

Podcast: Advice to Summer Clerks

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It is summertime in the city, and we have 11 summer associates joining McGlinchey across seven of our offices over the next summer months. And for those of you who might not be in the legal field, that's an opportunity for law students to come work side by side with our attorneys and professional staff to learn more about the legal profession and to potentially work towards obtaining a job after law school. And so today, I'm joined by several of our associates who participated in our clerkship program and who have sage advice for law students who are entering into clerkships or who might be next year doing this gamut of summer activities with firms across the country. And so, we have questions for each of you in the hopes that it might help law students find their way a little bit easier, have less anxiety about going through this process, and find the time more useful and more productive because it is a unique opportunity for law students to take advantage of.

Zelma Frederick: I am Zelma Frederick. I am a member in the Baton Rouge office of McGlinchey Stafford, and I have the pleasure of serving as the Chair of our Summer Associate Committee each year. We welcome clerks from all over the country in our various offices, and we aim to give a really enriching experience for our guests for the summer. And, of course, we want to show off what McGlinchey has to offer, but we also want to show off what it's like to be a lawyer in a mid-size law firm. Today I am joined by some of my colleagues who worked at McGlinchey as summer clerks in the past but have now come back as associates. And we want to talk through some of the benefits and how to make the most of summer clerkships for those law students joining McGlinchey and other law firms around the country this summer.

I'm joined today by my friends, Andrew Albritton, Farren Davis, and Gillian McCarroll, all from our New Orleans office, Julia Barry Lopez from our Albany office, and Taylor Bennington out of Cleveland. So, hey guys, welcome to the podcast. We're going to jump right in with some hot questions.

Andrew, you clerked with us in New Orleans and came back to New Orleans. I wanted to get your take on any unexpected benefits you found to working where you clerked, other than the obvious ones that you already knew us and felt comfortable with who we were as a firm there. Are there any other benefits that you've realized from working here after your clerkship?

Andrew Albritton: Yes, absolutely. I clerked three times with McGlinchey, once my 1L summer, then my 2L summer. And then, I did a part-time clerkship during my 3L year. And I think that the two biggest unexpected benefits from doing a clerkship before starting at the law firm where I started my career are one, I was able to

find my practice group as a clerk. I tested out all, what is it, six or seven of our practice groups. I worked with attorneys from every different practice area that we have and found a home in labor and employment with a little side practice group in the enterprise litigation section. I don't know that I would have found that had I not been a summer clerk before I started working; I came to McGlinchey without an idea of what type of law I wanted to practice. Meeting the people in the individual practice groups gave me the opportunity to see what the different types of work were and learn what suited me best.

The other unexpected benefit was the opportunity to take leadership roles within the firm. Because I met so many people as a law clerk, I saw a need for leadership within the firm, and I became the Chair of our McGlinchey PRIDE Employee Resource group because someone needed to do it. And as a clerk, I realized that, so I joined our diversity committee and became the chairperson of that group.

Zelma Frederick: I think that's a really interesting point because the clerkship for the law firm is a little bit of a two-way street. So you were able to be comfortable and voice something to the firm, not just, I love everything, but hey, this could be better. And I'm the guy that can step up and help. I love that, and I encourage clerks not to be overly critical, of course, but in a meaningful way if the opportunity presents itself, to have that discussion like it sounds like you did with the firm.

Andrew Albritton: Exactly, it's like the clerkship is when you have the training wheels on. And so whenever you start as a first-year associate, you have a two-year head start on people who didn't get the opportunity to be a law clerk.

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Zelma Frederick: That's really insightful, and I'm glad you're with us and returned after your clerkships because getting to work with you is great. Now you and everybody on this podcast, y'all are all here to help us make the clerkship program better, more engaging, and more meaningful, again, because whether these students come and practice at our firm or down the street, we're all going to be practicing law together. And so it's for the betterment of the whole profession, in my view, not just McGlinchey's profession or role in the profession.

So Farren Davis is in our New Orleans office, and I wanted to ask you, my friend, to tell me some advice that you have for clerks in terms of relationships and networking during their stints with law firms over the summer.

Farren Davis: I know this is going to sound pretty basic, but honestly, be organically you. So many times, we try to find the right things to say to certain partners. I remember when I was a clerk, I was looking up politics because I was like, I have to be talking about politics. Of course, I knew nothing. And then I realized I'm a person; I have something in common. I went to law school, they went to law school. There are so many topics you don't realize that you naturally have in you that you could talk to people about. So that was one thing that I had to have a pep talk with myself.

I remember when I was here, the first partner I talked to was Woody Norwood, and he is, if you don't know Woody, he is the longest-serving partner attorney at McGlinchey. He is a treasure trove of knowledge. And I was kind of scared to talk to him because I felt a little intimidated, and I remember talking to him, I was in his office for three hours. And fast forward four years later, I'm still in his office for like three hours at a time. But I just remember being like, you know what, these are real people. I can find something to talk about. We're in the same boat. And I think sometimes, coming from law school, you feel like this generational gap, and sometimes you don't know what to say, but be yourself. Be yourself.

Also, there are a lot of things going on in the summer, even outside of McGlinchey, like Chamber of Commerce events and NOBA events; go out and have some fun with some other clerks that are in the position. So you're going to want to vent. Sometimes, you're going to want to talk to someone. And also, this is the time when you're meeting a lot of people from different areas in different parts of the state. So I know sometimes after five o'clock you're like, I'm going home. But try and make the effort to go to events even outside of McGlinchey events.

Zelma Frederick: I love that. First of all, be yourself. I would say that for clerks across the land, I think that's such good advice.

As a person that interviews during on-campus interviews for our firm, I can tell you that one thing that we try to do to let people feel more comfortable is to tell them to be themselves. Because if you're doing on-campus interviews, grades are not an issue. So you're going to be in consideration already. It's more about finding that fit, and it's a two-way street. So if you're not yourself, we're not getting to know you. Say we slap out an offer out there, and then you come on, and then it's like, oh, well, I wasn't myself, so I don't really jive with these people. You know what I mean? It's all about finding that fit.

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And I think the culture of a firm is a really important part of having a great workplace. So your personality has to shine through. And I don't mean that in a way that you have to always be "on," because I feel like that sometimes when I meet somebody that's an amazing appellate attorney. I had the same experience with Mike Rubin in our Baton Rouge office when we worked on a case together. I felt like I had to be, I'm doing air quotes, "on" all the time, which was exhausting. Then I had the same kind of realization. He puts on his pants one leg at a time every day, just like I do unless I'm wearing a dress. But he is just another human. He has kids; he was a young associate once too. He had rulings denied. And so I think taking that advice to heart will help these law students organically find a good fit, which is probably half the battle.

And then your second piece of advice to go out and hang out with your law student colleagues outside of your particular firm events is great advice. It can be exhausting, but it's one of the last times in your life that you're in school and you're not tied to a job and have to go to things for a job or be in that role all the time. So I agree that there are a lot of activities through bar associations and chambers of commerce geared for law students, and it's there for a reason. And networking, you could run across your next law partner that you work with ten years later, or a judge that you're going to be in front of, or a decision maker that's going to be a client in ten

years. And you might have, that might be your thing, like, we met at this Chamber of Commerce event, you know, ten years ago at a law clerk function. You just never know. So you need to do that. I love that advice Farren. Thank you for sharing.

Taylor, I'm going to move over to you. What do you think clerks need to understand about what they are facing in the next 12 to 18 months of their careers? They're in law school; they're in the final countdown. What's coming up for them that they need to get their minds around in the next 12 to 18 months of their career?

Taylor Bennington: First of all, I agree with Farren 100%. Especially in your 2L summer, that's the home stretch. Enjoy it while you can, because once you get back into your 3L year, you're going to be focused on finishing school, headed toward the bar exam, and then your life is on pause for a second. So enjoy that final summer, especially if you're at a firm. I have a couple of pointers from my experience.

First and foremost, your 2L clerkship, especially if you're a 2L clerking at a firm, it's kind of like dating, right? It's no secret that it's like a dating relationship between you and the law firm. We want to know if you're going to be a good colleague for us, and you want to know if this is going to be a good fit for you. So definitely give it your best effort.

But also socialize as much as you can with the associates, with the partners. I know, at least in our group, when we want to make an offer for someone, it's an all-team effort. As my boss likes to say, especially for associates, they're going to work with you, so we want to know if you like this person. So make sure you make a good connection with the associates, with the of counsels, with the partners, and give it your best effort. I think that's number one.

Number two is to finish strong in law school. Just because you get an offer, and congratulations if you did, welcome, we are excited to have you as a colleague. But finish strong. It's not a free pass to just go through law school and finish on a bad note. We want good attorneys at this firm, and any firm wants good lawyers. So make sure that you finish strong.

And my final piece of advice is the bar exam is just a test, but it's an important test that gets you into the profession. Make sure you take that time to dig in deep and appreciate the task in front of you. Nobody likes taking the bar exam. At least I haven't met a single person who does, but it's a necessary evil because the other side is much better. Once you get to the firm, you're going to get to work with great lawyers, you're going to get incredible training, and it's not always easy. Your first year as an associate is not an easy one, but it's one, especially at our firm, where you really get the chance to get next to the experienced partners in your group, learn from them, and set the foundation to become a great attorney.

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Zelma Frederick: I love all of what you said, and I was taking notes. Number one, give it your best effort. I love that. That goes with what we said before. I think it's interesting that you said it's so important to finish strong,

and that ties in with your bar exam. The bar exam is a beast, but it's probably the last test you're going to take, unless you go and take more. And so I would say that finish strong sentiment extends to the bar exam. You don't want there to be any risk that you don't pass, especially if you have a clerkship offer. But even if you don't, take the time and be proud of the three years of hard work is great and important, and so you don't want to stress; you're going to be stressing either way, but you don't want to be stressing because you were not prepared, as you await your bar results. You want to be as prepared as possible so that that stress that you're going to have is at least a little lessened I think.

But I was definitely stressed to the max after that for sure. But I think too, for that period of time, I would take advantage of, say, you finish your clerkship, you get an offer from a law firm. At our firm, we typically say, hey, this is your firm. I told Gillian this at the time; you have an office here if you want to come study for the bar here. If you want a change of pace, don't feel like you can't go back to that firm if you have an offer and take advantage of any opportunities or amenities that they might offer as you're really digging down deep to study. You don't have to do it by yourself; you have to go in and take that test. But if there's something that would be helpful for the firm that you have accepted an offer from, at least with our firm, give us a shout-out. We love to hear from our clerks that are not yet on board, and we want to support you because we want you to be our colleague.

Taylor Bennington: At least at our firm, we get partnered with a mentor attorney when we are summer associates, and I just happened to be partnered with someone who almost got a perfect score on the Ohio Bar exam, which is crazy. Oh, I bugged him the whole time when I was studying for the bar exam. So to the extent that your firm gives you a mentor, take advantage of that. Whether or not they were a perfect score or near perfect score on the bar exam, I cannot be more grateful to have been able to reach out to my mentor, asked for study tips, asked how to really dig in. And that was, I didn't get a perfect score, to be honest.

Zelma Frederick: I was just thinking, I don't I think that was probably low, but right. But I think that's great, and that probably built your relationship somewhat.

Taylor Bennington: It did, yes. I started at the firm as an associate, and I'd already formed this mentorship friendship relationship with someone and already had that connection. So it's like a double bonus to that end.

Zelma Frederick: I love that. I never knew that about you, Taylor.

So we're going to move over to Gillian. Do you have any advice for clerks in terms of handling the work product and the workflow? Because I know they're going to get assignments from different people in our firm. We try to give assignments from different offices, different practice groups. What are your tips and tricks for that?

When you are getting an assignment from an attorney, you need to understand, you need to ask questions. You need to understand the scope of the assignment; you need to understand what is the product that they want; and you need to understand when the deadline is.

Gillian McCarroll: Absolutely, I think that being a summer associate and being a clerk, it's a lot of fun and games, but the work product that you put out is the majority of what you're graded on, and you need to make sure you're putting your best foot forward. When you are getting an assignment from an attorney, you need to

understand, you need to ask questions. You need to understand the scope of the assignment; you need to understand what is the product that they want; and you need to understand when the deadline is. And those are three things that I think you need to understand. And when you're talking to an attorney, you know, that's what you are doing, and ask questions about when you're getting an assignment. Do not be scared to ask questions. It's very intimidating. I think a common misconception is you have to appear that maybe you think you know what's going on, and you feel like you need to nod, write down quietly, and you think you're going to go back to your office and figure it out. But I was told when I was a clerk and a summer associate, and now as a young attorney, that what people appreciate the most about me is that I ask questions, and I tell you when I don't understand. And I think that's very important.

And speaking of mentors, a person you can ask is your mentor. McGlinchey assigns mentors, and I hope that the firm you're working on assigns mentors. Ask, "how would you approach this research issue? Have you ever researched something like this before? What do you do when this partner gives you an assignment? What do they like?" So definitely rely on your mentors as well.

You need to turn in a neat work product. I think you can stress a little bit less about being substantively correct as a summer associate, but your work product absolutely has to look as perfect as you can make it. No typos, no spelling errors, formatting, the things you can control. You need to control and turn in something that is the best you possibly could do.

I know McGlinchey offers the same training for summer associates and law clerks as we do for regular associates that start, that are barred. And what I mean by that is Westlaw training, LexisNexis training, document management system training, and understanding the tools that you have to work with. That sounds silly, but I mean that helps you get your work done in a timely fashion. And you need to take advantage of the library resources and ask questions of other attorneys, like, "what resources do you use to get your work done? Where can I find examples?"

And then, as far as workflow, the summer associate level or the law clerk level, that is the point in your career where it is not on you totally to control your workflow. If you get an assignment and you have a conflicting deadline, you bring it to the attorney that gave you the assignment. "I have an assignment from this person with this deadline; I'm facing this assignment with this deadline." You know, it's not on you. You don't want to be put in the position where you're late on something because you didn't speak up. You need to rely on your mentors; you need to rely on your assigning attorneys. It's for them more so to control your workflow and make sure that they're giving you assignments that you can handle. At the same time, you're also trying to work with as many people as possible, but don't bury yourself. There's a lot of fun to be had over the summer, and you don't need to be working until 1:00 AM.

Zelma Frederick: Yeah. And that's not what we want, as the attorney that gives assignments. We do not want our law clerks stressed at 1:00 AM, or probably beyond about 5:00, about work. And I think it's interesting what you said about the projects when you started talking; you said ask questions. When is this due? What format do you want it in? The when is this due is paramount because you can very quickly diffuse a situation where you know if they need a "quick project," it's only going to take you a couple of hours, and you're blocked for the next three days. You can say, this is what I'm already facing. Do you want to go to talk to the other attorney about it?

And attorneys know how to work that out when that comes up. We anticipate that, but it's not all on you to say, well, let me talk to the other attorney and see if it can be delayed. The attorneys that are already working with the firm, if you raise the issue, can work it out between themselves if there's an emergency.

Gillian McCarroll: I think an easy way, and you can use this snippet if anyone's listening, I think you say, "how do I prioritize this?" Or, "how would you prioritize this assignment," instead of "I'm busy, I can't take it." I would never phrase it that way. I would say, "hey look, I have this, I have this. Where would you prioritize this on my to-do list?" And I think that's an easy way for people to jump in and help you.

Zelma Frederick: That is good advice for every attorney from day one to day 101 or 1,001. That is great advice that probably will garner a lot of respect among your colleagues and eliminate any kind of bad taste in someone's mouth by inadvertently responding in a way that's not your best foot forward. The other thing you made me think about workflow is to take advantage of having the opportunity to go around. At least at our firm, we encourage our clerks to take charge on the front end. I would advise, and y'all tell me if I'm wrong, but I would not sit in my office and wait for people to come to me and offer me work. Gillian used to do it here. She would come in in the morning with her V8, and she would come in and say, "hey, what's going on? I can take on a project right now."

And even if I did not have a project lined up, what that did was it gave Gillian and me that relationship. And my impression of Gillian when she left was, she's proactive. She's a go-getter; she's interested in my work, even if I don't have a project to give her right now. It gave us an excuse to discuss work. So I think that feeds into workflow, is that you're not in charge of it so much, but take the opportunity to go around. Even if somebody never has a project for you, you leave them with that good impression of an opportunity for them to talk about their work. We all like to talk about ourselves and have an opportunity to say "man, she was always interested. She was always here, always asking for work." So I think that's another kind of easy low-hanging fruit to learn.

Take advantage of having the opportunity to go around. At least at our firm, we encourage our clerks to take charge on the front end. I would advise, and y'all tell me if I'm wrong, but I would not sit in my office and wait for people to come to me and offer me work...Even if somebody never has a project for you, you leave them with that good impression of an opportunity for them to talk about their work. We all like to talk about ourselves and have an opportunity to say "man, she was always interested. She was always here, always asking for work." So I think that's another kind of easy low-hanging fruit to learn.

Julia, what were your goals for your clerkship, and did they change or pivot while you were here with us during that clerk period?

Julia Berry Lopez: Yes, great question. I might sound a bit like a broken record because I'll probably pick up on some themes my colleagues have already spoken to. But one of my goals coming in was, as everyone says, to treat it like a ten-week job interview, but in both directions. So if I like the work and the firm culture and all those things, I want to get an offer at the end of my clerkship. But also, do I like the firm, and do I like the work? I was once told by a judge mentor, if you're unhappy as a lawyer, that's your fault, because you could do so many things with a law degree and work in so many different areas. I wanted to see, I think I'm going to like doing this work but, am I? And day after day, not for the first day of the internship or whatever, although you're probably not going to be doing substantive work on your first day.

Zelma Frederick: Yeah, you'll probably just get a free lunch that day.

Julia Berry Lopez: Maybe take some HR trainings and things. So my big goal was to see if this is going to be a long-term fit for me and if I'm going to be a long-term fit for McGlinchey. And I'm happy to say I think it is and am very happy to be here. But that was definitely my approach. And then the other thing that I wanted to keep in mind, and I continue to want to keep in mind, is try to be teachable, not perfect.

Zelma Frederick: That's really good. Say it again for the people in the back.

Julia Berry Lopez: Try to be teachable, not perfect.

Zelma Frederick: I love that.

Try to be teachable, not perfect...So many of us want to get everything right 100% the first time, and if you make a mistake, oh no, I made a mistake, or I didn't understand this. And it's so easy to go down that path of like, oh well, I guess I'm not going to be valuable, or I'm not going to be an asset to the firm if I make a mistake. It's crazy. We're human; we're learning. But I think how you respond in those moments is really what counts.

Julia Berry Lopez: So many of us want to get everything right 100% the first time, and if you make a mistake, oh no, I made a mistake, or I didn't understand this. And it's so easy to go down that path of like, oh well, I guess I'm not going to be valuable, or I'm not going to be an asset to the firm if I make a mistake. It's crazy. We're human; we're learning. But I think how you respond in those moments is really what counts. And I think this goes to a little bit of what Taylor was talking about beforehand, but if you know, take in the feedback and figure out what you're missing. If you know what you don't know before, ask about it. Like Farren was saying, but sometimes you don't realize. You don't know until you get that feedback, and you go, oh, I misunderstood this.

Zelma Frederick: Right? And that happens, and my takeaway is, I mean, I've been practicing right at 15 years, it still happens to me. So it's not just law clerks. But know that too, that the person giving you the assignment might point out something that's technically a mistake or a learning opportunity; they have those as well. So it's okay. That same mantra that will be my new mantra that you just gave me is equally true for the attorneys. No matter if they are, like Farren said, the Woody Norwoods of our firm that have, you know, he's our longest serving attorney. I think he would probably sign on to that advice for himself as well.

I want to go back to what Julia said, though, because I wrote a note about it, and it ties back into what Gillian said about taking control and giving work products that are perfect as long as it's within your control. I think to Julia's point, they just both tie in together where if I'm an attorney, and I tell you I want a formal legal memo for the file, here is a template, then yes, the things I probably will be a little like "eh," if I get back work product and it's got typos or is like in an email instead of the formal template that I gave you. So that's the kind of stuff that's in your control. But if I give you this nuanced issue on civil rights in a Supreme Court case that takes you an hour to read and the grammar is perfect, I'm not going to have any issue if you come back and say, I read this, I haven't written a word yet, here's what I'm thinking, let's talk through it kind of thing.

So it's not all about that perfect answer. We can find and navigate the legal answer together. I'm fine with that. But if you are going to give me something back, I don't want to spoon feed or get work product with easy mistakes that could have been avoided. So do take that extra time because, like Julia said, it's a job interview

both ways. The person that does that with me might be like, yeah, well, I'm going to have a secretary that can correct everything. In our firm, that's not really the way that we roll, but in some firms, it might be. So it's a job interview both ways, and I think that clerkship is an opportunity for you to figure out those nuances of the law firm life.

Well, thanks, everybody, for taking the time out today to share your nuggets of wisdom with other summer clerks across the United States. We appreciate your time and your insight, and your candor and honesty. Thank you all, and we will see you later.

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