

## **SPOTLIGHT ON TENNESSEE LAW SCHOOLS**

### **A look back: reflections from a graduating NSL student**

By Patti Garner

In August 2003 most of the members of the 2007 graduating class entered the hallways of the Nashville School of Law (NSL) in a small two-story building on Sidco Drive in Nashville. They seemed a bit overwhelmed and often had that “deer in the headlight” look, which I’m certain those who have experienced the first year of law school would recognize. As time progressed and the mind-numbing exercise of reading for contracts and torts took over, most of the 200 class members seemed to find their groove and begin to pull it all together. I know, because I was there.

During orientation, we were all given the “look to your left, look to your right” speech and quietness overtook the room. I recall leaving orientation and thinking how horribly cruel the speakers had been. But when Christmas break was over and nearly 20 students did not return, I was disappointed to learn that the administration really did know what they were talking about. The remainder of that year was a blur – so much studying, briefing, highlighting and coffee. But when it was over and grades were posted, I, along with my classmates, breathed a sigh of relief. We had accomplished something.

The following year was much ado about a new building being constructed and/or remodeled. There was a great deal of anticipation and frustration as rumors ran rampant about where our new home would be located. Finally, in 2005, students excitedly walked through the doors of a brand new, state-of-the-art building. It was an amazing structure; so very different from the location where we started our law school careers. Finally, NSL had a building that was appropriate, considering the reputation of our impressive little law school. While the newness of the beautiful building may have worn off by now, there is no denying that amazing things continue to happen in the hallways and classrooms. Those same nervous, deer in the headlight looking students are now about to graduate, take the bar exam and become practicing attorneys. As we prepare to make our exit, it seems right to take a moment and look back.

The Nashville School of Law, the oldest law school in Tennessee, was founded in 1911 as one of the nation’s first night law programs. The school was established by then recent Vanderbilt graduates and was specifically designed for those individuals who sought to obtain a law degree, but could not do so during the day. The law school has been in operation since that time and has bestowed law degrees on more than 2,900 graduates. The school is known for producing practical attorneys with a true spirit of advocacy. The faculty members are well-respected practicing attorneys and judges, many of whom enjoy regional and national reputations in their specialties. My classmates and I have had the pleasure of learning the law from former Justice Adolpho Birch Jr., Judge Steve Daniel, Judge William Koch, Judge Carol Solomon, Judge Steve Dozier, John Lewis, Hal Hardin and Marshall Davidson, to name a few. These faculty members represent the cutting edge and forward thinking elements of our legal community and they bring a rich and diverse variety of professional experience to the classroom.

Today, the NSL student body consists of 627 students: 192 first-years, 170 second years, 121 third-years and 144 in their fourth year of study. Applications for admission have remained at all-time highs for several years, with the number of applicants far exceeding the school’s capacity. In an exciting new development, this year’s incoming class has been divided into two terms. One class of 90 students began in August 2006, while a second class of 85 began this

February. By now, these students have heard the “look to your left, look to your right” orientation speech. I’m sure they experienced the same horror. I hope they prove the administration wrong.

NSL made the decision to split the entering class into two divisions for a number of reasons. First, the school wanted to give students a greater opportunity to get to know and interact with professors, faculty and administration. Second, by creating two smaller, more cohesive groups of first year students, the administration hoped to reduce the sense students have of feeling overwhelmed. Third, offering students the opportunity to start classes in February allows for a completely different school schedule for the rest of the year. Under this alternative calendar, the February class will meet through the summer and end in November – allowing students with families to have more time at home during Thanksgiving and Christmas. Once again, NSL brings flexibility to the pursuit of a law degree.

Although I am biased, I think the Nashville School of Law’s approach to legal education produces graduates who are prepared to hit the ground running. Ben Parsley, class of 2007, summed it up this way: “NSL provides a practical learning experience. The instructors are practicing attorneys and judges who teach material from the point of view of their day-to-day lives in practice or in the courtroom. Additionally, having the opportunity to work in the field of law while attending school has been very beneficial. I will be able to step into a courtroom with the confidence and knowledge of a tenured attorney the day I get my bar results. I would not have had this experience if it wasn’t for the opportunity to work while completing my law degree.”

Even experts agree! During a recent joint lecture given by the Board of Law Examiners and the Tennessee Lawyers Assistance Program, one of the presenters said that research data shows that, “persons who graduate from four-year law school programs are believed to be better equipped to handle the practice of law.” The lecturer went on to say that this is so because of the practical teaching style, the real-life experiences of instructors and the requirement that students become well organized in order to manage an often overwhelming lifestyle that includes work, school and family. While I do not know if this really is true, I remain hopeful that the real-life experience of maintaining an active life (working, volunteering and raising children) while managing to get through law school will have some kind of reward.

This will be my last article for the TBA as a law student. I have enjoyed my time as a TBA liaison for NSL and I am hopeful that the person who picks up the torch will have as much fun as I have. It has been my pleasure getting to know so many members of the Tennessee legal community and I greatly appreciate each one for kindnesses shown and willingness to give advice, research tips and answers to my questions. To my law school colleagues around the state who are graduating this year, I say, “Congratulations.” I look forward to seeing all of you on the other side of the bar exam.

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