

10th Annual Norman Amaker Retreat: Legal Education Transcends the Classroom

On an unseasonably warm afternoon in mid-February, a deluge of youthful enthusiasm flowed into Loyola University's Retreat Center in Woodstock, Illinois. For three days, 62 law students from around the Midwest converged on this woodsy haven, leaving behind their laptops and libraries for the opportunity to capitalize on the benefits of a nontraditional learning environment.

From the moment of walking through the door at the Loyola Retreat Center, there was a spirit of congeniality and unity of purpose that pervaded the meeting rooms and long corridors. Bonding among students in the typical law school environment is often relegated to advice on which courses to select, debate over where to purchase the cheapest coffee in the immediate vicinity of school, and those lucky enough to forge an alliance that may confer for themselves an outline of impressive pedigree. But liberated from their computer screens, students were able to meaningfully connect with one another over a communal dedication to ameliorating the causes of social injustice.

After an early morning yoga session, Saturday morning's events were kicked-off by Loyola Law's Professor Emily Benfer, who issued a profound call to action. Each of us students has a heightened moral sensibility, Professor Benfer explained. Although we may be subjected to ridicule and rejection as a result, each of us has an inherent responsibility—vested by our compassion and awareness—to advocate for the marginalized and disempowered in society; to use our powerful voice as lawyers to speak on behalf of those who have been silenced by injustice.

During the panels, I learned about the medical-legal partnership model, interdisciplinary collaboration and increasing access to the legal system through pro bono legal work. One of the most impactful speakers, however, was not a lawyer. He was a young man who had spent six years in the county lock-up at 26th Street and California (referred to in the Chicago legal community as the notorious "26 & Cal"). He had been coerced by the most powerful weapons in the investigative arsenal, and after days of interrogation without food, water, or legal counsel, he pliantly signed a confession for a crime he did not commit. After years of unjust incarceration, he was finally liberated through the efforts of two female attorneys who, as he lauded, believed his story.

After a day of mingling with peers and listening to thoughtful speakers, I stole a quiet moment to reflect on the words of a man I do not know. His is a story told by Professor Benfer during the retreat, as an exemplar of the effect of marginalization on the human spirit. This man, who testified before the Washington D.C. Committee on Human Services, had been a victim of extreme poverty and homelessness. When asked to state his name and who he was before the committee, he simply replied, "My name is no one. I am invisible." *No one. Invisible.* Those words continue to

resonate, years after he said them, in a time and place wholly unconnected to the one in which they were uttered.

It is in those private moments, where one turns inward to find a connection between themselves and a cause, when true learning can occur. Someone once told me that when you tell someone something, they may forget it, but if you make them *feel* what it is you want them to know, they will remember forever. That is the gift of the Amaker retreat. It provides a teachable moment in which students are able not only to see injustice, to hear stories of profound inequity, to learn about the causes of poverty, but to use our heightened moral sensibilities—to *feel* what social injustice is, who it hurts, and that it is a wrong that we must work each day as lawyers to rectify.

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