

NEW JERSEY LAWYER

October 2026

No. 362



New Lawyers



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Saturday, Dec. 19 | 9 a.m. – 12 p.m.

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Moderator: Shawn C. Huber, Esq.

Join us for this program geared toward new attorneys and anyone who has not practiced civil law. A Certified Civil Trial Attorney provides a thorough introduction to the civil trial process. Attendees will explore essential aspects of civil litigation, including pre-trial preparation, trial procedures, and post-trial activities. Ensure you are fully prepared for your next civil trial. Register today!

AI Prompt Engineering for Lawyers

Friday, Oct. 16 | 9 a.m. – 12 p.m.

Earn up to 3.3 credits.

Presenter : Paul Unger, Esq.

This program will include a session on the ethical use of AI in the law so you can balance technological innovation with maintaining ethical standards. We will examine how AI tools can be used in compliance with the American Bar Association's Model Rules of Professional Conduct and the New Jersey RPC's, including issues of competence, dealing with AI hallucinations, confidentiality, supervision, and reasonable fees. The discussion will also address practical strategies for evaluating which AI technologies can be used responsibly, as well as potential pitfalls to avoid. Attendees will leave with a clearer understanding of which AI tools to integrate into their practice ethically and how to use them effectively.

Horror Stories – What True Crime and Other Disturbing Stories Can Teach Every Lawyer

Wednesday, Oct. 28 | 12 – 1:40 p.m.

Earn up to 2.0 credits.

Moderator: Kimberly A. Yonta, Esq.

Presenters: Hon. Louis F. Locascio, J.S.C. (Ret.); Cara A. Fialkoff, Esq.

This unique program draws critical practice, ethical, and risk management lessons for New Jersey attorneys from real-world cautionary tales and high-profile legal disasters. Registration details to follow.

Inbox Ninja – Using Outlook To Organize & Manage High Volume Email

Friday, Nov. 20 | 9 a.m. – 12 p.m.

Earn up to 3.3 credits.

Presenter: Barron K. Henley, Esq.

For attorneys, mastering email organization is critical to boosting daily productivity, reducing administrative stress, and ensuring practice efficiency.

The Gavel Through Time: How Ancient Law Shaped Modern Justice

Thursday, Dec. 17 | 9 a.m. – 12:35 p.m.

Earn up to 4.0 credits, including 1.9 in ethics.

Moderator: Justice Michael Noriega

Presenters: Justice Barry T. Albin, (Ret.); Hon. Natalie S.

Watson, J.S.C.; Hon. Nelson Johnson, J.S.C. (Ret.)

In honor of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, join a distinguished judicial panel for a compelling exploration of the historical and legal traditions that shaped the American legal system. From the code of Hammurabi to the philosophies of the Enlightenment, this program traces the lineage of the principles, structures, and ethical obligations that define the practice of law in the United States today.

Avoiding Disorder: Robert's Rules for Lawyers

Wednesday, Dec. 30 | 12:15 – 2:15 p.m.

Earn up to 2.4 credits.

Presenter: Thomas H. Prol, Esq.

This program provides an essential primer and refresher on Robert's Rules for every lawyer, especially those who counsel New Jersey corporate boards and public entities. As required by statute, municipal public entities reorganize and meet during the first week of January. These reorganization sessions, as well as upcoming corporate meetings, require attorneys to have a functional, working knowledge of parliamentary procedure.

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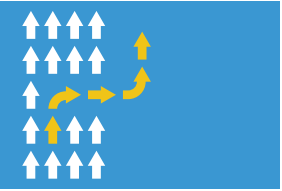
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PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

NORBERTO A. GARCIA

Keeping the Human Connection in Law



The law is grounded in rules but shaped by relationships. Legal practice—one of humanity's oldest institutions—is fundamentally a social business.

Many of us in the profession, myself included, gravitated here because of the human connections we can forge with the people we represent and our colleagues in the law. The legal system is a deeply human system, made up of people who make mistakes but, for the most part, strive to fulfill their obligation to uphold the law. It is flawed, like any human institution, but it is the system we depend on to deliver justice.

The law also attracts people with a talent for persuasion and a penchant for conversation. Business gets done in pivotal, face-to-face moments—with your adversary on the courthouse steps, across the table during a high-stakes deposition or through a brief handshake at a networking reception. You never know which interaction will add another tool to your legal toolkit or when a new connection will open a door that propels your career forward.

And, with any luck, some of those adversaries you once fought tooth and nail in court become your closest friends and confidants. They become colleagues you can turn to for a sympathetic ear or candid advice from a different perspective. I don't know many professions like that. The social and collegial nature of the law is part of what makes this profession special. Success in the law is not just what you know, it is also who you know. You can be the best tax lawyer in the state, but if nobody knows this, your practice suffers.

Unfortunately, much of that changed with COVID-19.

When the wheels of justice all but ground to a halt, attorneys went from arguing in open court to arguing before a computer screen in their home offices. Opportunities for spontaneous human connection dried up and were replaced by Zoom meetings, emails and phone calls. This is a far cry from when I started practicing. You first drafted a response in long-hand or dictated a response into a Dictaphone. You then reviewed the final product. This deliberation and reflection encouraged a more respectful level of communication.

Thankfully, the pandemic is behind us, but we never fully returned to the professional norms that defined the practice of law before COVID. Virtual proceedings and remote meetings are now fixtures of the profession. The amount of face-to-face time we have with one another is more limited.

I worry about what we lose as a result.

For experienced practitioners, the change can make the profession feel more isolated. But I am particularly concerned about younger attorneys, who are beginning their careers without many of the everyday interactions that helped previous generations learn the profession and build relationships. It is harder to climb the ladder when you have fewer chances to meet the people who might help you find the next rung. I learned more in court rooms watching other proceedings than I did in any law school class. The conversations I had with other lawyers in the courthouse hallways taught me lessons no bar examination preparation course could provide. Those experiences were invaluable.

There are practical consequences, too. It can be difficult to fully gauge a witness's demeanor and credibility through a virtual deposition. It is harder to establish rapport with an adversary or the court when interactions are confined to brief appearances on a screen. And professional relationships are simply more difficult to build when remote meetings replace the conversations that once happened in hallways, conference rooms and courthouses.

It's a brave new world.

I'm under no misconception that the profession will ever return completely to the way things were. Nor should it. Technology has made aspects of legal practice faster and more efficient, while remote work has created welcome flexibility in our professional and personal lives. But efficiency should not come at the expense of connection.

That's where I believe the New Jersey State Bar Association has an important role to play. Through networking events, receptions, section and committee gatherings, golf outings, educational programs and countless other opportunities to meet face to face, the NJSBA can help fill some of the social void left by the pandemic.

Fall is one of the busiest times of the year at the Association. In recent weeks I have had a front-row seat to the many ways

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FROM THE SPECIAL EDITORS

Bringing the New Lawyer Experience Full Circle

By Jonathan Amira and Brett Yore

When the *New Jersey Lawyer* Editorial Board sought our creation of a new lawyer-themed issue, it represented a moment of both accomplishment and reflection for us. Coincidentally, albeit at different times, we both attended Rutgers Law School in Camden, we both became assistant prosecutors, we both served on the New Jersey State Bar Association Young Lawyers Division and received awards at the Annual Convention. At the peak of our involvement, we both served at different times as editor-in-chief of YLD's publication *Dictum*. As our tenures ended, we went on to serve as fellows on the State Bar Leadership Academy, and were appointed in our current capacity as members of the *New Jersey Lawyer* Editorial Board.

The new lawyer experience is broad and amorphous; it can be a direct pipeline into one's vocation from young adulthood, it can be a fulfilling mid-life career change, it can be a reset after an indeterminate pause due to life events, it can even be someone's ambitious next chapter in their later years. Whatever the case, the authors featured in this issue represent their own version of these experiences. We welcome you to explore their insight with this special issue, featuring some complex issues of law, in addition to reflections on the new lawyer experience.

NJSBA Young Lawyers Division Chair Maralee Sanders offers a welcoming message on finding community and professional support through the YLD, encouraging newly admitted and early-career attorneys to get involved and build meaningful connections. Chief Municipal Prosecutor of Atlantic City David Little makes an engaging case for judicial clerkships, often the seminal professional experience for many young lawyers. The author weaves his own experience with the process by praising the mentorship, the professional ties, and the lessons in lawyering through firsthand observations that come with shadowing a Judge.

We are blessed to have our successor to YLD *Dictum* editor-in-chief, Will Dungey, reflect on his new lawyer experience, the importance of writing as a practicing attorney, the benefits he learned from becoming involved in YLD, and how the experience positively reinforced his belief in Bar Association involvement.

Kaitlin Hackett, the current Young Lawyers Division chair of Wills for Heroes, and this year's recipient of the YLD Service to the Community Award, takes us on a personal journey through her involvement. With passion, and enthusiasm, she makes an inspirational case for the importance of pro bono work in the context of WFH, as well as the benefits of mentorship gained within the program, and why volunteer service makes us a stronger Bar Association.

Amber Osterbrink, a current YLD member, takes us into the complex and cutting-edge world of artificial intelligence. As industries worldwide continue to grapple with adjusting to this revolutionary technology, the author asks compelling questions about AI's utility within legal practice, and the implications it may have in the legal industry's near future.

Cara Anan writes openly and captivantly on the experience of starting her

own solo practice, early in her career. She discusses the hurdles of building a business, a professional support system, and checking your well-being during the arduous, but ultimately rewarding process.

Brandon DeJesus, an NJSBA Trustee and YLD member, also discusses his experience as a young lawyer switching careers from the public to private sector. In the process of discussing this switch, he asks important questions about building professional identities and what kind of practice lawyers choose to build that satisfies their personal goals.

Coming full circle by shifting gears, slightly, but intentionally, experienced attorney Ana Milena Goncalves discusses her journey toward a long career in civil litigation and personal injury, until recently making the switch to solo family practice. She writes about what it means to be “new” again after years in a different practice area; rebuilding a professional identity mid-career, and learning a new area of law.

The feature articles in this issue of *New Jersey Lawyer* represent a comprehensive wealth of knowledge by the authors that touches upon the gestalt of the new lawyer experience; ranging from both the practical to the academic. Whether you are just starting out, or are well into your practice, there is truly something for everyone offered here by our authors, as we commemorate the challenges, the wisdom, and perspectives of the new lawyer experience. ■



JONATHAN AMIRA is an assistant prosecutor at the Gloucester County Prosecutor's Office, where he works in the Special Litigation Section. He is the office's legal internship coordinator and a member of its diversity council. Jonathan is a member of the Hispanic Bar Association of New Jersey, a trustee of the Camden County Bar Association, and is the treasurer of the Rutgers Law School Camden Alumni Association. He is a former member of the New Jersey State Bar Association Young Lawyers Division, and the 2022 recipient of the YLD Service to the Community award. Jonathan is currently a member of the Criminal Law Section, Legal Education, and Government, Public Sector, and Public Interest Lawyers Special Committees. In 2023, Jonathan accepted appointment to the New Jersey Lawyer editorial board, where he continues to serve. The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the respective authors and do not represent the Gloucester County Prosecutor's Office.



BRETT YORE has been a prosecutor in Atlantic County, Cape May County, and Burlington County. He is a past president of the Cape May County Bar Association, former trustee of the Atlantic County Bar Association, and trustee for the New Jersey State Bar Association. He has previously been recognized by the NJSBA's Young Lawyers Division with the Young Lawyer of the Year award.

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PRACTICE TIPS



WRITER'S CORNER

The Pronoun Puzzle: Avoiding Ambiguous Writing

By Veronica J. Finkelstein

Associate Professor of Law

Widener University Delaware Law School

Legal writers love efficiency. We streamline. We compress. We use shortcuts that keep the prose moving. Pronouns are one of those shortcuts, and when used well, they help a reader move quickly from idea to idea. But when used carelessly, pronouns turn sentences into little puzzles. They make the reader stop and ask a question no writer ever wants to provoke: “Wait. Who is ‘he’?” Or “What is ‘it’?” Or “Which party does ‘they’ belong to?” That moment of hesitation is a tiny failure of clarity, and tiny failures add up.



The problem is especially common in legal writing because we often juggle multiple actors who share similar roles. Two officers. Three witnesses. Four corporate entities with names that sound like distant cousins. And yet, we still fall back on pronouns because repetition feels clunky. The instinct to use pronouns is understandable. The result is often confusion.

Imagine briefing a judge on a motion with two key players. You write, “The defendant told the officer that he had consented to the search.” You know who “he” refers to because you wrote the sentence. But the reader does not. The ambiguity is real. Did

the defendant consent? Did the officer tell someone else he consented? Was the officer reporting the defendant’s words or the other way around? A single unclear “he” turns a simple fact into a puzzle.

Judges and clerks work fast. They read your text with less context and less memory than you have. They are less patient with inference. When a pronoun can attach to more than one noun, a split second of confusion interrupts the flow. It might seem small, but those seconds distract the reader. A judge who repeatedly pauses to decode your sentences begins to worry that your argument may require the same effort. The clerk may put your brief down, finding it simply unhelpful, and instead turn to your opponent’s brief.

The consequences of ambiguous pronouns show up most often in fact sections. Facts live and die by chronology and identity. The reader must track who did what, when, and why it matters. If the reader has to hunt for those answers because of sloppy pronoun use, the structure of your case becomes muddy. Even worse, you miss an opportunity to reinforce your narrative. Good fact writing builds momentum. Ambiguous pronouns break it.

The cure is simple. Use pronouns sparingly when more than one actor could plausibly fit the reference. If two parties share the same gender, avoid “he” and “she” unless the referent is unmistakable. If multiple entities could be “it,” repeat the entity’s name. Repetition may feel inelegant to the writer, but to the reader it feels like relief. Precision beats variety in legal writing.

Another common problem arises when a pronoun refers not to a person but to an entire concept. Consider the sentence, “The statute allows a court to grant equitable relief when it is appropriate.” What exactly is appropriate? The relief, the granting, or the statute? Or take, “The company reviewed the policy and then revised it.” Many readers will assume “it” refers to the policy, but in some contexts it might refer to the review process itself. Adding clarity prevents guesswork.

You can avoid these pitfalls with a simple habit. After drafting, scan for every pronoun. Ask yourself whether there is any chance a reasonable reader might attach the pronoun to the wrong noun. If the answer is yes, revise. A clear sentence usually requires only a few extra words. Often it requires only one.

Another helpful technique is to vary your noun phrases. Instead of repeating the full party name, use a clear descriptive label. “The driver.” “The supervisor.” “The purchasing manager.”

These labels cue the reader more quickly than a long corporate name and allow you to avoid pronouns without creating monotony. They also reinforce the role each person plays in the story.

In editing, watch for chains of pronouns. Writers often begin a paragraph with a clear noun, then rely on pronouns for the next several sentences. By the time the reader reaches the final sentence, the original noun has faded. Re-anchor the paragraph by repeating the noun after two or three pronouns. You are not writing a novel where repetition feels heavy. You are guiding a legal reader who appreciates orientation.

Pronouns also shape tone. A sentence that clearly names the actor feels confident and direct. A sentence that hides the actor behind a vague “it” or “they” can sound evasive even when that is not the writer’s intent. Lawyers often slide into passive constructions like “It was decided that” or “It appears that.” These phrases rely on pronouns that refer to nothing. They weaken arguments and invite skepticism. Replace them with specific subjects whenever possible. Judges respect clarity.

If you mentor new lawyers, teach them to treat pronouns as

potential hazards. Have them identify every pronoun in a draft and name the noun it refers to. If they cannot do it instantly, they need to revise. This practice helps them develop an instinct for clarity. It also helps them recognize when they have overloaded the story with too many actors. Sometimes pronoun confusion is a symptom of deeper structural clutter.

The puzzle of who did what should never be a puzzle at all. Pronouns can be helpful tools, but only when used with care. In legal writing, clarity is kindness. It shows respect for the judge’s time and reduces the cognitive load for the clerk who is trying to summarize your argument. When you remove ambiguity, you make your writing feel smooth. The reader stays with you instead of working against you.

So the next time you draft a brief, slow down long enough to examine your pronouns. Make sure every “he,” “she,” “they,” and “it” has one and only one clear referent. Your writing will become cleaner. Your arguments will land harder. And your readers will never again feel like they are solving a grammar puzzle instead of evaluating your case.



WORKING WELL

Improve Your Productivity

The secret to being productive every day is understanding how you spend your time, setting goals that make the most of it, and recognizing when to step back and recharge before burnout sets in. Productivity is not about doing more—it’s about doing what matters most, consistently and with intention.

Recognize the value of long-term and short-term planning.

It takes time, energy, and sustained motivation to achieve meaningful goals. Never expect to tackle all your work in one day

and still produce your highest-quality results. Instead, use both short- and long-term planning to break larger projects into manageable tasks.

Long-term planning helps define your vision and direction. Short-term planning creates actionable steps that move you closer to that vision. By identifying milestones and setting realistic deadlines, you create momentum while reducing overwhelm. Each small accomplishment builds confidence and keeps progress steady.

Prioritize your tasks.

If you don’t know where to begin, it’s difficult to plan effectively. Start by clearly outlining your long-term and short-term goals, then prioritize them into a manageable list of tasks. Ask yourself:

- What must be done today?
- What will have the greatest impact?
- What can wait?

Make sure your short-term goals are challenging enough to sustain momentum, but not so overwhelming that they discourage action. At the same time, keep your long-term goals visible so they remain within reach and aligned with your daily efforts.

Focus on getting organized.

Organization is crucial to success. By creating plans and prioritizing tasks, you are already taking important steps toward becoming more organized. Take it further by reducing physical and digital clutter, keeping related work together, and using tools that support your workflow.

Avoid getting bogged down in unnecessary details that slow progress. Perfectionism can become a hidden drain on productivity. Strive for excellence but recognize when “good and complete” is better than “perfect and unfinished.”

Make a point to manage your time.

Time management is about working smarter, not longer. Tackle your most difficult or mentally demanding tasks when your energy is at its peak. Reserve simpler or routine tasks for times when your energy naturally dips.

Build short breaks into your schedule to recharge your focus and creativity. Watch for warning signs of burnout such as

irritability, fatigue, or lack of motivation. When possible, group similar tasks together to increase efficiency, and eliminate distractions that interrupt your concentration.

Consistency in small daily habits often leads to the greatest long-term productivity gains.

Make the most of your leisure time.

Don't forget to have fun. True productivity includes rest and renewal. Recreation literally means “to recreate yourself.” Taking time for hobbies, exercise, family, or relaxation restores your energy and sharpens your focus.

Work hard—but also recharge intentionally. Too much leisure can become a distraction, just as too much work can lead to burnout. Strive for balance between productivity and personal enjoyment. When you care for your well-being, you return to your responsibilities with renewed clarity, creativity, and motivation.

Remember: Productivity is not about constant activity. It's about purposeful progress, balanced energy, and steady forward movement toward your goals.

This article is from New Jersey State Bar Association Member Assistance Program provider Charles Nechtem Associates. The Member Assistance Program connects NJSBA members—and anyone else in their household—to trained, experienced mental health professionals and resources. Learn more at njsba.com/member-assistance-program.

PRACTICE PERFECT

Everything Has a Process

By PracticeHQ

Whether your firm handles corporate litigation, contracts, criminal defense, or any other type of law, one thing is true: There is a process to everything you do. And any time there is a process, there are ways to improve upon that process. Change simply for the sake of change isn't ever a good thing. Still, when you implement changes to make your teams' jobs easier, help a function to operate more smoothly, eliminate unnecessary activities, and ultimately improve your bottom line... well, then that's change for the better!

Processes can be large or small. Some have thousands of activities and moving parts to track, while others might involve as few as one to five easy steps. Whether your process is simple or complex, the best process improvements start with identifying the current process.

Process mapping can be both time-consuming and confusing, but these tips make it easier:



Include the Right People

Managers and attorneys may think they know what their people are doing, but most of the time, they don't. Focusing on subject matter experts will ensure that you accurately map the current state, and that you capture all minor (or major) details, while at the same time safeguarding that your project has buy-in from those impacted.

Make It Fun

Process mapping can be tedious. It sometimes helps to get started by gathering your team in a room and giving everyone markers and sticky notes to put on the wall or whiteboard.

Select the Best Tool for Your Team

Vendors have created dozens of process mapping tools. The product suitable for you is the simplest one containing the details you need. Others may need to read and interpret it later, so consider the ease of that transition. Examples of tools we've used effectively are detailed Word outlines, Excel spreadsheets, and visual diagramming products such as Microsoft Visio, Lucidchart, OmniGraffle, and yEd Graph Editor.

More is Better

No detail is too small to document. You should map out not only the standard process as it happens most of the time, but also include deviations and what path you take when a deviation occurs.

Be Consistent

Although there may be different groups of people involved in mapping out the various pieces of your process, the map will become very confusing if there is no standard. To avoid that, ensure that the mapping is handled consistently, including the flowchart technique and how you identify tasks. Avoid non-standard abbreviations for brevity's sake. Instead, consider verb-noun tasks such as "Draft the Agreement" or "Attend Court Hearing."

How to Improve Your Process

Once you have identified a process in your firm, you can take steps to improve that process. Remember, your processes may vary based on each matter's circumstances, but a process exists for everything you do. The hard part is figuring out whether your work is efficient and making improvements to help your firm boost that efficiency.

Take, for example, scheduling hearings. In some jurisdictions, you must coordinate hearings with opposing counsel and witnesses, and account for the court's availability. If your staff contacts opposing counsel to select a date before checking the court's calendar, the effort to coordinate may have been in vain. Most would check the court's calendar before trying to coordi-

nate, keeping in mind that if it takes too long to agree with the other side, you might have to re-check the court calendar multiple times. Scheduling hearings is usually quite simple. But this example reveals there are easy and hard ways, even with simple processes.

Process improvement may include minor changes to the steps taken in the procedure. Other improvements may require a complete re-engineering, which might involve upending the current method. The goal is to do more with less. Consider modifications in light of the fact that the people doing the work, the work being done, and the technology used may be affected.

These tips help you evaluate potential process improvements effectively:

Look at the Big Picture

The view from 10,000 feet sometimes reveals issues right off the bat.

Evaluate Issues in Smaller Pieces

Once you have identified an issue, mapping out the process, including every step taken, by whom, when, and what else that step affects, can reveal simple potential solutions.

Look at the Issues from Every Angle

Don't limit yourself to looking at the steps taken and how you can change them. Consider whether you have the right people handling each action, are fully exploiting your technology to be efficient, and whether automation could make the functions easier.

Use Available Technology

Don't fear automation technologies. Automation wins big if the price fits your budget and the prospective tool reduces delays and complications.

Be Open to Change

Improvement requires change. Without change, things stay the same, and nothing gets better.

Finally, remember that change isn't easy—there will be bumps in the road. Making changes may cause different problems to crop up or reveal issues no one even knew existed. People may rebel, and you may lose people who can't or don't want to keep up with the changes. But, if the changes you make are for the greater good, you will find your firm and its processes stronger in the end. ■

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Finding Your Place in the Profession

A Message from the Young Lawyers Division Chair

By Maralee Sanders

The New Jersey State Bar Association offers a wonderful support network for attorneys at all stages of their careers, but especially for newly admitted attorneys. Through my involvement in the Young Lawyers Division, I have developed an incredible network of other newly admitted and early-career attorneys throughout the state in a range of diverse practice areas, many of whom I consider friends as well as colleagues in the law.

The community, support, and resources for newly admitted and early-career attorneys through the NJSBA and the YLD have provided invaluable advice and guidance through the early stages of my career, when it didn't necessarily feel right to ask a partner down the hall. I consider my involvement in the YLD as one of the smartest things I have done in my career, to date.

If you've been looking for ways to get involved with the YLD

and the NJSBA and didn't know how, now is the moment. The YLD has a variety of ways to make meaningful connections within our field and in our communities. We are currently seeking committee members for each of our committees, including attorney wellness, DEIB, philanthropy, seminars, and our busy Wills for Heroes committee. This is a great way to meet other young lawyers, dip your toes into being involved in the NJSBA, and build your professional network.

In addition to our committees, the YLD has a robust calendar of events for the fall, including business meetings, a visit to a winery, a paint-and-sip and karaoke night, and volunteer events. I would love to see you there. Check out the calendar and check out the resources page for new attorney information at njsba.com. And—please reach out to me with any questions! ■

Get Involved with the YLD

Connect with fellow young lawyers, join a committee, attend an upcoming event and find resources for newly admitted attorneys at NJSBA.com.



MARALEE SANDERS is a partner in HDRB&B's Employment and Trusts and Estates departments, where she advises clients on employment matters, estate administration, guardianships and related issues. She is Chair of the New Jersey State Bar Association Young Lawyers Division and has served on several NJSBA committees and initiatives, including the Leadership Academy and Labor & Employment Section Executive Committee. Maralee is also a trustee of the Somerset County Bar Foundation and a member of several professional organizations.

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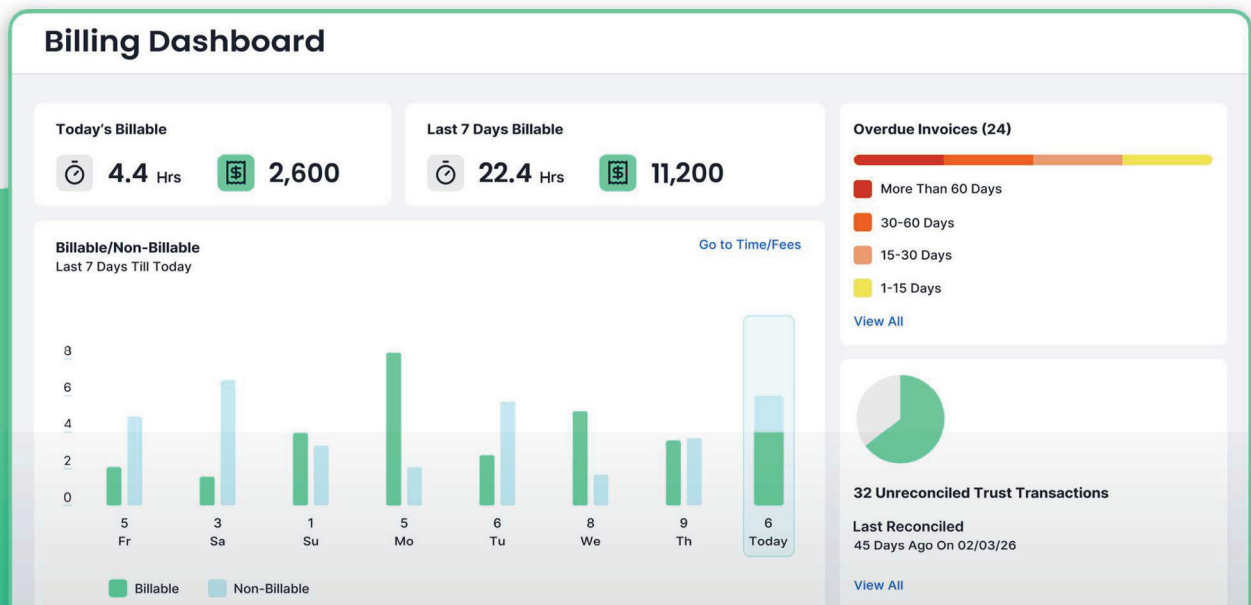
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JUDICIAL CLERKSHIPS IN THE SUPERIOR COURT OF NEW JERSEY

The Best Training for New Attorneys

By David Little



DAVID C. LITTLE is the Chief Municipal Prosecutor for the City of Atlantic City. He previously served as an Assistant Prosecutor at the Atlantic County Prosecutor's Office. He serves on the Board of Trustees for the Atlantic County Bar Association.

As I prepared to graduate law school and begin to explore post-graduate career opportunities, I was unsure of what path I was going to take. "Do I want to join a law firm?" "Do I want to work in-house?" I thought that I wanted to jump right into being a lawyer and try cases in a courtroom, but I quickly learned that sometimes young attorneys at law firms do not have the opportunity to spend much time in courtrooms. "I wish I learned that in law school," is a commonly-heard refrain from recent law school graduates, and I uttered those same words when I discovered the benefits of becoming a judicial clerk in New Jersey. Looking back, I can say that completing a judicial clerkship with the Superior Court of New Jersey was an invaluable opportunity that has shaped the trajectory of my legal career for the better.

Every year there are 480 clerkships available in Superior Court of New Jersey.¹ Despite making the decision later in the application process to apply for a clerkship, I was able to meet a judge who was hiring, Judge W. Todd Miller. During our first meet-

ing, I felt nervous, yet optimistic. I had never met this person who I had the possibility of spending the next year working with. At the time, Judge Miller was assigned to the Family Division and I had no interest in practicing family law. I had never even taken a law school course about the subject. As the interview commenced, I discovered that the interview was less about my knowledge of the practice area and more about my personal and professional qualifications and whether I would be the right fit for the position. About a week after my interview, I received a phone call from Judge Miller—I was offered the clerkship.

We are fortunate in New Jersey to have such a strong clerkship program to prepare new attorneys for practice. Many other states, including neighboring New York, do not offer one-year state court judicial clerkships, opting rather for long-term career law clerks.² Judicial clerkships offer competitive salaries, health insurance, participation in the Public Employees' Retirement System, federal student loan forgiveness and more benefits.³ The New Jersey Courts advertise law clerk positions as "busy days, challenging work, and new connections that can drive your career forward." A clerkship provides you with the additional training, experience, and judgment that employers seek in their candidates.

When I began my clerkship, I was naturally a little nervous. This was my first real job out of law school. Fortunately for incoming law clerks, there is an overlap period where the outgoing law clerks train their successors to ensure a smooth transition. As law clerks, individuals have significant opportunities to research and draft memoranda, judicial opinions, and orders. Under the guidance of their respective judges, clerks have the opportunity to work on important issues early on in their legal careers.

Judge Miller and I worked closely every day on challenging cases. Judge

Miller was assigned to the "Children in Court" docket, which deals cases in which the welfare of a child is endangered by the parents or guardians and often involves the removal of a child from the family home. Handling these cases, freshly out of law school, was an eye-opening experience. I was fortunate to have a mentor like Judge Miller, who was there to explain legal concepts and teach me about the practice of law, while also responsibly, and fairly, handling very emotional cases. Over time, I knew that our professional relationship was turning into a mentorship, and that bond was going to be lifelong.

There is a distinct advantage in being a judicial law clerk aside from the personal and professional relationships. Law clerks gain a unique institutional knowledge. Many judges host annual reunions with their clerks. As new clerks join the "family," the network grows a little larger every year. You may also develop a network of lawyers who clerked for different judges in the same city or courthouse. You will also get to know, and appreciate the role of key administrators in the courthouse, who too can be lifelong friends and mentors.⁴ Law clerks become familiar with certain insights into each judge, they can tell you things to do or not to do with each judge. Understanding how a judge thinks and how a court operates is a crucial skill and increases your value as an attorney.

As a judicial law clerk, I was able to spend time not just with Judge Miller, but with the other members of the legal community. As a law clerk, the schedule is also more predictable than it may be at other points in your career, and there is more ability to be engaged with my fellow clerks and attorneys. I became active with the Atlantic County Bar Association and engaged with the Young Lawyers Division. As a part of the ACBA, I was able to be a part of a summer event where incoming law clerks get to meet others and develop new friendships. These rela-

tionships I built at these events and organizations remain strong today, which allowed me to eventually be elected as a Trustee.

After my clerkship ended, when I returned to the courthouse, it felt like a reunion of sorts. I was able to reconnect with court staff, sheriff's officers, maintenance staff and more. As a young attorney, it put me at ease walking back into a familiar place. Good professional relationships with our colleagues are invaluable and can make everyone's job a little less stressful. Another benefit of the experience.

So what can we do as practicing lawyers to encourage judicial clerkships? We can build and maintain professional connections with law students within the legal community. Encourage law students to apply for judicial clerkships with the Superior Court of New Jersey. Whether they're former employees, interns, or simply connections, we can work with these students to educate them about the benefits of judicial clerkships, and when appropriate, introduce them to the judges themselves. The impact of even an introduction may be enough to lead them to a judicial clerkship, which could transform the future of their career. I know it did for me. ■

Endnotes

1. *Become a Law Clerk*, NJ Courts. njcourts.gov/public/find-jobs/become-a-law-clerk
2. *Why Should I Clerk and Where Can I Clerk?* Cornell Law School Community. community.lawschool.cornell.edu/careers/judicial-clerkships/clerkship-advice/why-should-i-clerk-and-where-can-i-clerk/
3. *Benefits*, NJ Courts njcourts.gov/public/find-jobs/job-benefits
4. *Why Should I Clerk?* Columbia Law School law.columbia.edu/careers/judicial-careers/why-should-i-clerk



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A Young Lawyers Division Journey of Growth, Connection and Leadership

By William H. Dungey III

I joined the New Jersey State Bar Association Young Lawyers Division in the winter of 2021. At the time, I was a new associate at my first firm and did not know anyone at the meeting. I joined because I saw it as an easy way to network and meet other young attorneys. Building a network was especially important because I had attended law school in New York City but began my legal career in South Jersey, where I knew no one in the legal community.



WILLIAM H. DUNGEY III is an associate at Kulzer & DiPadova. His practice is concentrated on business and succession planning, business transactions, state and local tax, and tax litigation. William is the editor-in-chief of New Jersey State Bar Association Young Lawyers Division's *Dictum*, and he is the Camden County District Representative.

Thankfully, the YLD welcomed me immediately. During my first two years, I was largely a fly on the wall, although I served as an assistant editor of the YLD's *Dictum* publication, and assisted the Chair of the Wills for Heroes Committee. While my contributions were modest, I met dozens of young attorneys from across the state and at different stages of their careers. I was struck by how junior partners interacted with mid-level and junior associates as genuine friends. Until then, I had assumed that partners were far removed from associates, both professionally and socially. I came to understand that attorneys remain "young attorneys" for many years, and that a job title does not instantly confer the expertise that only time and practice can provide. Everyone is still learning.

Looking back, meeting and speaking with more experienced attorneys in the YLD prepared me for interactions with senior associates, partners, opposing counsel, clients, and other professionals. People are still people, regardless of the setting, and

there is usually no reason to be nervous. As I continued with the YLD, I was given the opportunity to lead the Wills for Heroes Committee. The responsibility seemed daunting for a third-year associate, but observing how my predecessors managed the events prepared me to step into the role. I successfully led several Wills for Heroes events before passing the reins to another young lawyer, who has taken them even further. That experience gave me confidence and valuable social capital by allowing me to meet people throughout the YLD, the broader Bar, and the first responder community. More importantly, it taught me that clear

communication and a positive attitude go a long way. By observing and learning from those around me, I was prepared to do a good job when my turn came.

I am now entering my second year as Editor-In-Chief of *Dictum*. Although the role is demanding, it gives me the opportunity to help others express themselves through writing. I encourage young attorneys to write about topics that interest them, and senior attorneys to use writing to expand their reach and grow their practices.

The NJSBA has been an invaluable support network, transforming a room full of strangers into a community of

friends and colleagues with whom I have grown and learned. Joining a community where you know no one can be one of the best steps you take, but the key is to keep entering the room until you know at least five people. As you build relationships and learn about others, opportunities emerge that can shape your professional life. I encourage young attorneys who want to expand their networks and practices to get involved as soon as possible. Once involved, do not rush the process; it is perfectly fine to begin as a fly on the wall. Showing up matters most. Your community—and the opportunities that come with it—will follow. ■

PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Continued from page 5

the NJSBA brings our legal community together.

I was proud to attend the New Jersey State Bar Foundation's biggest night of the year, where U.S. District Court Judge Esther Salas and Gerald H. Baker received the 2026 Medal of Honor for their service to New Jersey's legal community. They have demonstrated extraordinary integrity, professionalism and legal skill throughout their careers. And both, like myself, are products of the Hudson County community, with its rich diversity and storied history. I had the privilege of thanking them for their outstanding contributions to the profession and to the advancement and improvement of New Jersey's justice system. There are few occasions when so many leaders of New Jersey's legal community gather in one room to celebrate the ideals and individuals that strengthen our profession. The NJSBA and Foundation provide an invaluable forum for doing just that.

The NJSBA's First Annual Golf Outing at Fiddler's Elbow Country Club in Bedminster was another resounding success.

More than 140 members, guests and sponsors attended, with golfers of all skill levels hitting the links for a four-player scramble and a day of networking and camaraderie. The event also featured a barbecue lunch and a post-golf cocktail and dinner reception. To everyone who joined us—and those who would like to next time—we look forward to seeing you next year. Few activities can match the bond creation that a round of golf creates. If you have ideas for events that bring people together—hikes, picnics, retreats, bowling—we welcome your suggestions.

To celebrate National Hispanic Heritage Month, I also had the privilege of sitting down for a fireside chat with HBA-NJ President Cristal Lambert at an event presented by the NJSBA Minorities in the Profession Section. We had an intimate and engaging discussion about leadership, representation and our personal and professional journeys in the law, followed by an opportunity to connect with colleagues over Latin-inspired cuisine and beverages. Gatherings like these are among the most meaningful ways we can celebrate the contributions of Hispanic

attorneys to our Association and the greater New Jersey legal community.

And there is much more ahead.

If you are looking to get out and reconnect with colleagues this fall, there will be no shortage of opportunities. We have judicial receptions for attorneys who practice in Tax Court and complex business litigation, wine events for women in the profession and young lawyers, along with the vast array of section and committee meetings and NJI-CLE programs that make this such an active time of year at the Association.

I encourage you to take advantage of them. Attend a program. Stop by a reception. Introduce yourself to someone you have only seen on a screen. Reconnect with the colleague you haven't spoken to in a while. Because for all the ways technology will continue to transform the practice of law, there is still no substitute for being in the room.

I hope you'll take advantage of all the NJSBA has to offer this fall. I look forward to seeing you at a seminar, reception or mixer, or at the Annual Mid-Year Meeting in Lisbon this October. ■



Service, Mentorship, and the Next Generation

How WILLS FOR HEROES is Building a Stronger Bar

By Kaitlin Hackett



KAITLIN HACKETT focuses her practice on estate planning, estate administration, and guardianship matters at Porzio Bromberg & Newman, PC. With a commitment to providing personalized legal solutions, she assists clients in navigating the complexities of tax planning, estate administration, and disputes.

When my big cousin, Jared “Jay” Hain, took his own life, it shattered my family in ways that are difficult to articulate. Jay was a Navy veteran, a man who served his country and returned home carrying burdens that too many of our service members bear in silence. His death, in turn, became a quiet burden for my family to carry. Yet, in the aftermath of that loss, I found a sense of purpose that shaped my commitment to service. While I have always prioritized service to others, it is because of Jay that I became passionate about ensuring that those who serve our communities, whether in uniform overseas, or on the front lines here at home, have access to the legal protections they deserve.

That passion led me to the Wills for Heroes program while at Rutgers Law School in Camden, and ultimately to my role as Chair of the Wills for Heroes Committee of the New Jersey State Bar Association Young Lawyers Division. What began as a deeply personal connection to the program's mission has grown into something far larger than I could have imagined. The program is now a thriving initiative that serves not only the estate planning needs of first responders and veterans, but also nurtures the professional development of the next generation of New Jersey lawyers.

Wills for Heroes is a community service initiative of the YLD. The program was originally started by the Wills for Heroes Foundation to express appreciation for the service and sacrifice of first responders in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy by providing them with free basic estate planning documents. At each clinic, volunteer attorneys and law students receive basic wills and estates practice training, meet individually with eligible participants to discuss their estate planning needs, prepare the appropriate legal documents, review those documents with the participant, and supervise their execution. The documents we provide include Last Wills and Testaments, Durable Financial Powers of Attorney, and Advance Directives for Health Care. These documents are often life-changing, particularly for individuals who face elevated risks in their daily lives and service.

When I assumed the role of Chair, the NJSBA YLD Wills for Heroes program in New Jersey was hosting approximately two events per year. While those clinics were a great start, I knew the need far exceeded what only two annual events could address. With the invaluable support of my team, YLD members Richard Wille, Michelle Yang, Allison Price, and a list of many other dedicated volunteers too voluminous to name, we set out to dramatically expand the program's reach. Together, we have grown Wills for

Heroes from just two clinics per year, to hosting monthly clinics throughout the state. That growth required tremendous coordination, volunteer recruitment, and community involvement, but the results speak for themselves: More first responders and veterans are receiving the legal protections they need, more volunteer attorneys are engaging in pro bono service, and more law students are gaining hands-on legal experience.

Broadening the program's eligibility

While the estate planning services we provide are critically important, one of the very meaningful and often overlooked aspects of the Wills for Heroes program is the mentorship and professional development that naturally occurs through our clinic model. This ties directly into the NJSBA's broader mission of generating passionate lawyers and fostering a collegiate bar in our state.

At each clinic, law students work side-by-side with practicing attorneys. They

Originally, Wills for Heroes served only active first responders, including police officers, firefighters, EMTs, and other emergency personnel. Given my personal connection to veteran suicide, and the reality that so many veterans face similar challenges in accessing legal services, expanding eligibility to include veterans became a top priority. This expansion allowed us to honor a broader community of individuals who sacrificed for others, and it deepened the program's impact across New Jersey.

to include veterans is one of the most significant expansions under our leadership. Originally, Wills for Heroes served only active first responders, including police officers, firefighters, EMTs, and other emergency personnel. Given my personal connection to veteran suicide, and the reality that so many veterans face similar challenges in accessing legal services, expanding eligibility to include veterans became a top priority. This expansion allowed us to honor a broader community of individuals who sacrificed for others, and it deepened the program's impact across New Jersey. I believe we now truly support all of our "Heroes."

observe client interviews, discuss legal issues in real time, assist with document preparation, and participate in the execution process. This is not a passive shadowing experience, it is hands-on, substantive engagement with the practice of law in a real-world setting. Students interact directly with clients, ask questions of supervising attorneys, and see firsthand how legal knowledge translates into tangible protections for real people. For many students, particularly those in their first or second year of law school, this is their earliest meaningful exposure to practicing attorneys outside of the classroom.

Wills for Heroes serves a powerful dual purpose. It provides critical estate planning services to first responders and veterans, helping them...designate healthcare decision-makers,...and provide for their loved ones. It simultaneously cultivates the next generation of legal professionals through mentorship, experiential learning, and meaningful community service.

The mentorship value is particularly significant for first-generation law students. Many first-generation students do not enter law school with existing professional networks or family connections in the legal field. They lack the informal guidance that students with lawyers in their families often take for granted, like advice about career paths, practice areas, networking strategies, and the unwritten rules of the profession. Finding mentors organically can be challenging when one does not know where to begin. Wills for Heroes helps bridge that gap by creating structured opportunities for students to develop relationships with practicing attorneys who can provide guidance and mentorship, answer questions, and serve as long-term professional contacts.

As a young lawyer and first-generation attorney myself, I understand this challenge intimately. I did not have a parent or close relative in the legal profession to guide me through the transition from law school to practice. No one in my family could explain what “clinic” or “journal” meant in school. No one could explain what it meant to “bill .1,” manage a client relationship, navigate firm culture, or the business of law as opposed to the practice of law. My only option, like many other first-gen students, was to build a network of other law students and seasoned attorneys who welcomed me, answered my questions without judgment, and showed me that the legal profession could be generous and collaborative rather than isolating. Most of my network-building was done through pro

bono projects and other community service. The first-gen experience fundamentally shaped my identity as a lawyer, and it is one of the reasons I am so committed to making this program available to the next generation of students and young attorneys who want to walk the same path I once did.

For the volunteer attorneys, the mentorship runs in multiple directions. Because our clinics are staffed by volunteers from different firms and practice areas, they naturally foster peer-to-peer mentoring and professional relationships among the attorneys themselves. These connections build the kind of collegial professional community that strengthens our bar as a whole. Attorneys share not only substantive legal knowledge during clinics but also practical skills, career insights, and perspectives that come from diverse professional experiences.

Through repeated participation in clinics and training programs, students gain not only practical legal experience, but also access to a supportive network of attorneys committed to their professional growth. The trajectory from a law student nervously observing their first client meeting, to a confident young attorney providing counsel of their own is exactly what the NJSBA envisions when it speaks of cultivating passionate lawyers and a collegiate bar.

In this way, Wills for Heroes serves a powerful dual purpose. It provides critical estate planning services to first responders and veterans, helping them nominate fiduciaries, designate health-

care decision-makers, express their end-of-life wishes, and provide for their loved ones. It simultaneously cultivates the next generation of legal professionals through mentorship, experiential learning, and meaningful community service. Every clinic is both an act of gratitude toward those who serve, and an investment in the future of our profession.

I think often of Jay when I am at a clinic. I cannot change what happened to my cousin, but I can honor his memory by ensuring that other veterans and first responders receive the legal protections and the human connection they deserve. I can also honor the profession I love by helping to build a bar that is generous, engaged, and committed to lifting up the lawyers who will follow us.

If you are a young attorney looking for a meaningful way to give back while building your professional network, or if you are a law student seeking real-world legal experience and mentorship, I encourage you to volunteer with Wills for Heroes. If you are an experienced attorney who remembers what it was like to be new to the profession, I invite you to join us and share your knowledge with the next generation. Lastly, if you are a first responder or veteran who has been putting off your estate planning, please know that we are here for you, one clinic per month, across New Jersey, free of charge, and with gratitude for your service.

Together, we can serve those who serve us, and build a stronger, more connected bar in the process. ■

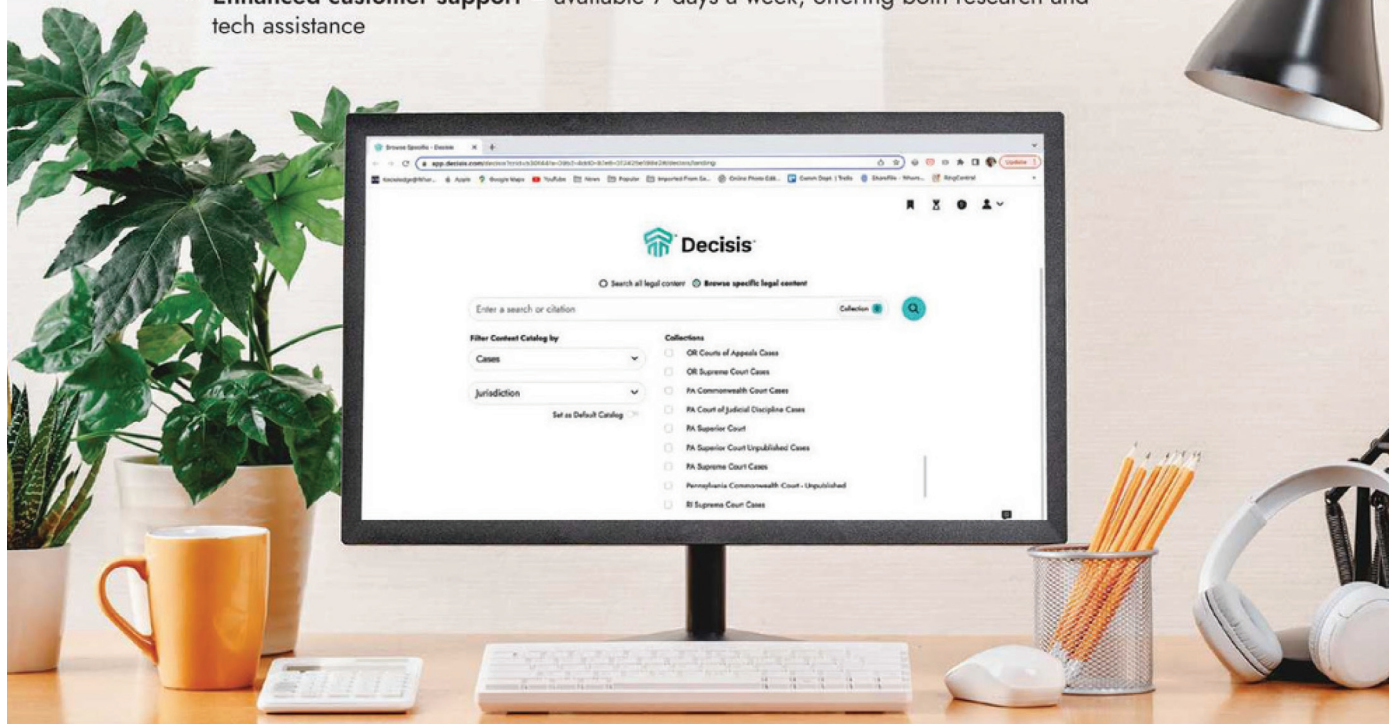
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CALLING AUDIBLES

Practicing Law as AI Rewrites the Playbook



AMBER M. OSTERBRINK is an attorney in Hoagland Longo's General Liability practice group, focusing on premises liability, automobile liability, and insurance coverage/bad faith litigation. A Rutgers University New Brunswick undergraduate and Seton Hall Law graduate, she previously clerked for Hon. Pamela D'Arcy in Atlantic County's Criminal Division. She is active in the legal community as Cape May County Bar Association's NJSBA Young Lawyers Division Representative and a member of the Atlantic County Bar Association.

By Amber M. Osterbrink

It was suggested that I start this article off with an anecdote about the point in time when I had the epiphany of artificial intelligence within the legal realm. However, my AI epiphany had nothing to do with my use of it in the law at all. The moment I realized just how revolutionary AI was going to be happened on Super Bowl Sunday of 2026.

It was my family's turn to host the party, and it was my responsibility to come up with the prop bet questionnaire and bingo with some prizes. It's the morning of the Super Bowl. I live an hour away from the party. I have no prop bets and certainly no bingo cards or prizes. Light bulb! ChatGPT. I open my laptop and choose 25 items I want on my bingo card including a free space and a square for "Go Birds!" despite the Eagles not even being in the Super Bowl. Spoiler alert, "Go Birds!" was a called square on the card.



feel so far away, and I am among the first generation of attorneys building a career alongside a technology that is actively reshaping the profession. Yet back in law school, I barely knew what ChatGPT was, let alone AI more broadly. Between navigating the curve, wrestling with concepts like the Rule Against Perpetuities, and simply learning how to study for a law school exam, I was still learning my own

semester of my 2L year. Before ChatGPT, we would manually need to compile a semester's worth of notes, typed or handwritten, into a single Word document as our outlines to study which took hours. Now, a student can upload all their notes from the semester and have ChatGPT generate an outline in a matter of minutes.

It is questionable as to whether that is

Throughout law school, I used ChatGPT sparingly as it was not a major topic of discussion in my classes or even among my peers. Instead, it felt like this looming new tool that we all knew existed, but few of us really understood how to use, or perhaps had the time to figure out. I never thought to use AI to help turn a semester's worth of notes into a study-ready outline, flash cards, or even generate practice exam questions.

I prompted ChatGPT to make me 10 cards. Two minutes later—done. I review them. I further prompted ChatGPT to actually make 20 cards, the font a bit bigger, oh and also create an answer sheet. Three minutes later—done. ChatGPT assisted me in making 20 bingo cards within 20 minutes. Although it seems simple, that is something that would have taken hours manually.

It was then that I realized, wow, if this is how AI can assist me with fun prompts, what about tedious work assignments?

Every self-respecting article opens with a bit of background on its author, so here's mine. I attended Seton Hall University School of Law in Newark, New Jersey, from August 2021 to May of 2024, sat for the New Jersey State Bar Exam that following July, clerked for a Superior Court Judge while I awaited my results, and landed at a private firm less than a year ago.

As a young lawyer, law school doesn't

playbook, with no idea AI was about to call an audible on the entire profession.

The most notable advancement in the legal field was the release of the arguably most well-known generative artificial intelligence chatbot to the public, ChatGPT. ChatGPT was an overnight success that served as the basis for the AI revolution as we know it today.¹ ChatGPT granted public access to an easily accessible web-based large language model computer program that pulls from the vast amount of information on the internet to quickly answer user questions in real time.²

I know what you may be thinking, but unfortunately, ChatGPT didn't replace those stylish (and quite heavy) textbooks everyone enjoyed lugging around in law school.

ChatGPT was not a significant presence during my time in law school. It did not become publicly available until Nov. 30, 2022,³ toward the end of the fall

beneficial or not. Although it seemed treacherous at the time, self-drafting your own outline was an optimal way to reinforce the material learned throughout the semester. Especially when you likely had one exam that counted toward 100% of your final grade in that class. However, without replacing exam banks, I do think that ChatGPT can be a beneficial tool in creating practice exams if questions from past exams are not accessible. Students can upload their notes, or outline, and prompt ChatGPT to generate multiple practice exams. As someone who prefers to study with practice questions, this may have been helpful in my third year.

Throughout law school, I used ChatGPT sparingly as it was not a major topic of discussion in my classes or even among my peers. Instead, it felt like this looming new tool that we all knew existed, but few of us really understood how to use, or perhaps had the time to figure out. I

never thought to use AI to help turn a semester's worth of notes into a study-ready outline, flash cards, or even generate practice exam questions. Unfortunately for me, I had spent my time preparing for exams the way generations before me had by rereading case briefs and turning semi-coherent class notes into polished outlines.

From 2024 to 2025, I clerked in the New Jersey Superior Court, Criminal Division, in Atlantic County. Even then, I used AI software only sparingly in either my personal or professional life. AI still loomed over me, particularly as

forefront by both my peers and the New Jersey court system. I noticed some of my fellow clerks used AI in their everyday practice, for example, using AI as a tool to identify relevant case law and assist in drafting legal opinions.

At the same time, the New Jersey Judiciary was actively examining AI's potential and how it could be used to improve judicial efficiency. We were provided with free Continuing Legal Education courses, mandatory training, and formal guidance regarding the appropriate use of artificial intelligence in a judicial setting. Similarly, directives and guidance

directly into their products. For example, in 2023, Thomson Reuters launched their own generative AI powered tool that, looking back, has helped to forever transform the process us attorneys have come to know—and love—called legal research.⁶

During my clerkship, certain clerks had trial access to LexisNexis Protege, a personalized AI assistant that can help with legal research and document drafting, among other uses.⁷ In my experience, this tool was a helpful starting point in understanding unfamiliar complex legal concepts. It was also helpful with niche legal concepts.

I often found myself asking these clerks with special access to Protégé to run certain queries related to the legal issue I was researching. Typically, when my own legal research the traditional way returned little to no supportive authorities or when I needed an answer quickly as a starting point. These were my Hail Marys. Although AI did sometimes provide hallucinations, it also provided applicable case law or statutory framework that could be expanded through further research.

Throughout my clerkship, I had become more familiar with AI in a professional and personal capacity, unlike in law school. More importantly, I began to understand the do's, the don'ts, and the upper limits of using AI in a professional setting. As I began to look for where my next step in my legal career was going to be, I accepted AI was no longer something that I could wave off with fear—I needed to learn to use it to my advantage.

By the end of my clerkship, my perception of AI changed from being this advanced computer program beyond my comprehension to one of the many tools in my playbook. And I wasn't alone in how I felt. Thomson Reuters Institute published a study titled "2025 Generative AI in Professional Services Report" that surveyed legal, tax, accounting, corporate risk, and government professionals.⁸ The

As I got further into my clerkship, I realized how quickly the shift toward AI was happening in the legal profession and that it was something that could not be avoided. I began to learn about the evolution of legal research powered by AI through Westlaw and LexisNexis as these platforms began building generative AI directly into their products. For example, in 2023, Thomson Reuters launched their own generative AI powered tool that, looking back, has helped to forever transform the process us attorneys have come to know—and love—called legal research.

stories emerged of attorneys across the country being reprimanded for citing nonexistent cases or fabricated quotations in court filings.

As a clerk, and to this day, I still am respectful of the current limitations of AI in legal writing. I remember being shocked when two attorneys barred in New York were sanctioned \$5,000 each in fines by U.S. District Judge Castel for submitting a brief written by AI that included citations of non-existent court opinions and fake quotes in 2023.⁴

However, during my clerkship, AI was no longer something that could simply be ignored. It was being brought to the

were also being issued to legal professionals throughout the state to provide information on how to ethically practice law with the use of AI.⁵ While guidance on AI use was being provided by the judiciary, I was still hesitant to use the tool in my clerkship as it was easier to avoid and thus, avoid negative consequences.

As I got further into my clerkship, I realized how quickly the shift toward AI was happening in the legal profession and that it was something that could not be avoided. I began to learn about the evolution of legal research powered by AI through Westlaw and LexisNexis as these platforms began building generative AI

share of respondents who described themselves as hesitant fell 11 percentage points, from 35% in 2024 to 24% in 2025.⁹

Other young attorneys I know were starting to use AI as a tool in their playbook as well. Some that I spoke to used it to help generate to-do lists and prioritize what work should be done based on filing dates—even building personalized schedules or work blocks for their assignments. Others were using ChatGPT to refine language in motions that they had already drafted but wanted to polish among other uses.

After much experimentation, I successfully crafted the right prompts to turn AI into my personalized coaching tool for interviews.

One of my interviews was with my present firm, Hoagland, Longo, Moran, Dunst & Doukas. In fact, I was interviewed by our managing partner, Chad M. Moore, who was appointed to the New Jersey Supreme Court Committee on Artificial Intelligence and the Courts in 2023.¹⁰ AI was an extensive topic of conversation in my interview. Suddenly, I was intrigued and curious as to how AI would be integrated into my profession and excited at the opportunity to do so.

My firm has taken a proactive approach to the inevitable artificial intelligence integration in the legal profession. One of the proactive approaches is the adoption of an extensive AI policy, and others are encouraged to consider whether they already have or need to integrate an AI policy for their employees as well. Even if you do not think you need one, you most likely do as AI is being integrated into software that most law firms use daily—such as Microsoft 365¹¹ and even Google!

While AI will certainly never replace lawyers, judges, or support staff, its integration into the legal realm is certainly inevitable. AI software is being integrated into our daily lives both professionally and personally whether we like it or not; whether we even consent to it or not.

Many Google searches now display an AI-generated summary.” Content of emails and texts on iPhones are automatically being summarized. Microsoft has issued its own software to assist with Outlook, Word, et cetera. AI is here to stay, and it is only going to become more integrated in our everyday lives. If anything, certainly at a faster rate than the timeframe from when I was a law student to becoming a practicing attorney.

The question now becomes to what extent and at what rate will it become integrated into private practice, the judicial system, and even public practice. As AI becomes more integrated into the legal profession, will you accept it with open arms or hesitate to embrace the change? Do you even have a choice? ■

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CARA N. ANAN is the managing attorney of Cornerstone Legal LLC, where she represents clients throughout New Jersey and New York. A former judicial law clerk to the Honorable Richard W. English, P.J.F.P., Cara brings a strategic and practical approach to her practice and also serves as an adjunct professor. She has been recognized as a Super Lawyers Rising Star each year from 2023 through 2026.

What I Wish I Knew in My First Year as a Solo Practitioner

By **Cara N. Anan**

There is a moment—maybe you have felt it before—sitting in a fluorescent conference room, reviewing a document that will soon be reviewed by people above you. Everything is quiet except for the hum of the lights and the rustle of paper. Then somewhere in that silence, a thought slips in: Is this it? Not in a dramatic, cinematic way. Just a small, honest flicker of a question that you quickly bury under the next task on your list, but somehow, it keeps coming back I kept burying it, again, and again, and again. And then one day, I stopped burying it.

That is how my own legal practice was born—not from a grand business plan, or a perfectly timed market opportunity, but from a decision to stop waiting for someone else to hand me the kind of practice I actually wanted to build. I wanted autonomy. I wanted to sit across from a client and know that the advice I was giving was mine, the relationship was mine, and the outcome mattered to me personally—not just finan-

cially. I wanted to build something. So I did.

What I did not fully appreciate, standing at the edge of that leap, was how much I did not know. Not about the law—but what I did not know about everything else. Everything else, it turns out, is most of it.

The Clients Do Not Just Appear

In a big firm, the clients are already there. They exist in the system, passed down through relationships built over decades, managed by partners whose names are on the door. You do the work, and the work finds you. Going solo dismantles that entire infrastructure overnight, and nothing quite prepares you for the silence of a brand new website and a phone that has not yet rung.

My first lesson was building a client base is not about advertising—it is about relationships, and relationships take time. I had to show up. To bar association events, to committee meetings, to conversations I might have previously scrolled past on

LinkedIn. I had to learn that every person I met was not a potential client, but was potentially connected to one, and that being genuinely present and genuinely helpful—without an agenda—was the only marketing strategy that actually worked and brought in referrals.

If I could go back and tell myself one thing about client development, it would be this: Start before you think you need to. Once you are solo, you are building the plane while flying it, and there is very little time to also be laying the runway.

The Loneliness Nobody Mentions

Firms have a built-in community. There are colleagues in the next office, assistants down the hall, lunch orders and war stories and the ambient hum of other people working alongside you. When you go solo, that disappears entirely, and the silence can be genuinely disorienting.

Work-life balance, I also discovered, does not improve automatically when you work for yourself. If anything, the boundaries get harder to maintain, because the firm is always with you—on your phone, in your inbox, in the back of your mind at dinner. The autonomy I had craved came with a shadow: the freedom to work all the time, which is not freedom at all. Learning to close the laptop and be present—with my family, with myself—was its own kind of professional skill, and one I am still actively developing.

The Systems You Build (Or Fail To)

In a firm, the systems exist. The intake process, the file management, the billing software, the conflict checks, the templates—all of it is already there, already running, and your job is simply to plug into it. Going solo means building every single one of those systems from scratch, while simultaneously trying to serve clients and generate new business.

I underestimated this. Dramatically. In my early months, I was improvising

workflows that should have been standardized, recreating documents I should have templated, and spending time on administrative tasks that should have been systematized long before my first client ever signed a retainer. The cost of that disorganization was not just efficiency—it was mental bandwidth, and that is the most precious and finite resource a solo practitioner has.

What I wish I had done was invest in the infrastructure before I needed it. Choose the practice management software, build the intake forms, create the templates, establish the workflows—all of it—before the clients arrived and demanded your full attention. Because once the work starts coming in, you will not have the luxury of building your systems thoughtfully.

You Don't Have to Do This Alone—But You Have to Choose Your People

Here is something nobody told me before I went solo, and something I want to say clearly to anyone reading this who is considering it: Solo does not have to mean alone. But here is the catch—at a firm, your team is handed to you. You get the paralegals, the assistants, the support staff. You do not choose them, and you do not recruit them. When you start your own practice, none of that exists. You walk in on day one, and it is just you. Whatever team you are going to build, you have to build it yourself, intentionally, from the ground up.

One of the best decisions I made in my first year was bringing Alessandro Amato on board as chief operating officer. Alessandro is not an attorney—and that is precisely the point. While I am focused on the law, on the clients, on the cases, Alessandro is focused on everything that makes the firm actually function: The operations, the client experience, the day-to-day infrastructure that allows the legal work to happen smoothly and professionally. He is the reason clients feel cared for

from the very first phone call. He is the reason our systems work. He is the reason I can be fully present as an attorney without simultaneously trying to be a full-time office manager, marketing director, and client services coordinator.

What I wish someone had told me is that finding the right people is a strategy you need from the very beginning. You will not stumble into your Alessandro. You have to look for that person deliberately, understand what gaps they fill, and be willing to invest in the right fit before you feel financially comfortable doing so. The right team member does not cost you—they pay for themselves in the time they give back to you and the quality they add to your clients' experience.

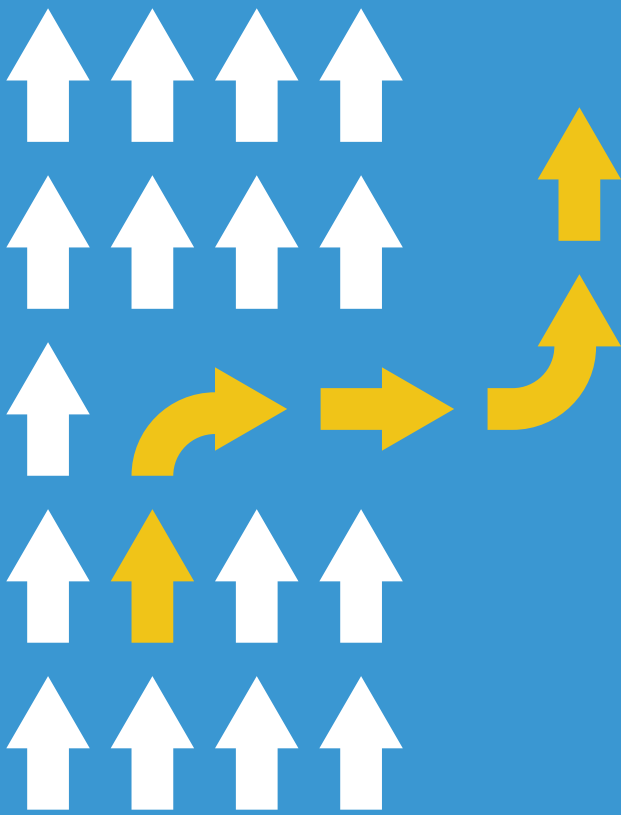
The solo practice journey is yours alone to take. But the firm you build does not have to run that way. Surround yourself with people who complement your strengths, who share your values, and who care about what you are building as much as you do. That is exactly how you build something that lasts.

What I Know Now, Almost One Year In

Here is what I did not expect: I love this. Not every day, and not every part of it, but in the deep and sustaining way that matters. My practice, Cornerstone Legal LLC, is not yet a year old, and there is still so much I am learning and building. But I can tell you the question I buried in that conference room was the right question, and that I am glad I finally stopped burying it.

If you are sitting somewhere right now, asking yourself the same quiet question, I am not going to tell you it is easy, but is worth asking honestly. And if you decide to leap, go in with your eyes open: the clients, the cash flow, and the systems will all demand your attention at once. But on the other side of all of that is a practice that is entirely, unapologetically yours.

That is worth everything. ■



When a Good Job Is No Longer the **Right** Job

By Brandon E. DeJesus

Like many young lawyers, I entered the profession with a clear plan for the start of my career: finish law school, clerk for a judge, and find a position where I could get into the courtroom and learn how to practice law. For me, that opportunity began at the Prosecutor's Office, but that's not where it ended.



BRANDON DEJESUS is an associate attorney at Dasti & Staiger Attorneys at Law, located in Ocean County. After beginning his career in the Ocean County Prosecutor's Office, Brandon now primarily focuses his practice on land use matters, labor and employment, municipal work, real estate and criminal defense.

Prosecution offered almost everything a young lawyer would want. The work mattered and the office entrusted me with substantial responsibility early. Right out of the gate, I prepared cases, met with witnesses and victims, made oral arguments before Judges, and helped make decisions with real-life consequences. That responsibility accelerated my development as a lawyer and gave me confidence I probably could not have developed as quickly elsewhere. It also gave me something harder to measure: a strong sense of professional identity. I was a prosecutor, and I was proud of the work. That made my decision to leave more complicated.

Career changes are easy to explain when someone is miserable, but much harder when the position is familiar and professionally rewarding. Over time, the questions I asked myself early in my career began to change. At first, I was mostly concerned with where I could get the best experience and become a better lawyer. A few years later, those were no longer the only questions that mattered. Marriage, a two-attorney household, and a young child required me to weigh old factors and new factors in tandem: compensation, flexibility, control over my schedule, long-term opportunity, and the ability to build a career that worked alongside the rest of my life, not apart from it.

I enjoyed being a prosecutor. I believed in the work and the pursuit of justice. I also felt myself becoming a better attorney at a rapid pace. Despite my enjoyment and comfort, my calculus about staying in government work changed. It changed because the qualities that had mattered most early in my career—meaningful work, responsibility, and professional growth—no longer were enough justification for a career choice on their own.

Ultimately, I decided to transition from prosecution to private practice, shifting my focus from government work to billable hours. My experience was hardly unique. A 2024 National District Attorneys Association survey found that although 93% of prosecutors reported high job satisfaction, 57% had considered leaving the profes-

sion, citing personal well-being, better pay, and overwhelming case loads among the primary reasons.¹ I did not leave because I believed private practice was better than public service; I left because at that point in my life, it offered things I increasingly valued. Private practice offered a greater variety of legal issues and a different level of autonomy. However, it also introduced new challenges, such as dealing with new unfamiliar areas of law, meeting billing requirements, and adapting to an entirely different set of expectations.

That experience has made me rethink the way young lawyers discuss career

ing greater earning potential didn't diminish my commitment to public service; it simply meant that supporting a household, raising a child, and planning for the future made a career's economics impossible to ignore.

Looking beyond practical considerations, I was eager to discover what lay ahead. My experience in prosecution gave me a strong foundation. I wanted to know whether the skills I had developed as a prosecutor would translate elsewhere. That meant giving up the comfort of knowing what I was doing and accepting that, in most respects, I would be a beginner again.

We spend a lot of time asking young lawyers what kind of law they want to practice. As our careers develop, maybe the better question is what kind of life we want to build, and what kind of legal career fits within it. ■

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Early in a legal career, experience can feel like the only currency that counts. Young lawyers want files, hearings, trials, difficult assignments, and any chance to get on their feet and say, “Good morning, Your Honor.” As life outside the office grows, however, a career must provide more than experience alone.

decisions. As young lawyers, we treat our chosen practice areas as a permanent declaration, even though careers and lives rarely remain that simple. The right job at the beginning of a legal career may not be the right job several years later. That doesn't mean our first career choice was wrong.²

Early in a legal career, experience can feel like the only currency that counts. Young lawyers want files, hearings, trials, difficult assignments, and any chance to get on their feet and say, “Good morning, Your Honor.” As life outside the office grows, however, a career must provide more than experience alone.

Legal practice is demanding almost everywhere, but there is a meaningful difference between working long hours and having some control over when those hours are worked.³ In a household with two attorneys and one child, flexibility and autonomy became as valuable as experience and compensation. Want-

Letting go of my identity as a prosecutor was harder than I expected. For years, saying “I'm a prosecutor” had been an easy answer to both what I did and how I saw myself professionally. That familiarity can easily become a strong reason to stay in a role. I didn't choose to leave because prosecution had stopped being a worthwhile career. At this stage in life, I had to consider whether it still fit the lawyer and person I was becoming.

Young lawyers should resist the idea that choosing a career path means committing to it for life. The legal profession often encourages us to define ourselves early on. We might label ourselves as prosecutors, litigators, transactional attorneys, government lawyers, or private practitioners. Those labels can help us build a professional identity, but they can also make changing direction feel more dramatic than it actually is.⁴ Careers should be allowed to evolve because our lives do.

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NEW AGAIN

Starting Over After Almost 20 Years of Practicing Law

By Ana Milena Goncalves



ANA MILENA GONCALVES is the founder of AMG Law, LLC, a solo family law practice in Paramus. After two decades practicing law, including 17 years in personal injury litigation, she launched her firm in 2023 to focus exclusively on family law. She is bilingual in English and Spanish, serves a significant Spanish-speaking client base in Bergen and Passaic counties, and is a New Jersey Judiciary Roster Mediator for the Economic Aspects of Family Law Cases. She is a 2025–2026 NJSBA Leadership Fellow.

It's 2001. I had just graduated with a double major in psychology and sociology. In my family, this meant I had reached the pinnacle. I was a college graduate, ready to leave my mark on the world. I didn't always know what drove me, but when my psychology studies touched on children and families, I knew I found it. Suddenly, studying was no longer a chore. I wanted to learn more, dive deeper, and understand the why.

At 21, I didn't know where that would lead. Here I was with a double major and no next step. My parents moved back to Colombia. They had accomplished their goal: to see their youngest graduate from college. I wasn't mad. I could have moved to California instead. What was the difference between me moving and them moving?

But here I was at 21, figuring out adulthood and responsibility with no fallback plan. My first post-college job was in accounts receivable at Computer Associates. What did that have to do with psychology and sociology? Nothing, but it filled an immediate need: pay the bills. To say I was unfulfilled would be the understatement of the century. I knew this was not my forever job, so I started searching for my next move.

That search landed me at Lutheran Social Services in New York City, as a foster care caseworker. It was incredible. I was helping children and families navigate one of the most difficult times of their lives. Children had been removed from their homes, parents were working to restore their parental rights, and foster families were doing their best to bring normalcy to the lives of the children entrusted to their care. I was making a difference. I felt that this was where I could do the most good. The next logical step seemed clear: apply to an M.S.W. program.

I applied. I was accepted. And never went. The decision to apply is where my journey to law began. Law school was never a dream. As a matter of fact, it had never even been a blip on my radar.

Law school was outside the realm of what I had ever believed was possible. Me? Law school? The bar? A lawyer? Never. No one in my family was a lawyer. I knew no lawyers. I didn't even know what it would take to become one.

But, as the universe would have it, I met someone who believed in me before I did. Someone who saw possibilities where I saw limitations. I found a peer who became a lifelong friend and mentor.

We sat down and discussed my love for children, families, and anything that touched on psychology and sociology. For me, obtaining my M.S.W. was already a reach goal. A law degree, impossible.

Then we discussed how many lives I could touch as a lawyer, how many families I could help. And, honestly, the financial bottom line. I'd have to pay for my M.S.W. or J.D. (remember, my parents were in Colombia), and I'd have to work while obtaining either. Night school was the only way I could make it work. Then we did the math, and the math made sense. But me, in law school? I just couldn't see it.

I was guided and pushed into a world I didn't know existed for me. I took a leap of faith and took the LSAT. What was the

worst that could happen? Law schools don't accept me? I had a plan B: my M.S.W. There was nothing to lose but uncertainty itself.

Another hiccup: Whether I pursued my M.S.W. or my J.D., I needed a higher-paying job. Although I loved my position as a caseworker, I knew I would be unable to sustain myself, buy books, and pay for either program.

I said goodbye to my position and to the kids I loved, and started working as an administrative assistant at a financial firm in Scarsdale, New York, where I learned the importance of excellence in everything I did. I was endearingly nicknamed Radar (a *M*A*S*H** reference) and eventually found myself researching philanthropic organizations for their charitable portfolio.

Law school was outside the realm of what I had ever believed was possible. Me? Law school? The bar? A lawyer? Never. No one in my family was a lawyer. I knew no lawyers. I didn't even know what it would take to become one.

Also wonderful work.

In the meantime, I took the LSAT and was accepted into a few night programs. My intention was to graduate, sit for the bar exams (New York and New Jersey), and, with God's grace, start working at a family law firm.

It was now the summer of 2003, and I was about to start my law school journey. I decided on a law school close to home: Touro Law Center. Working at the financial firm no longer made sense. They expected me full time, and I could never make it from Scarsdale to Huntington in time for classes, let alone study (Touro since moved to its campus in Central Islip).

I found a small family law firm in need

of a legal assistant. The attorney and I shared a small office. She also dabbled in entertainment law. She was great, but the fit wasn't right. My bills didn't care about fit, though, and I needed the flexibility. Another solution presented itself: Her suitemate was a personal injury attorney who had just started his own practice. He offered me a position. I accepted. Little did I know that I would stay there for nearly two decades. Legal assistant, paralegal, associate, senior associate: all of life's milestones, one firm.

I learned, I grew, I tried cases, managed a large caseload, had autonomy. Yet something was missing. It was quiet at first, a void, a missing piece. I knew family law had been the goal, but I had dedicated so many years to personal injury that the shift, once again, felt impossible.

I was comfortable. The work had become easy, routine, predictable.

I had been able to spend time with my children, attend school events, be present for illnesses, and enjoy summer Fridays. I was able to care for my premature baby and my dying mother, from home, before COVID made remote work possible.

I was grateful, and unfulfilled.

I found myself at a crossroads: I could continue excelling at the job I knew and live in comfort, or I could take a leap of faith, bet on myself, and embark on the journey that had brought me to law in the first place.

I did it once before. And I did it again.

The decision was not easy, and it was

not made quickly. I had a conversation with my boss and explained that I was at a crossroads. It was 2022; 16 years into my legal career, 19 years with his office, and it was time for a change, even if I didn't know what that change would look like. There was no extreme catalyst, just a soft hum pushing me toward something different. He took it well, better than well. He reminded me that I still had a position at his office and that I could explore the future without resigning or cutting back my hours.

It was my green light. I knew family law would be the answer, but I had no idea how to get there. So I did what any 40-something-year-old would do: I went to YouTube. Not for a how-to on building a practice, but on what it would take to start a business. I had been taught the practice of law, and I had practiced law, but I knew nothing about building a business. I knew it would require a different set of skills, a different mindset. What it would entail, I did not yet know.

Through my search, I found the idea of personal development. It had not dawned on me that all these years I had focused on professional development: the law, the CLEs, the techniques.

Personal development, though? Very little of that outside my professional world.

Building a business would require personal development. I found entrepreneur and motivational speaker Jim Rohn and, for the first time, heard the idea of working harder on yourself than you do at your job. It was eye-opening. I started listening every morning, in the car, at home, whenever I had free time. Failure is a result of small errors in judgment committed every day. Success is a result of discipline, consistency, focus, and perseverance practiced every day. This message from Rohn, these words, were now on repeat. In 2022, I began the work of personal development, becoming the person who would be required to start a business, and I haven't stopped since.

In late 2023, on my birthday, I made a decision: I would create the LLC. I quickly learned there was more to figure out than I expected. What would my firm name be? Law Office of Ana Milena Goncalves? Something else? More questions than answers. My year of personal development helped me push through the uncertainty without giving up. I confirmed that New Jersey allowed trade names, so my firm name didn't have to be a mouthful. Back to the drawing board: Goncalves Law, LLC? My vision was bigger. I finally settled on AMG Law, LLC. Who files the LLC paperwork? Zen-Business did it for me. On Nov. 21, 2023, AMG Law, LLC was born. The formation documents made it real.

A real law firm, with no clients. On paper it existed, but I was still a long way from my first client.

Did I mention that I had practiced New York personal injury law, and that AMG Law, LLC was a New Jersey-based firm? I had never practiced in New Jersey. I had been living in Jersey since 2006 but practicing in New York for 17 years. I had to learn New Jersey law, New Jersey procedure, and the New Jersey court system.

Hello, 1L. This is the part of my journey that brought me back to my 1L life, except that it was a little less scary. Scary still, just less. I had 17 years of lawyering behind me, and my brain had already been rewired to think differently: not to stay with the problem, but to seek the solution. I searched for pro bono organizations that offered hands-on practice and mentorship for attorneys who wanted to learn a new area of practice. I found many, including Volunteer Lawyers for Justice, Northeast New Jersey Legal Services, and Legal Services of New Jersey. My first New Jersey pro bono case came through VLJ, and the staff there were nothing short of amazing. I explained my background and my desire to learn.

I took countless hours of CLE, virtual and in person, centered on New Jersey family law and practice. I attended a Solo

and Small Firm Symposium. I sat in rooms where everyone was more advanced than I was, rooms where listening alone was an education.

I signed up to be a per diem attorney. Education by exposure. I took the opportunity to sit in courtrooms and listen: to attorneys making their arguments, to judges asking questions, to self-represented litigants presenting their evidence.

I joined the Bergen County Bar Association. I walked into their office on a random weekday, nervous beyond belief, and said, essentially, that the thing I needed most was the very thing I had been avoiding: networking. I had never networked before. I had never needed to; I had always been content standing in the corner of a room, observing. But here I was, with a law firm on paper, no pipeline, no referral network, and a genuine desire to be of service. The staff at the BCBA were beyond welcoming. They guided me and invited me to their next CLE event.

During that same period, in late 2024, I made a decision: I would start telling friends and family that I had opened a family law practice and was available to serve the community. I am bilingual in English and Spanish, and happy to offer my services. I was as ready as I would ever be, and I knew I would be honest if a matter was beyond me. At the gym, I mentioned it to the receptionist. A few days later, she called. She had received a motion for modification and wanted to know if I could help. I explained how new I was to this, but told her that if she was willing to give me a chance, I would tell her honestly if I couldn't handle it. I handled it.

Through that work, I met an attorney at a BCBA CLE. When I introduced myself, I knew nothing about him, his expertise, or his contributions to the world of family law. He was simply a friendly face, and I was eager to get to know other attorneys. Little did I know

he would become an instrumental guide (he doesn't care for the word "mentor"). That chance encounter turned into a friendship I will cherish for a lifetime. Through his encouragement, I applied for and was selected as a 2025-2026 NJSBA Leadership Fellow, which led to an invitation to present a CLE comparing personal injury law in New York and New Jersey. And through the BCBA referral service, I have been able to serve a large number of Spanish-speaking clients, and along the way I connected with the Women's Rights Information Center and the Alternatives to Domestic Violence, both invaluable resources.

Late last year, I found the Statewide Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, a non-profit whose mission is to educate entrepreneurs. Earlier this year, I applied for and was selected for their Entrepreneurial Training Program (ETP), a 16-week,

free program focused on developing small business owners and giving them the tools to grow and scale. The practice of law and the business of law are not the same creature but they require equal attention. Personal development taught me the grit needed to push through the hard parts. Practicing family law means helping families navigate emotionally charged situations. Building a business means facing uncertainty with confidence. Our livelihood depends on both. Through the ETP I learned the importance of understanding the numbers, how to scale thoughtfully, and the value of surrounding yourself with others on the same path.

In the past year, I trained as a mediator and parenting coordinator and am now on the approved roster. Most recently, I completed Collaborative Divorce training.

Finding an area of law you love and are passionate about doesn't make the process of building and growing a practice easier, but it does make pushing through the difficult parts easier. When your mission, vision, and values align with your practice, the late nights are easier to tolerate. Giving up when it gets hard stops being a viable option, and the service you provide your clients stays at the forefront.

The path is simple but not easy. If your why is strong enough, doors that once seemed closed will open. That doesn't mean they will open when you want them to, or expect them to. It just means you will keep pushing until they do.

"Success isn't about knowing how things will turn out. It's about trusting yourself to figure it out as you go."—Jim Rohn. ■



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MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

First-Generation Law Student Builds a Path Through Service



For Rutgers Law School student and Army National Guard member LUZISANIA FIGUERAS, the path to the legal profession has been anything but conventional. As a first-generation college student, she once faced the possibility of putting her education aside when financial aid ran out. Rather than abandon her goals, she joined the military, beginning a journey that would allow her to serve her country while continuing her education and discovering a passion for advocacy. Today she is balancing law school, a full-time career and a new role as a mother, all while preparing for a future as a litigator. As a recipient of a New Jersey State Bar Foundation scholarship, she is now one step closer to a goal years in the making. She recently spoke about her journey, the lessons she learned through military service and the example she hopes to set for others.

Tell me about where you grew up and what your life was like before you joined the military.

I was born in Newark and raised in Elizabeth, primarily by my mom. I'm a first-generation college student. Growing up, higher education didn't always feel like something that was attainable. Not a lot of people around me pursued college because, for many families, it just didn't seem financially feasible. My mom was always the person who motivated me and pushed me to want more for myself. She reminded me not to give up on my dreams, even if the path wasn't easy or there wasn't someone in our family who had done it before. She wanted to give me the foundation I needed to succeed, and education was a big part of that. In high school I was fortunate to participate in programs which gave first-generation students exposure to college and the opportunity to take classes during the summer. I was also involved in JROTC, so I had some exposure to the military from a young age.

When I had the opportunity to go to Rutgers University in New Brunswick for my undergraduate studies, it meant everything to me. I received grants and scholarships my first year, but eventually that funding ran out. I found myself at a crossroads. I had made it this far, I was the first person in my family to do so, and I had my family looking up to me. I didn't want finances to be the reason I had to give up on my education. That was a major reason I decided to join the military. I knew that if I was going to find a way to pay for my education, I was willing to earn that opportunity through my service. I had to take a break from school for a period, but when I returned, I was a member of the Army National Guard and was able to

continue my education while simultaneously building my military career.

Where did you travel and serve during your time in the military?

I remained in the United States during my service, but the military took me to several places around the country. I spent time at Fort Jackson in South Carolina and Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri. When I returned to New Jersey, I was often stationed at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, and I also traveled to places like Virginia and Louisiana for additional training.

One of the benefits of serving in the National Guard was that when my military duties were finished, I could come home, take off my military hat, put my graduation cap back on and continue pursuing my education. Balancing those two parts of my life wasn't always easy, but it allowed me to serve while continuing to work toward my goals.

Are there particular experiences or lessons from your military service that have had a lasting impact on you?

One of the things that has stayed with me most is seeing how people from different backgrounds and walks of life can come together around a common mission. You learn to put aside your differences to work as a team and rely on one another. When things get difficult, you're in a high-stress environment or you're away from your family for an extended period of time, you have each other.

The military also taught me the importance of taking care of people. If I'm responsible for people who are new to the mil-

itary or for a squad, I have to check on them and make sure they're OK. You need to know that your people are in the right place mentally and emotionally before you can go out and accomplish the mission. In a way, all of those experiences have also brought me back to the law. At the heart of it is advocacy. You can't effectively advocate for people unless you're willing to be there, listen to them and understand what they need. My military service has taught me that I'm capable of being someone others can rely on, especially when they're going through difficult moments.

When did you begin thinking about becoming a lawyer?

It took me some time to figure out what I wanted to do. I had always heard that you go to college in order to build a successful life. But once I got there, I realized I didn't necessarily know what came next or what career I wanted to pursue. I realized how much I loved reading and writing and ultimately double-majored in English and communication and minored in sociology. Looking back, there were a lot of signs pointing me toward the law. I joined the debate team and participated in the pre-legal program, which gave me some exposure to law school. I also became involved in advocacy and volunteer work. As a court-appointed special advocate, I worked with children in the foster care system, meeting with them regularly, accompanying them to court and making recommendations to judges. I also worked in violence prevention and as a victim advocate, supporting survivors of domestic violence as they navigated interactions with doctors, police and the court system. At the time I didn't fully realize how closely that advocacy work intersected with the law. I just knew I wanted to be there for people during moments when they needed someone the most.

During law school you became a mother. How has that experience shaped your journey and your determination to become a lawyer?

When I became pregnant, I never viewed motherhood and law school as competing choices. I never thought, "Now I'm becoming a mother, so maybe this isn't the right time." If anything, becoming a mother made me even more intentional about finishing what I started. Suddenly there was someone who might one day look at the decisions I made and the example I set.

One of my favorite memories from law school happened when I was nearly nine months pregnant with my daughter, Emilia. I was competing in the semifinals of our Hunter Moot Court competition, standing in a courtroom and making an argument before a panel of real judges. I loved every minute of

it. I remember thinking that one day I'll be able to tell Emilia that she was already there with me. Before she was even born, before she could ever see me inside a courtroom, she had already stood in one with her mom. That experience reinforced for me that this is what I'm meant to do.

Once you graduate, what kind of lawyer do you hope to become? How have your life experiences shaped the work you want to do and the people you hope to serve?

My immediate goal is to finish law school strong and gain as much practical litigation experience as possible. I know that I want to be a litigator, so I'm trying to take advantage of every opportunity I can to develop those skills. I also want service and mentorship to remain important parts of my life. I'm particularly interested in supporting first-generation students and people who may not see a traditional path into the legal profession.

My own path has certainly not been traditional, and I don't want others to become discouraged because their path looks different. If I can set an example or encourage someone else to keep going, I want to do that. Sometimes one door closes and you have to find another way forward. You have to understand why you're pursuing this path and keep pushing toward it. I may not know exactly what area of law I'll ultimately practice in, but I know I want to litigate and advocate for others and continue serving the communities around me.

What does receiving a scholarship from the New Jersey State Bar Foundation mean to you, both financially and as recognition of the path you've taken to law school?

It means a lot to me. Having gone through a point in my undergraduate education when I had to completely rethink how I was going to stay in school because my funding had run out, I don't take educational support lightly. The financial assistance absolutely makes a difference, especially at this point in my life as a new mother balancing law school, my full-time career and military service. But the scholarship means more to me than the financial support alone. There's something incredibly meaningful about being recognized for the journey I've taken and the work I've put in to get here. It feels like someone looked at my story and said, "We believe in you and we think you're worth investing in." For someone who once had to step away from school because the money ran out, that means a great deal. When I look at where I started and where I am today, receiving this scholarship reminds me of how far I've come. It doesn't just help me finish law school. It gives me even more motivation to keep going. ■

NJSBA Events

NJSBA Members Connect, Serve and Lead Across New Jersey and Beyond

From the Association's inaugural golf outing and young lawyer service projects to law school outreach and national policy work, NJSBA members stayed active throughout the summer. Recent events highlighted networking, professional service, community outreach and leadership at every stage of the profession.

NJSBA's Inaugural Golf Outing Draws More Than 140 Participants

The NJSBA welcomed more than 140 members, guests and sponsors to its Inaugural Golf Outing at Fiddler's Elbow Country Club in Bedminster. Golfers of all skill levels hit the links for a four-player scramble and enjoyed a day of networking and camaraderie. The event also featured a BBQ lunch and a post-golf cocktail and dinner reception. The NJSBA thanks everyone who attended and helped make the inaugural outing a success, with special appreciation to the event's key sponsors for their support.





NJSBA President Addresses Seton Hall Law Students at Orientation

The New Jersey State Bar Association kicked off the academic year with a visit to Seton Hall Law School, where NJSBA President Norberto A. Garcia welcomed incoming 1L students and offered advice as they begin their legal education. Garcia, who earned his undergraduate degree from Seton Hall University, shared words of inspiration and guided the students through the New Jersey Commission on Professionalism in the Law's Lawyer's Pledge, emphasizing the values and responsibilities that come with entering the legal profession.



Young Lawyers Division Hosts Networking Fundraiser for Volunteer Lawyers for Justice

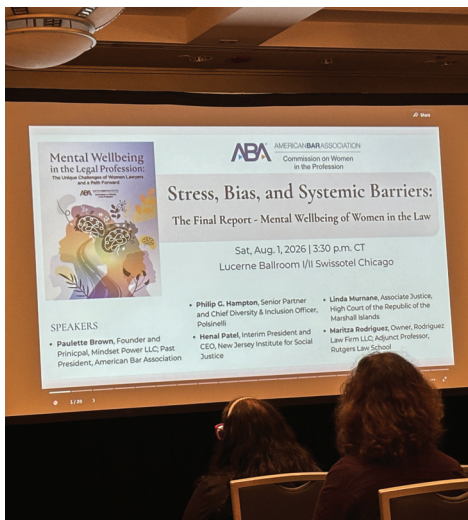
NJSBA members joined the Young Lawyers Division at Homestead Bar & Kitchen in Morristown for a networking fundraiser benefiting Volunteer Lawyers for Justice's New Jersey Survivors Justice Project, which provides legal services and support to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. The division organized a silent auction, with all \$8,500 in proceeds benefiting Volunteer Lawyers for Justice and its mission to expand access to justice for New Jersey residents in need.





NJSBA Delegation Joins ABA in Adopting National Policy Priorities

New Jersey State Bar Association leaders joined the American Bar Association's policy-making body to debate and adopt national policies on issues ranging from judicial independence and immigration enforcement to legal ethics and law school recruitment. The action came during the ABA Annual Meeting in Toronto, held July 29 through Aug. 4, where nearly 600 delegates representing ABA entities and state, local and specialty bar associations convened for the association's two-day House of Delegates meeting.



Young Lawyers Division Gives Back Through Wills for Heroes

Members of the NJSBA Young Lawyers Division put their legal skills to work for those who serve their communities during a recent Wills for Heroes event at the Salem County Office of Emergency Management. Volunteer attorneys, paralegals and law students came together to provide free estate planning services to first responders, veterans and their spouses, assisting 17 participants with important documents and planning for the future.



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New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1520

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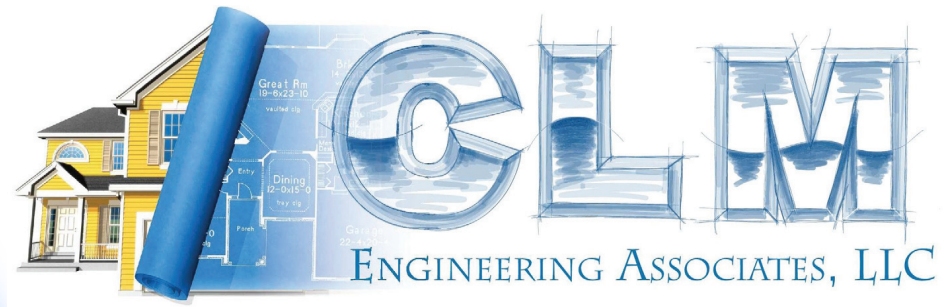
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