

2015

Chip Off the Old Block

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Recommended Citation

46 U. Tol. L. Rev. 371 (2015).

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CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK

*Jim Rosenblatt**

INTRODUCTION

WHAT a proud moment it is for a father or mother to have a child pursue the same vocation as the parent. There is something affirming about knowing that a child has observed your work, your lifestyle, your colleagues, and your impact on the world, and chooses to follow in your vocational footsteps. A child who claims the lifestyle and work of the parent, after having observed it close at hand for a number of years, sends a positive message to the parents that what they are doing is worthwhile enough to be emulated.

I. A MILITARY TRADITION

Following my 30-year career as a judge advocate officer in the Army with countless moves, school disruptions, and leaving friends behind, our four boys all vowed they would never serve in the military. Irony-upon-irony, two of them later served for their own reasons. Indeed, one son continues to serve in the Army today as a judge advocate officer, after attending law school at the University of Virginia under the Army's Funded Legal Education Program. He enrolled in law school while I was still in the Army, before I became a law school dean.

II. CLOSE TO HOME

A second son also chose to attend law school. Our youngest son earned a business degree and worked for a bank, a financial services company, and then a defense contractor in northern Virginia, before deciding that he wanted to go to law school. His college grades were excellent, while his LSAT score was fair. He let me know that he was going to apply to Mississippi College School of Law, where I was serving as the dean. I was delighted to learn this news and offered my moral support to him during the application process. He applied to a number of law schools throughout the mid-Atlantic and southeast area.

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A. Admissions Phase

The first question I faced was whether to let our admissions office know that he was applying. I was prepared to let the information slip in a casual way, without appearing pushy. However, I finally concluded that it would be best not to mention it at all. We have a relatively uncommon surname (Rosenblatt), and I concluded that this information would come to light in the normal course of events.

I recall the day that our admissions director came into my office and let me know that my son's application had been received. I said only, "Thanks for letting me know," and let the normal process operate. I sensed that our admissions folks appreciated my not mentioning anything about the application. That prevented them from feeling any real or perceived pressure that would have resulted if I had mentioned his application.¹

My son's application was not in the "immediate acceptance" stack, so some time went by without any action on the application. Again, though tempted to inquire as to the status of his application, I refrained from checking. In the normal course of events, he was eventually offered admission, and the admissions folks did not let me know. Rather, I learned of the decision from my son. Not only was I committed to remain out of the process, but our admissions folks were dedicated to making the process work in a normal way so there would be no actual or perceived favoritism from the dean. If word had gotten to our faculty that the dean pushed his son through the application process, neither he nor I would have retained credibility.

B. Dean-Student Relationship

My son and I spoke before classes began. We agreed upon a course of conduct designed to promote awareness that in law school he was on his own, without help from Father Dean. Not only was this important with respect to the faculty and my relationship with them, I also did not want his fellow students to be jealous of the relationship or have the perception that my son was getting any type of favored treatment. In some ways, this is similar to an athletic coach who has a child on the team. I wanted my son to have a normal relationship with his classmates, so they would regard him as a colleague and not as "the dean's son."

My son and I agreed upon several courses of action to demonstrate his status as an independent law student. I did not speak to him as I went about the law school and encountered him in the hall. He in turn addressed me as "Dean" if there was an occasion where I was speaking with a group of students. We also agreed that I would not talk about any law school matters with him, and he would not discuss his fellow students or his teachers with me. I did not want anyone to

1. Another irony in all of this is that the child of one of our faculty had also applied. That professor had a common last name, so it was deep in the application process before someone put two and two together and concluded that there was another "chip off the old block" in the application process.

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get the idea that there was a special communication flow or that I would find out about a classroom rebuke and take it out on a professor.

My son kept his end of the bargain. He refused to trade on his name and kept his identity as under wraps as possible. One of my son's adjunct professors later recalled an event in which he went around the classroom on the first day to have the students introduce themselves. When asked his name, my son responded with only his first name. When pressed by the unknowing professor, he revealed his last name. The professor asked him, "Are you related to the dean?" My son responded only with a curt "Yes." The professor drilled further and asked, "How?" My son still reluctant to admit the relationship responded with, "By blood."

I never asked my son about any professor or how his professors operated in the classroom, what type of homework or exams they gave, or how he was doing in his classes. My son upheld his end of the bargain by keeping me clueless as to his day-to-day student life.

I was able to see how my son was doing with his grades, for I would receive a print out of grades and class rank at the end of each semester for all students. I admit I was a bit apprehensive to see how he would do in his first semester and could only imagine the ignominy of having him flunk out or go on probation and not be able to cut it. I avoided making any inquiry of our director of law school records as the grades came in and were posted. I simply waited until all the grades were in and were "rolled" to permit the printing of grade point averages and class rank. I was relieved to see that he made it in that first semester and that I need not concern myself with his flunking out. To his credit, he had a clear focus on what he wanted from law school; he set his goals and then committed himself to the study and preparation necessary to achieve them.

I was pleased to see my son become active in student government, our trial advocacy program, and student organizations. Again, it was important that he not talk to me about them, so there was no appearance that he was currying some special favor or that he or his organizations were getting a special break. I would occasionally hear stories about him from older students. On one occasion he was cross-examining a witness named Ladeaux in a moot court exercise. His opening question of the witness was, "And so what do you do, Ladeaux?" I was told the judge, jury, and the witness all cracked up and burst out laughing. It was encouraging to know that my son had spunk and spirit about him in the eyes of his fellow students, but I did not seek to learn all the acts and elements that went into his reputation with his fellow students.

C. Graduation

What a thrill it was to hood my son and shake his hand at our graduation ceremony. I confess I broke away from the behavioral standard we had established and managed to give him a quick hug on stage. At that point, there was no begrudging the father-son relationship because school was complete. I breathed a sigh of relief knowing that he had completed his three years of professional legal education and also earned an MBA in a joint program.

D. Bar Examination

I encouraged my son to attend all of the bar review classes in person even though it was possible to view them online. Without any opportunity to influence the outcome of his bar examination, I offered direct and visible support to him and his classmates.

Towards the end of July, my son and some 300 other recent law graduates entered a large banquet room in a downtown Jackson hotel to take the bar examination. I offered him some advice (for example, stay in the hotel where the exam was being administered) and checked with him after each day of the bar examination. Aside from encountering difficulty downloading his computer-generated answers after the first day and a rogue bankruptcy question, the examination was uneventful though apprehensive.

E. Results of the Bar Exam

Then came the big day in September when the bar examination results were to be available online at 5:00 p.m. I was waiting in my office with the phone close by to get the call or text from my son with his bar results. At 6:00 p.m., with nary a word from my son, I began to worry. At 7:00 p.m., my worrying had become intense, but I resolved I was not going to call him and embarrass him if his results were not favorable.

At 8:00 p.m., I sat down at my computer and drafted an email to our faculty that explained why my son had failed the bar exam and why it was not their fault. In the email, I concluded that the bar examination results were a reflection of his individual effort, and that he would redouble his efforts to be successful on the February bar examination. This memo was sitting in my draft email ready for dispatch on Friday morning, when the results would be known by all. I locked my office and departed. Arriving at my home I was met by my wife whose first words were, "Aren't you proud of our son for passing the bar exam?" I came to find out my son was messing with me and told everyone but me his good news. That was carrying our "no communication" agreement a bit too far.

However, knowing that even the best of students at times are not successful with the bar examination, a dean has to be prepared to deal with such news and maintain the relationship with his or her son or daughter, the law school community, and the students.

CONCLUSION

It is a source of professional and personal pride to have a son or daughter go through law school while one is dean. That familial relationship brings about a need to relate to that child in an even-handed and dispassionate manner during law school. Such an approach is necessary for the good of the student, the good of the school, and the good of the dean.