

LAWYERS AS JOURNALISTS

Everyone who has been to law school has heard the line, "You can do anything with a law degree." Today that seems more true than ever. More and more lawyers are discovering career transitions to areas outside the law but where their legal background is advantageous. At a program entitled, "Careers in Journalism," cosponsored with the Harvard Law School Arts Initiative, four formerly practicing attorneys spoke about their transition to print and television journalism.

Why Journalism

To know if a career in journalism is right for you first take inventory of your skills and then compare them to the skills necessary to succeed in the field. You may find, as the panelists did, the skills needed for a career in print journalism or media are many of the same skills lawyers gain while practicing law.

For example, lawyers can be quick studies having to learn about a new industry or business depending on their client's needs. This skill is transferable to the world of journalism, where you would be expected to write an article or report a story on a legal topic you may know little about. Lawyers are often called to think on their feet and to ad lib, work under pressure in an organized manner and work efficiently. Lawyers must be able to communicate a story and have exceptional writing skills. All these qualities, as one would imagine, are extremely useful in journalism. When going on interviews it is important to focus a potential new employer's attention on these transferable skills.

Breaking In

Even with all these attributes on your side, breaking into television journalism or newspa-

per reporting can be difficult and the fields are competitive. But there are many things you can do to make landing that coveted journalism job easier.

Developing relationships, the panel stressed, is the most important thing you can do to help yourself break into journalism. Develop relationships wherever and whenever you can. Network aggressively. Have a coffee with people who might be able to help you; go on informational interviews. You will find that most people are more than happy to talk to you about what it is they do.

Be and be known as a specialist in a particular area of the law. Being a legal expert sets you apart from others and the media may actually reach out to you, as was the case for one of the panelists. Although you may get the job because of your particular expertise, the panel agreed that once in the job you must learn to be a generalist and be willing to report on many different areas of the law depending on the hot topic of the day.

The panel was split on the question of whether going to journalism school would be advantageous. Some felt that there is no need to pursue a degree in journalism since as a lawyer you already hold a graduate degree and that it is better to gain practical experience or to intern. Others argued that journalism school would be beneficial as it teaches the craft of journalism. With growing technology the field is always evolving and attending a graduate journalism program would allow you to be up to date with the newest forms. In addition, journalism careers can be very haphazard and journalism school is a good way to meet the people who are most able to assist you in your career. When considering journalism school it is clear you must take your own unique background and experience into account.

Life in Journalism

One of the changes described by the panel when transitioning from the practice of law to journalism is the difference in the time commitment. The panel agreed that the hours are fewer than at a large firm and you have greater flexibility in your schedule. As in law, there are extraordinarily busy times, such as when a high priority story is evolving and you are the person on call to cover it. The story then takes priority over your personal life.

Another difference is life style. At least initially most journalist's salaries do not match those of lawyers in private practice. It may take a while to reach the same level of compensation you were at in your former career in your new career. The panel suggested that it might be wise to start writing while continuing to practice law. Author some articles or work on a book before leaving the practice so when you leave you have writing experience and a portfolio to show and can garner a more senior position.

When asked what the biggest challenges were the panel agreed that whether in print or television journalism it is the pressure to do things quickly and not feel like you have had a chance to do the most thorough job. For many lawyers that can become frustrating. In addition you see and learn about many horrific things, especially in television journalism.

In conclusion the panel urged that more lawyers are needed in journalism. Not just because they bring a strong work ethic, are good at speaking and thinking on their feet but because the public needs to be educated on how the legal system works. Newspapers and magazines, book publishers and the media all hire writers and journalists who have a passion for communicating about legal issues. The bottom line, as with any career decision, is the best reason to choose a career is because you love it.