years of researched articles and programs designed to mentor and encourage young lawyers to take a more active role in the bar. Young law-

yers are often viewed as less experienced, not trusted, and sometimes overlooked when opportunities are available. In fact, some of my predecessors have written on this exact topic. This generalized view of young lawyers, coupled with a pandemic, causes me concern.

But the pandemic is no reason to stop trying to effectuate change, and in fact, it might even be a better time to welcome it. To any mentors and senior attorneys reading this article, I strongly encourage you to check in on the young lawyers in your network and offer guidance. Alternatively, inquire how the young lawyer might be able to help you or your firm or company. Young lawyers may be critical to your firm or company in overcoming the challenges the legal industry faces during the pandemic. It is also important to evaluate your firm or company's diversity and inclusion efforts during this challenging time.

I am energized by the willingness of the YLS Executive Committee to not only offer more time to our association, but also

in its members' excitement to take on new roles and ability to brainstorm and develop creative ideas for programs in this virtual world. The practice of law has not stopped during the pandemic, and neither will young lawyers.

The YLS has traditionally hosted many successful programs, which unfortunately, will need to be postponed or modified this year due to restrictions on large group gatherings. Nevertheless, we are excited about the changes that we have made and will continue to make, and we anticipate that you will find our new virtual programs enjoyable, useful, and beneficial to our association. ■

NOTES

1. Emma Cueto, *Many In Atty Ranks Down About The Future Of Their Industry*, Law360, July 13, 2020, www.law360.com/employment/articles/1291371/many-in-atty-ranks-down-about-the-future-of-their-industry?nl_pk=73fd15d3-9073-416c-b0b3-2c2d9f9a387d&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=employment.



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