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A chairlift legal lecture: It's hardly downhill from here

Ski resort chat with law students on a Colorado vacation a chance to reminisce

My family recently returned from Snowmass, Colo., from a long holiday weekend of skiing.

Truth be told, skiing is not my favorite activity. A fear of heights coupled with constant near-death visuals on lifts, gondolas and catwalks adds to my detestation.

On Presidents Day, while ascending the mountain, two young law students seated next to me were discussing their remedies course.

My first thought was, "how can you two clowns be skiing while law students?"

I thought to myself that I could not afford it back in the day and felt like I had very little free time between school and work. Regardless, we made some small talk about being a lawyer for the next five minutes.

I appreciated the passing of the time as we were escalating above the surrounding trees and mountains. The discussion momentarily distracted me from thoughts of the gondola crashing down to earth.

We have three serious skiers in our family. In fact, my wife and two kids are very good skiers. Not to brag, but I am pretty darn

good when it comes to apres-ski. (For you non-snow bunnies, après-ski is the mountain version of happy hour.)

That day, apres-ski couldn't come soon enough. After my chat with the lawyer wannabees and a couple of "garage sales" later, I was perched in front of the fire pit. My family would be down in an hour or so. It was not much of a surprise when my two new favorite chairlift legal eagles showed up at base camp for a drink.

One thing never changes: When law students are offered free cocktails at 3 p.m., they show

up promptly at 3 p.m. Over a bucket of beers, the lecture took place.

The overriding questions from them were, "What is it like to be a lawyer?" and "What can a young lawyer expect?" Two solid questions which we all pondered



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at one time or another.

Being a lawyer is difficult. It is hard work and long hours. At the outset of one's career, there is typically very little praise. I told them they will struggle early on.

Yet, they must understand that struggle does not mean failure. The failure to learn from your struggles will inevitably doom your legal career, but struggling is part of the learning curve.

I truly believe to be successful as a young lawyer, a simple formula is needed: sweat plus sacrifice. Sadly, I see a lot of lawyers from this current generation with a sense of entitlement. The need

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for sweat and hard work is not required in their eyes. Nonsense.

Like skiing, it is OK to stumble or even fall down. The key is picking yourself up and learning from one's mistakes.

I know I sounded like an old man to them when I preached

civility. I could almost see them elbowing each other under the table. There are some jerks in our profession. I tried to explain to them when you play in the mud with a pig, you both get dirty.

I begged of them not to mirror bad behavior. An adversary can be compassionate and gracious, but still be a worthy advocate. This is what makes the practice of law such an intellectually challenging career choice.

One intimidating aspect of the law for a newer lawyer is the encounter with much more experienced attorneys. Let's face it: Some experienced attorneys have forgotten more in certain areas of law than you know at this juncture of your career.

You cannot control experience. Yet, there never has to be someone more prepared than you in that courtroom, at that hearing or in that deposition. Preparation is one variable you can and must control.

I enjoyed the fireside chat with the two men from Denver. It has been 26 years since I was in law school.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. We laughed about some of the professors in school, the long hours and limited free time. I busted chops about their dedication to school and challenging themselves academically by skiing. They laughed and still maintained the "Cs get degrees" mantra.

The last thing I said to the young lads is something I meant. At the risk of sounding corny, I told them they were entering a very honorable profession. Your goal should be simple — try and leave it in a better position than when you entered it.

I hope they heed the advice of a veteran of the bar. Of course, I'm referring to both my tenure as a lawyer and my status at the après-ski firepit.