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This year marks the 24th anniversary of my licensure to practice law. I think such a benchmark allows me to now refer to those currently in law school as the “next generation” of lawyers. I recently had the unique opportunity to get together with a group of these next generation lawyers to discuss some of the things that don’t necessarily come through in the classroom.

Josie Gough, the director of experiential learning at Loyola University Chicago School of Law, invited me and David Susler to meet with her class of students to share the insight that comes with a few years of real life experience. Our discussion mirrored some of the issues that I have written about in this column, the idea being to help the students benefit by hearing from experienced lawyers who could describe some of the landmines that many lawyers may encounter over the course of their careers.

Although many issues were touched upon, the focus always returned to the notions of integrity, honor, duty and humility around which our talk was based. I was truly impressed with the way the students genuinely embraced these concepts and seemed determined to absorb as much as possible in the short time we had together.

I was similarly impressed with the way that Professor Gough reaches out to the community of lawyers to bring their actual experiences to life for students who have had relatively little exposure to practicing law. By working in externships and meeting lawyers from the real practice world, the students gain snippets of wisdom accumulated over the course of many lifetimes of practice across a broad practice base – private practice, in-house, public interest, judicial and government. Professor Gough uses her extensive “Rolodex” not only to connect her students with terrific practical experience externships, but also to call on lawyers like Susler and me to provide insight into the “softer” skills, such as getting along with your boss, creating value for the company in the legal department and nurturing quality relationships with your clients.

She also creates the opportunity for her students to affirm that what she teaches them in the classroom is not just theoretical. They learn from “outsiders” that maintaining their integrity is essential to a successful career and not just flowery language that means nothing once they actually enter practice – that it impacts how they will be viewed by judges and other lawyers for the rest of their careers. They learn that they will soon occupy positions of leadership in their communities, that they will be sought out to solve problems, that there are many gray areas and advice is usually not black and white, that they might have to make a difficult choice between a client and “doing the right thing.”
They learn to understand that their chosen profession is indeed noble and that they must act with nobility (not arrogance) and with heartfelt humility. They learn it is important to treat everyone with the dignity they deserve simply because they are a member of the human race – from their support staff or the poor pro bono client to the partner in the corner office. They learn that they must use the gifts they have been given and the positions they have earned, to give back to the community and to further enhance the profession of law.

Susler and I were privileged to have been a part of Professor Gough’s experiential learning class. If you are afforded a similar privilege, as a member of this noble profession you are called to answer, to help ensure that the next generation of lawyers continues to value the privilege of practicing law and the position of influence that goes along with it.