



Tom Owens, center, was the high scorer on the July 2013 bar examination. Owens is a graduate of Brigham Young University Law School and an associate at Norton Rose Fulbright. Also pictured are Texas Supreme Court Chief Justice Nathan L. Hecht, left, and Julia Vaughan, executive director of the Texas Board of Law Examiners.

We're Just Getting Started

BY TOM OWENS

THANK YOU CHIEF JUSTICE HECHT, JUSTICES, JUDGES, AND MEMBERS OF THE BAR.

On behalf of all of us new inductees, I want to thank all the family and friends whose support and love have helped us get this far. And, personally, I want to thank my wife, who shares credit for every success I ever have achieved or ever will achieve.

In all honesty, I'm surprised to be in this position. I was just trying to pass with a bit of a cushion. Turns out that I way overdid it with the studying.

But a recent experience at my firm made me think that maybe all that extra studying was worthwhile. We were in a practice group meeting and a partner said, "One of our clients has a series of multiple choice questions they need answered, under timed conditions." I was amazed to find out that the skills tested by the bar exam really are relevant to legal practice!

Unfortunately for me, the truth is that being a multiple-choice ninja hasn't been all that helpful as I've started my patent law practice. So I don't really have much wisdom to impart to this group as far as legal practice goes. Most of us are in the same boat: trying to figure out what real legal practice is all about and trying to take some steps toward a fulfilling career.

But I do have a somewhat unique story as to how I arrived at being sworn in as a lawyer today, and it may provide some useful lessons. I have been a full-time student for a long time. I started college in 1997, during the second Clinton administration. I don't think many of my fellow inductees were in diapers at that time, but a lot of you were in elementary school. So it feels good to be done. It's like I'm a real grown-up. Even my kids were starting to realize that it was time for Dad to join the real world and get on with his life. A couple of years ago

around the dinner table, my 10-year-old son asked out of the blue, “Dad, how old do you have to be to get a job?” I figured he was asking for himself, trying to figure out how he could get some Lego money. I told him you can start working when you’re 16. He said, “But Dad, you’re way older than 16!”

Getting to this point was an ordeal. I started graduate school fully expecting that I would be good at it because I was good at other kinds of school. I expected I would make important discoveries, publish papers, storm through the Ph.D. program in four short years, and be well on my way to a professorship. Well, about four years into grad school I finally abandoned the project into which I had invested so much time, sweat, and hope. I had done everything right, worked out several technical challenges, and generated good data. But I didn’t discover anything publishable, which is all that matters in science. So I was back at square one. A couple more years of failed projects took their toll on my spirits, my confidence, and my self-esteem. That was a difficult time. I was in a serious rut. I look back on myself at that time and picture myself just drooping, both in my body and spirit. I went into the lab every day without much hope that I would make any progress, doubting I had it in me to see it through. I faced with horror the possibility of having to leave school without a Ph.D., with six or seven years down the drain.

It was around that time that I finally decided that I would change career paths and go into patent law. When I made that decision, it was like the clouds lifted and I could see a clear path to a fulfilling career.

It was also around that time that I fully took the reins of my graduate career. Up to that point, I had been working on projects that followed up on previous lab members’ observations. Since that wasn’t getting me anywhere, I decided to go a different direction. I researched the literature and came up with a project that was “safe,” which in science means boring but probably doable. From the time I started on that project to the time I defended my dissertation was about 18 months. Of the 26 students in my entering class, I was the last to graduate. But I like to think I ranked first in perseverance.

The last hurdle to getting here was law school. I won’t say law school was easy, but at least it had a definite endpoint, and they don’t really fail anyone. So compared to grad school, it wasn’t too bad.

JULY 2013 BAR EXAM PASS RATE INFORMATION

The table below shows the number of graduates from each Texas law school who took the bar exam for the first time in July, the number that passed, and the percentage that passed.

LAW SCHOOL	TESTED	PASSED	PASS RATE
Baylor	121	118	97.52%
St. Mary’s	227	188	82.82%
South Texas	263	235	89.35%
SMU	214	196	91.59%
Texas Tech	192	165	85.94%
Texas Southern	130	103	79.23%
Texas A&M	127	109	85.83%
U. of Houston	217	191	88.02%
U. of Texas	268	256	95.52%
TOTAL	1,759	1,561	88.74%

After such a long road, I’m glad to be done. But I recognize that I haven’t really “arrived” anywhere yet. Like most of us inductees, I am just getting started. As I go forward in this new career, I take some lessons from my path thus far, which I hope may also be beneficial to some of you.

The first one is obvious: don’t give up. We’re bound to have some difficult times in our careers. Some of us may struggle with unemployment, or we may have difficult cases or other professional frustrations. If we persevere through difficult times, we can come out the other side in a better place.

Second, you may not be good at everything, and that’s okay. If you

keep your eyes open and are willing to try different paths, you can find your way to a fulfilling career that you are suited to.

Third is the value of having a definite goal in mind. Once I decided I was going to start law school by the fall of 2010, I was strongly motivated to do everything in my power to reach that goal. Having that target made it easier to work the long hours necessary to get my degree in time.

Finally, I have to recognize in my story the power of love. My wife and children were a source of light and happiness when I needed it most, sometimes just by being happy to see me at the end of a difficult day. By cultivating loving relationships with family and friends, we can have better careers and better lives.

Before I close, I just want to propose that we keep our eyes open for opportunities to make our communities better. Let’s do good and be good to each other.

Again, I offer my congratulations and thanks to you all. **TBJ**

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