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### "So You Just Passed the Bar: A New Lawyer's Guide to Life in the Profession"

Kathleen J. Wu

*Texas Lawyer*

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*Kathleen J. Wu is a commercial real estate lawyer and managing partner of the Dallas office of Houston's Andrews & Kurth. Her e-mail address is kwu@andrews-kurth.com. The views represented here are her own and do not represent those of the firm.*

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November can be a heady time for freshly minted lawyers. Six long months after you sweat for three full days over the biggest test in your life, you finally get word that you passed the bar exam. You now have permission to exhale.

If you're one of the lucky ones that got good news from the state, congratulations! You're now an official member of a club that, for better or worse, is going to be one of the most important affiliations in your life.

Now that you're really and truly a lawyer, you should know a few things about this life we call the law. The first and most important thing you should know is the following: You have an incredible amount to learn.

Your value as a lawyer isn't what you know; it's what you've been taught to figure out. Hopefully, during your three years of law school, you learned the logical steps that need to be followed to help solve a client's problem, whether it's a real estate problem, a criminal charge or a family law matter. But it will be years before you truly grasp what lawyering is really about. Just ask any of the senior lawyers you know. Chances are they'll tell you it was at least six years before they figured out how to do their craft. And, if they're honest with you, they'll probably tell you they're still learning it to this day.

#### **Midnight Oil**

Don't let the fact that you're fairly ignorant intimidate you. We all were when we started out. The difference between those who become excellent lawyers and those who become mediocre lawyers is what happens next.

And what happens next, I hate to tell you, is a lot of hours at the office. You're going to be putting in some late nights, and you'll probably know the number to Domino's by heart. But the first time a partner gives you an assignment and you don't feel completely bewildered by it, you'll know why you stuck with it.

Despite the fact that you don't know exactly what you're doing just yet, look at every project as your own. By that I mean take ownership of every task and don't let it out of your sight until you know it's so clean you could eat off it. Nothing is more frustrating to a partner, and nothing goes on your "permanent record" faster than half-ass work product. Use your spell-check, check your cites, make sure "capital" shouldn't be "capitol." And make sure your research is thorough.

An associate who makes his or her partner's life easier is an associate who will be requested again and again.

It would stand to reason that all of these things will also put you in strong contention for partner. But I don't want you to worry about that, not yet. Get partnership—and whether you're on track for it—right out of your head. For now.

#### **Welcome to the Marathon**

Like love, partnership often comes to those least on the lookout for it. If you spend your early years politicking and sucking up to those you think are in the best place to recommend you for partnership, especially if you do these things at the expense of mastering your craft, you risk being left out in the cold. First, that high-powered partner you're counting on to tout you to his or her peers may jump ship to your cross-town competitor. Or, his practice could tank because of a major client's bankruptcy, leaving your alleged patron powerless to bring his protégés into his fraternity.

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All sorts of things beyond your control could happen to scotch your chance at partnership, despite all the jockeying you've done. So the best course to take is to focus on your own skills. The competence you gain by knowing your stuff will give you the confidence to inspire your superiors, win clients and, eventually, make partner. If, heaven forbid, the world (or your firm) should collapse around you, you're still equipped to take your formidable skills elsewhere.

That said, it doesn't hurt to align yourself with the A-team. Everybody knows which lawyers are the best ones in their firm, and almost everybody knows which ones are just blowing hot air. Being allied with your firm's best is more than a way to increase your chances of career advancement. It's also the most likely way to get the best work assignments and learn the most.

And you've got a lot of learning to do in the next several years. Having passed the bar, you've proven you can run the 100-yard dash. Now, welcome to the Boston Marathon.