



Robert E. Williams, Recruiting Partner, Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton Mr. Williams speaks about on-the-job training, serving clients, and the importance of humor

[by Teresa Talerico]

“Graduates of lesser-known law schools shouldn’t feel intimidated in the job market by their peers from more prestigious institutions,” said Robert E. Williams, recruiting partner for Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton. Mr. Williams is far more likely to examine someone’s academic achievement, experience, or even his/her sense of humor before considering whether the applicant attended Yale or Stanford.

“We find that’s not where all the great lawyers come from,” he said of the top-tier schools. “They come from a much larger pool of law schools than that.”

Mr. Williams, who himself has a law degree from Harvard (Class of 1976), joined Sheppard Mullin in 1977. A real estate law specialist, he has been a partner at the firm’s Los Angeles office since 1984.

Q: How does one break into real estate law?

A: Most people, at least in a large-firm setting, break into it by being assigned into the area and learning on the job. In my era, most law schools did not have specialized courses focused on real estate. I think that’s changed a bit, particularly in West Coast law schools, where there are some very fine courses focused on modern real estate practice. Taking those courses, where they’re available, is certainly helpful, but not necessary.

Q: What are some common stumbling blocks for new associates?

A: I would say that we don’t see a lot of people with big stumbling blocks; we don’t encounter a lot of failure on the part of beginning lawyers. Most entering lawyers are very bright people. We almost never run into a person who doesn’t have the intellectual capacity to do the work. I think people do have troubles with adjustment to the workplace and work demands, which is not

unusual given that people frequently start lawyering after 20 years of being students.

Q: What do you look for when hiring someone?

A: We start by looking at high academic achievement. At this firm, we still make a lot of associates partners, unlike a lot of really big firms. We’re looking for people who will not just succeed for a couple of years as helpers to partners, but rather will become partners. So we look for people whose resumes and interviews indicate balance in their lives and indicate a history of success in their previous activities.

Q: What’s one thing they don’t teach in law school that they should?

A: When I was in law school, I didn’t really grasp the degree to which lawyering is a service profession. I guess I had sort of an unrealistic idea of law practice. I didn’t have any lawyers in my family. The only impression I had of lawyers was formed from “Perry Mason.”

A lawyer is engaged in delivery of personal service on a competitive basis to not just one client, but many clients, each of whom regard its matter as the most important thing to it, and therefore to the lawyer. If you want to talk about the capacity of the job to generate anxiety, it all stems from the pressure of delivering best-quality service to

multiple people and juggling their demands so that you can keep everyone served at that high level. That’s a hard thing to do, and I don’t remember picking up any intimation that I was headed for that job description when I was in law school...A bunch of people are counting on you to do work that’s very important to them. The combination of your ethical obligations and your personal obligations to those people results in your working very hard day after day to keep meeting those client expectations.

Q: Who’s your favorite lawyer in movies or TV?

A: What strikes me about portrayals of lawyers in the media, whether it’s film or television, is how far off those portrayals are. You almost never see a portrayal of a lawyer where the lawyer isn’t portrayed ultimately to be crooked. And even sadder, you frequently see portrayals of judges as being crooked. Both of those stereotypes are terribly wrong. I think they stem from a desire to be sensational and a failure to understand legal ethics--in particular, an inability to deal with the idea that a lawyer must ethically represent someone even if that person is not an attractive person, particularly in the criminal realm. I think lawyers are terribly served by the portrayal of them in the media. It’s very unfortunate.

Q: How can a law school graduate with an outstanding academic record and prestigious



internships under her belt stand out when
there are so many just like her?

A: I can't think of a calculated way to stand out. I'm not very receptive to gimmicky resumes. Some people will write a letter in which they adopt a very salesman-like tone in describing themselves. I don't care for that; I don't think it's professional. We do look at a tremendous number of resumes. And as I described earlier, the first filter we apply to them is academic achievement. Then we look for experiences and an evident record of success. Those things speak for themselves.

Of course, personal impressions are very important. We look for people who are squared away, people who make a good presentation of themselves in an interview. A sense of humor is right up there among the very most desirable characteristics of people.