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LEARNING THROUGH OSMOSIS—TIPS AND TRICKS FOR BECOMING A GREAT TRIAL LAWYER

No, you can't just lay your head down on your pillow with the code of civil procedure under the pillow and wake up in the morning refreshed and having learned all that is contained within. But, there are some things you can do throughout your day to increase the amount of information you are learning, and the speed at which you are learning it.

From the moment I started law school, I knew I wanted to try cases and wanted to help people. Hence my chosen career path as a plaintiff's attorney. When I first started practicing, I was a little taken aback by the lack of people in my peer group practicing as plaintiffs' attorneys, or, for that matter, on the other side. I was by far the youngest, and often the only female. Hard not to be intimidated, right? So how do you overcome a glaring age, knowledge, and experience gap? It's not easy, but it can be done, and, with a lot of grit and determination, it doesn't have to take that long.

Law school was hard (for most of us). There were lots of hours studying, writing papers and doing extracurriculars. Graduation came and then we were off studying for the bar. Then after two (or three) days of grueling testing, you got to take a big deep breath and relax. Well, sort of. That breath is temporary. Get ready to roll up your sleeves, because now the real work begins. When I talk about work, I don't just mean hours. To set yourself on a trajectory for greatness, here are some tips:

Put in the time

If you want to be a great trial lawyer, the first few years of practice are going to involve a lot of work and a lot of time. 9-5 is not going to get you there. If you become great doing 9-5, more power to you—but most of us are not that special.

Learn Early and Often

When you're at home at night, or are drinking your morning coffee, learn the law. Not because you have a case that involves a particular statute, but just out of pure curiosity. Make yourself better by learning the Rules of Civil Procedure, Rules of Evidence, and Statutes involving torts. Review recently decided appellate cases in your jurisdiction. Learn enough to have the rules and cases in your arsenal so when the issue comes up, you know where to look and can easily access the information.

Get 'Er Done

You will have assignments with due dates, and due dates are great. Due dates are not an excuse to wait to complete the assignment until shortly before the due date. Due dates are the last resort. If you want to be great, get on the assignment immediately, get it done and off your plate. Why? Every assignment is a learning opportunity. When you complete the assignment, you will not only have accomplished that one task, but you will have added a brick to the foundation of your legal skills. You can't add a brick on top of that foundation until you've completed the project. If you get the project done two weeks before the due date, you can then pick up your next assignment and continue adding to your foundation far sooner than if you had waited.

The Devil is in the Details

Getting things done and off your plate does not mean sacrificing quality. Pay attention to the details. Look at spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Do not make your superior or the judge read through a document riddled with basic mistakes. Don't be a headnotes attorney. Read the cases, Keycite the cases, make sure it is good law. Know your facts. Know all of this like the back of your hand. You may not have the experience (or the grey hair, as I like to call it), but you have the time, education, resources, and energy to make sure that the details are correct. If you go into a hearing, deposition, or meeting with the details, you can make up for lack of experience.

Set Yourself Up for Success

One of the best things that came out of my first five years as an attorney was my connection to the founding partner of my firm. My office was right next to his, with a door between the two. I could leave the door open and just soak in information from phone calls, meetings, and ad hoc discussions. I would also regularly look at his calendar and invite myself along for depositions, court, and other interesting meetings. I made it a priority to be in the thick of things.

There is a lot of benefit to technology and the ability to work remotely, but that all comes with a price. You won't learn as much or progress as quickly on your own. You need to surround yourself with a great mentor and plenty of learning opportunities. Sometimes, you will get lucky and have someone who will invite you along. However, more often, you're going to have to take it upon yourself.

The same can be said of people outside of your firm. We have a fantastic number of amazing young trial lawyers in our midst. With that comes energy, inspiration, enthusiasm, and a lot of support. Be here for each other. Get involved. Don't isolate yourself. Keep your ears open. Listen and learn. Engage in discussions. Put yourself out there.

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About Miranda Soucie

Miranda Soucie is a Partner at Spiros Law, P.C., where she practices wrongful death, personal injury and trucking litigation throughout Illinois. She is a passionate and well-rounded litigator and has earned a reputation for being a fierce advocate for her clients. Miranda is a member of the NLD and WTLC as well as various other practice specific groups. She is new to the NLD Publications Committee. Miranda serves on the Illinois Trial Lawyers Association's (ITLA) Amicus Committee, and is the President of the East Central Illinois Women Attorneys Association (ECIWAA). Miranda is a Magna Cum Laude graduate of the University of Illinois College of Law and is licensed to practice in both Illinois and Florida.

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