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At the Lectern

Knitting 101: Why Law Professors Should Share their Hobbies with their Students

Susan Greene

I begin each year by asking my first-year law students in my legal writing class to submit a one-page answer to the question of what makes each of them happy. In addition to a stealth assessment of my students' writing skills, this assignment also allows me to open up a class conversation about the importance of maintaining those things—be they human relationships, animal relationships, hobbies—throughout the upcoming stresses of 1L year and the lifelong pressures of practicing law. We revisit this assignment at the end of the year, and I again remind my students not to lose sight of the elements of their lives that make them unique and bring them a sense of happiness.

My students who write about a hobby bringing them happiness are in good company. Maintaining their hobbies will bode well for them over their careers as students and as lawyers. Law students have selected a career path with the inauspicious distinction of generating among the most highly-stressed professionals.¹ It is also a career that requires mental focus, clarity, and creativity.² A hobby advances all of these goals, kickstarting creativity by allowing a wandering mind to see a new angle, easing depression and stress, even lowering blood pressure.³ Hobbies confer the added benefit not only of nurturing better, more productive lawyers, but of providing the perspective that being a better, more productive lawyer is not everything.⁴ And for law students who have long been motivated to be “the best” at any given task, a

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1. “[B]etween 21 and 36 percent [of lawyers] qualify as problem drinkers, and [] approximately 28 percent, 19 percent, and 23 percent are struggling with some of level of depression, anxiety, and stress, respectively.” NAT’L TASK FORCE ON LAWYER WELL-BEING, *THE PATH TO LAWYER WELL-BEING: PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POSITIVE CHANGE* 7 (2017). Lawyers also suffer from high rates of clinical disorders,
2. Susan Greene, *Slow Lawyering: How Law Practitioners Can Slow Down in a High-Speed World and Why It Matters* 43 L. & PSYCHOL. REV. 1 (2018).
3. Jaya Saxena, *The Case for Having a Hobby*, N.Y. TIMES (May 10, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/10/smarter-living/the-case-for-hobbies-ideas.html>.
4. *Id.*

hobby allows them to relax into, say, a game of basketball, without the pressure of trying to be the number one draft pick for the NBA.⁵

Yet for many students, adrift in a sea of outlines and anxiety over the pressures of being a law student, cultivating a hobby or even developing a new one seems a luxury in time and energy that they cannot afford. Therefore, it is incumbent upon law professors to lead by example. I do this very informally, talking with students about my own hobbies as a quiet reminder that personal pastimes merit a place in any busy schedule. I have had conversations with students about yoga, meditation, running, the books I read for pleasure, and knitting. While each of my own five preferred hobbies carries interesting parallels to the practice of law and teaching, it is knitting whose resemblance is the most stark and is the one that has been the subject of my most thought-provoking conversations. A knitting workshop could dovetail nicely with my legal writing courses, because four axioms hold true across stitches and memos: (1) you cannot start without a plan; (2) pace yourself over the course of your project; (3) sometimes the little things are the big things; and (4) no two results will ever be the same.

You cannot start without a plan. A successful knitting project requires a tremendous amount of planning—patterns, sizing, measurements, number of skeins, and more—before ever casting on the first stitch. Likewise, before tapping the first letters of a memo on a keyboard, my students must plan out how they will get to the final product. This involves both big picture planning: research, write, edit, edit again; and a more granular plan: jurisdiction, keyword searches, IREACs, and more. To start writing or knitting without a plan means you may know neither where you are going nor how best to get there.

Pace yourself over the course of a project. Like many knitters, I have any number of half-knit scarves and disembodied sweater arms languishing in a basket, patiently awaiting the return of my attentions. My best knitting projects, meaning the most enjoyable experiences of creating and the best finished products, are those through which I work with a calm, steady, sustainable pace. Stitch, stitch, stitch. Frenetic stitching at a frenzied pace is unsustainable and is often followed by periods of stagnation. I can always tell from looking at a finished project where I rushed stitches and where I took a break. Seamless knitting derives only from steady pacing.

So too must my law students establish and maintain a steady pace to their study of law to achieve success. Rushing one area, be it writing a memo or outlining for a class, causes anxiety while doing the work and diminishes the likelihood of success. At the beginning of each writing assignment, we have a class discussion on pacing—assignment due dates, interim work, estimated lengths of time for each piece—and then a post-mortem at an in-person conference after the writing assignment has been submitted. My students are

5. *Id.*

astonished when I can point to a section of a memo and ask if they wrote it at the very end with less time than they had for other sections. As with knitting, the rushed areas tend to show.

Sometimes the little things are the big things. The knitting work about which I grumble the most is the finishing work at the very end, like weaving in the edges. Likewise, it is the citation forms and final grammar checks that seem to most irritate my students and at times, get ignored entirely. Perhaps this is because, after completing the lion's share of the work and, particularly, the most intellectually challenging parts, there is little energy left for the more simple tasks. Yet those seemingly simple, final tasks carry outsized weight, because they are the first thing an outside eye will notice. A dangling string in the middle of my hat or a citation to the wrong reporter in the middle of an analysis section will distract the outside observer from the hard work that went into the piece and suggest a sloppy approach by the creator.

No two results will ever be the same. Knitting recently became a political statement, when pink hats resembling cat ears⁶ appeared atop the heads of scores of Americans. Pink yarn and a basic stitch predicated each, yet much like the individuals who made them or wore them, each hat was a bit different from the others. I think of this diversity each semester, as I hammer formulas for writing into my students' heads: IREAC, thesis paragraphs, components of a rule explanation; and even more so during those assignments for which I provide a closed universe of cases from which to work. Twelve semesters of teaching later and I still wonder, will I get forty memos that are mostly the same? Yet somehow, like hats knit from the same stitches with the same color yarn, each resulting memo is unique and bears some mark of its writer's individuality.

6. Nicole Brodeur, *Pussyhat Production Causes Run on Pink Yarn*, THE SEATTLE TIMES (January 10, 2017), <https://www.seattletimes.com/life/lifestyle/pussyhat-production-causes-run-on-pink-yarn/>.