



Experience wins over youth – most days

By: Carol Lundberg

Aaron Hanke, not even a year into his law career, looks back and wonders if he might have been better off stopping to smell a few roses on his way to the bar exam.

There are, he says, advantages and disadvantages to starting a career as a lawyer at the age of 22.

“I thought my young age would have been an asset, that people would look at me and think that I must be really smart,” he said. “But then I realized there are a lot of really smart people in law school. Maturity matters.”

During a recent job interview, the interviewer thought it was interesting that Hanke was so young, and asked him to find out if he’s the youngest lawyer in Michigan. So Hanke pestered the State Bar of Michigan until a records specialist told him that of all the licensed active members, three passed the bar exam at age 21. About 60 have done it at age 22.

Hanke describes his high school years as “pretty normal,” until his junior year when a counselor pointed out to him that he was just three classes shy of graduating.

“Once I got the idea in my head, I said, ‘Let’s see how fast I can do this,’” Hanke said.

So there were times he took 24 credit hours at a time to graduate in two years, and then started University of Detroit Mercy School of Law when he was 19. It’s affected his job interviews, and his job search, in ways he didn’t expect.

It certainly has helped him land interviews, he said. But as a teenager, he wasn’t ready for them.

“During my first year, I was going on interviews, and as a 19-year-old, I had this sort of cockiness, and that carried over into my interviews. It was a real wake-up call for me,” he said.

He started focusing on clerkships, and is working now at the 49th Circuit Court in Big Rapids. Last week he got an offer from the 42nd Circuit Court in Midland, where he’ll start later this year.

Hanke said he's happy about those opportunities, but he can't help but wonder if he handicapped himself early in his law school experience.

The flip-side

But Anupama Gokarn, who will graduate at the age of 57 from Wayne State University Law School this May, said it's not so easy at the other end of the spectrum.

She came to the U.S. from India in 2000. A survivor of domestic violence, she started working at First Step, a domestic violence organization, as a data specialist.

"When I started working at First Step I realized I could empathize, and these women needed empathetic representation," she said.

So she made the decision to go to law school. She is working as an intern for the domestic violence prevention court at 3rd Judicial Circuit Court in Wayne County, and hopes to practice immigration and family law after passing the bar exam.

She's been applying for jobs, but so far she's having a hard time getting prospective employers to bite.

She said she thinks her age and the economy are working against her.

"Speaking to my professors, I've come to the conclusion that the legal field is for young, and up-and-coming people," Gokarn said. "It will be a challenge for me to break those barriers. For me, and nontraditional students, we have to think outside the box to get hired."

Working harder

For Thomas W. James, it all boiled down to a willingness to work harder than the next guy, when in 2005 he graduated from Michigan State University College of Law at the age of 38.

Having already had a career in accounting, then a second career in sales, before starting law school in his mid-30s, hard work was the easy part.

But adapting to the competitive nature of law school, after enjoying the collaborative world of sales and earning an MBA, was tough.

"In law school, it comes down to the fact that I have to do better on my exam than you do on your exam," he said.

While in law school, he worked his first summer for a solo practitioner, and describes his job duties as such: "I did everything that he didn't do - secretarial work, reception, paralegal work. It was a great experience."

In his second summer, he worked for the Prosecuting Attorneys Association of Michigan, trying cases all summer in St. Joseph County, which meant three hours of commuting every day.

“A lot of my classmates wouldn’t have agreed to that kind of drive every day,” James said. “But that was the only way I was going to get trial experience, so I did it.”

He was preparing to graduate, just as there were hints that the world was changing for young lawyers, but before the “Great Recession” had been so dubbed.

“Our graduating class was one of the first years where summer associates were not getting picked up, but for economic reasons rather than for performance reasons,” James said.

He interviewed with Steven M. Gursten of Michigan Auto Law in July 2004, and got the clerk job. By October, he was offered a full-time job upon graduation in May. All year he juggled his classes and his job and the commute.

“To get the job, you have to be good at what you do, but you also have to be there. On days when I didn’t get out of class until 3, I would be here by 4, and I’d work as late as I had to,” James said.

The hard work paid off.

Gursten said age played no part in his decision to hire James.

“It was his personality and his experience,” Gursten said. “His previous sales experience was important. The first year practicing law, you deal with getting your head kicked in every day. Sometimes you lose when you should win. Because he’d been in sales, he knew how to cope with the hard knocks.”

Gursten couldn’t be happier with James’ performance.

“He ‘got it’ faster than any lawyer I’ve ever seen,” Gursten said. “Five years out, he’s doing things that no one else five years out could do. A couple of summers of work can’t substitute for having already had a career and all that experience.”

James said he was confident and clear in interviews about what he wanted in his career. To that end, he blew an interview or two, rather than pretend to be interested in something he wasn’t.

“At 22, I would have done whatever they wanted, and I would have changed myself to cater to the job,” James said. “I didn’t have a sense of what I wanted and who I am and what I like.”

Scheduling master

Nicole Matisse graduated from Wayne State Law School in May. She was, like Hanke, 22 years old (in fact, she’s just 10 days younger than Hanke).

She also was very clear about who she is, and where she's headed, despite her age.

Matisse managed to enter law school at the age of 19 because she earned her bachelor's degree from University of Michigan in just 10 months. She accomplished that by taking advanced placement classes in high school, and by earning 24 college credits from Oakland Community College while she was a senior in high school.

And then there was the semester she took 33 credit hours at U-M.

"I treated it very much like a job," Matisse said, then paused before adding, "and I'm a scheduling master."

She graduated with honors, and took the LSAT just two months into her undergraduate studies.

"I never really set out to graduate from law school so early, but I knew I wanted to be a lawyer when I was very young, so why not fulfill my dream as soon as possible?" she said.

Her ambition caught the eye of Dickinson Wright PLLC, where she worked as the firm's only first-year summer associate when she was just 20 years old.

She worked there a second summer, proved her competence, and received an offer to work for the firm after graduation.

She had to decline, in order to accept a clerkship at the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals with Judge Richard Fred Suhrheinrich.

Her age is either a non-issue or a positive, she said.

"I've found that my age might come up in an interview, but then it becomes a matter of competency," Matisse said.

But it does get her foot in the door.

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