

Closing Argument > column



By **Quentin G. Heisler, Jr.**
McDermott Will & Emery

Then and now

It was a different time then. I graduated from law school in early June 1968, and had come back home to Missouri to pick up my things for my move to Chicago to start my legal career.

On my last night at home, my father, mother, and I watched the California primary end with Bobby Kennedy's victory and exultant speech. We turned off the television and went to bed. The next morning I heard my father cry out in despair: "My God. What is this country coming to?" Kennedy had been assassinated minutes after we had gone to bed. The next day, I drove to Chicago to start my new career as a lawyer at McDermott Will & Emery.

We were all promised \$9,600 to start in 1968. New York was at \$12,000 when Cravath upped its starting compensation to \$15,000. Chicago followed with an increase to \$12,600. With a "huge" and unexpected raise, it seemed like a good time to start. But then came the assassinations, worsening times in Vietnam, the Grant Park riots, and the Chicago Seven. My friends and I began to ask ourselves why we continued to practice traditional big-firm corporate law when the whole world seemed to be coming apart.

I, like so many of my young lawyer friends, decided to change course "to do some good." I moved to Washington, D.C., to join an agency created by then-Sen. Percy to assist minorities in business. I immediately found that my legal skills were an impediment in what was a profoundly political initiative. I learned my first post-law-school lesson: Do not go to Washington without power. You probably will not make a difference. So, chastened, wiser, and married, I moved back to Chicago.

Those of us who became lawyers in the '60s came of age in that maelstrom of uncertainty and change, perhaps not unlike the economic

chaos that our young lawyers face today. The profession that these new lawyers so recently adopted has shifted under them. The client work that they expected to do has contracted, disappeared, or changed. The certainties and satisfactions that they anticipated seem to have vanished, almost overnight.

Perhaps the lessons we learned in the '60s and '70s at the start of our legal careers are relevant today. Some musings for our young (and not so young) lawyers:

1. Embrace the changes that are occurring. Try to understand what is happening and where our society and economy are going. The forces that converged in the '60s required all of us to rethink our goals and priorities. Some of us made good decisions and some of us did not. Our current economic whirlwind will require intellectual nimbleness and a substantial dose of personal introspection.

2. Be true to your profession. It is easy to lose faith in this wonderful profession and in its opportunities in times like these. Most lawyers will do well because they will navigate the new environment and will be able to refocus their professional disciplines.

3. Demand honesty from your clients, your colleagues, and your firm. I started in one of the most corrosive and ethically challenged periods in American legal history—the Watergate scandal and the multiple perjuries in the '70s were all orchestrated by lawyers. The lapses were so prevalent that our bar associations and law schools created what is now an organized bureaucracy in ethical analysis.

You will be challenged with ethical issues that are at times opaque and extraordinarily complicated. As lawyers you must insist on ethical and moral compliance from yourselves and from others. Lawyers and institutions fail when they lose their moral compass.

4. We wondered in the '60s whether our society would ever stitch itself back together. Many of you are probably asking whether the business and legal environment that you thought you were training for will ever return. It will get better, but it will be different. Some of you will be there and some of you won't. The prescient and persistent will be there.

5. Professional opportunity will continue to be deep and varied. Many of you are worried about partnership, compensation levels, and, indeed, about keeping your jobs. Those worries plague every generation of lawyers. I found, however, that my colleagues who left my firm almost always found enriching and rewarding opportunities, though perhaps quite different from those they had expected. Opportunities will appear out of these times.

6. Those of us who were educated in the '60s sought an environment that differed from that of our parents' generation. We wanted our workplaces to be fair, collegial, and friendly. To a large extent, many of us have enjoyed those qualities with our firms and practices. Today, with so many of our lawyers either looking for work or trying to stay employed, it is somewhat disingenuous to suggest that cultural values remain as important to us now as they were in the '60s and '70s. This will, I believe, be a time when lawyers will be forced to redefine their cultural interests and values. I am again optimistic that it will be a fruitful and positive process, albeit one with some serious challenges along the way.

I am sometimes surprised, when I reflect on my career, how satisfying it has been. There have been many good times and some bad times, but it has always been stimulating and demanding and interesting. I am so happy that I did not do something else. ■

qheisler@mwe.com