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Entering college. Getting married. Having children. All require some major changes in lifestyle.

But when it comes to transitions, there's nothing like settling into that first job after law school. No matter how much you know about the intricacies of torts and contracts, no matter how glorious your record in Moot Court, there comes a time when your attention has to turn to billable hours. Yes, it's the working world—a world utterly unlike academia.

Recently, we caught up with five 1988 graduates of the Law School to ask them about life in the workplace. They offered some revealing—and encouraging—inights into the practice of law in their various specialties. On one point they were agreed: Nothing a student can do will fully prepare him or her for the complexities and rewards of life after law school.

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A happy accident of geography led Catherine Coughlin to her situation as a solo practitioner, practicing general law, in rural Alabama, N.Y. She was working in Buffalo and her husband, Terence, was working in Rochester. Tired of the constant driving, they decided to split the difference and moved to Alabama, which is about halfway between the two cities.

Once they arrived, Coughlin realized how few legal options there were in the area. "Virtually the only alternatives for people were in Rochester or Buffalo," she says. "And a lot of city lawyers wouldn't take their cases because it's not cost-effective." So a few months after the birth of the couple's daughter in June 1988, she hung out a shingle and converted three rooms of their large home to an office.

Coughlin is busy now, she says, but it hasn't come easily. "You have to think about it practically," she says. "You're not going to start off bringing in money every week. You have to make sure you've got enough to live on until you get established." With a few matters she handled for friends and good word-of-mouth, though, her practice has stabilized. She now handles matters for clients in four counties, everything from family court to small business, real estate to personal injury claims.

The nuts and bolts of running one's own business, Coughlin says, is "something I had never even heard of in law school. There's a large business aspect—accounting, building a library, building a form bank. You have to order stationery. You have to decide about advertising. You have to know how to do bookkeeping. "Organization is what really matters. You have to be able to return phone calls. That's what really builds a practice."

The advantage of practicing in a rural community, Coughlin says, is that procedures tend to be more relaxed. "More can be done with a handshake and kind word," she says, "than a four-page written agreement in triplicate."

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As a staff attorney for the New Hampshire Public Defender Program, a private, non-profit corporation funded by the state, Nicholas Brodich spends a lot of time in court. "Many days I hit two or three courts," he says. "There's a good amount of driving involved."

And organizing, too. The day we spoke to him, Brodich had a caseload of 55 misdemeanors, four felonies and three felony appeals. "It's a lot of names to keep straight, a lot of stories to keep straight," he says. "It's almost total litigation."

The practical experience of all that casework, he says, has taught him a lot. "I didn't have any conception of what it would be like," he says. "I'd been in academia forever."

"It's really adversarial in criminal law. People are playing for keeps, and pushing you to the wall all the time."

"In law school, you're used to winning maybe 50 percent of the time. But when you come out and start doing indigent defense work, you lose — a lot. We take all the cases. We have to. And we lose."

The office includes seven staff attorneys and three who handle only homicides. The social problems of nearby
Nicholas Brodich is a public defender in New Hampshire.
Boston have crept into New Hampshire, Brodich says, as that city’s suburbs continue to expand.

As for his clients, Brodich says many are handicapped with mental illness or intellectual impairment. “I have a lot of patience,” he says. “But what makes me mad is when the state ascribes deviant motives to some of these people — people who can’t even take care of themselves.”

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“I t’s very different from school. For one thing, you wear different clothes.” That’s how Idelle Abrams half-jokingly sums up her experience as an associate at Sherman & Sterling, a firm with about 400 attorneys in New York City, where she works, and a total of 525 in 10 offices worldwide.

A New York City native, she spent a summer at the firm while in law school, so “I didn’t have so much of a culture shock when I came back as an associate.” Still, she says, there are adjustments to be made.

“You don’t make your own decisions about your own time so much” as in law school, she says. “You can’t blow off something and decide this isn’t a priority for you. You’re always supposed to be putting out your best effort.

“There are a lot of sacrifices. You are low man on the totem pole, and it’s a very demanding place to be.”

The firm organizes its attorneys into teams. Abrams is on a litigation team with between 30 and 40 members. They handle a lot of merger and corporate acquisition cases. “Everything has to be done immediately,” she says. “As a first-year associate, you do a lot of research and writing of court papers, doing briefs for cases. When you go to a large firm, you’re not going to take depositions right away.”

Her workday starts late, at 9:30 or 10 o’clock, but Abrams says she bills 65 hours in a typical week. And many times her team’s cases require around-the-clock work, with the members taking turns getting a few hours sleep.

The rewards, she says, are interesting cases and work that can be exciting. “You’re doing these huge deals,” she says. “And it sounds silly to say, but it’s neat to read about your cases in the newspapers.”

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“For people of my particular interests and background,” says Douglas Hoffer, “the school was all that I hoped it would be.”

Hoffer, who came to UB Law as an older student, has put the knowledge and skills he learned to good use in one of the most unusual cities of the United States — Burlington, Vt. “There aren’t many communities in the country where local government plays such an active role in social and economic change,” says Hoffer. As a staff member of the city’s Community and Economic Development Office, he works to promote such changes.

For example, he has lobbied the city-owned electric utility to spend money to encourage conservation — money that otherwise would go toward the purchase
of power from Hydro Quebec, sending local dollars out of the country. And Hoffer's interest in issues of biotechnology has led to some public-interest lobbying regarding Monsanto Corp.'s participation in research at the University of Vermont.

He has helped to develop alternative use plans for a local armaments plant that is experiencing layoffs; has worked with local banks to ensure that sufficient funds are retained in the community; and has helped to institute a city-wide recycling program, among others.

"It's great fun. We don't win 'em all, but we fight. These are issues that are just exciting as hell," he says. "My interest has never been in practice. And, in fact, I don't have to sit around and wait for clients to bring me exciting litigation. We just go out and do it."

"In this city, they don't just talk about it after work at the bar, they do something about it. I feel good going to work in the morning."  

Lucy Maiorana had two offers to practice tax law. She turned them down—and landed a job as a corporate counsel at Rochester's Champion Products, a manufacturer of athletic and leisure wear. Now she spends her days reviewing contracts and negotiating promotional agreements for Champion's various products and divisions.

"Every contract goes through the legal department, from $50 to $5 million," Maiorana says. "For example, we just got in a cleaning service contract for our Chicago showroom. I'll look at it and see that they want payment within five days of invoice. I know our computer system can't handle that, so I'll change it to 20 days. And if there's nothing about insurance, I'll put in a provision that they provide their own insurance.

"You learn a lot of little practical things. For instance, the first time I ever saw a lease was when I came here. And I have learned to deal with people. And another thing: I don't know what I'd do without my fax machine'."

The work's rewarding aspect, Maiorana says, is being able to see a project through from beginning to end. One that she found particularly fruitful was negotiating an agreement whereby Champion will become the official supplier of leisure and deck wear for the U.S. men's and women's water polo teams in the next Olympics.

Her days, she says, average 10 hours. "If you want to look like you're getting stuff done—or you want to get something done—you have to stay. And sometimes you might plan on getting out at 5 p.m., but something comes up."

Her advice to this year's crop of new lawyers: If you have the economic ability to wait, then wait until you get what you want. And be prepared for its not being as exciting as on TV.

"There are exciting moments, sure, but it's not all day."