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Professor Caitlin Murphy Information Interview

The Lawyer in Cowboy Boots

 On October 1st, 2013 the day of the government shutdown, I met Mr. Vytas Vergeer outside of the Washington Internship Institute program (W.I.I) in between classes for lunch. He was not what I expected. Most lawyers you meet are dressed in a suit and tie, looking their best. When I met Mr. Vergeer he was wearing jeans and red cowboy boots. I knew this man was not going to be a typical lawyer. Throughout my interview of him he proved to be anything but normal.

Mr. Vergeer works at Bread for the City as the Legal Clinic Director. Bread for the City is a non for profit organization that provides healthy food to those in need. Additionally, Bread for the City along with a host of other services such as financial services, were they take peoples paychecks and use them to pay their rent and other bills before giving the people what is left leftovers, a health clinic to provide people with medical care, social services and of course a legal clinic. I volunteered through W.I.I at Bread for the City which is how I learned about their amazing operation. The reason I wanted to interview Mr. Vergeer was because I wanted to know what it was like working for a non-profit organization, how lawyers worked in a nonprofit, and how things are different compared to working in a law firm.

On our way down to the food trucks I began to ask Mr. Vergeer my first questions. “What do you do every day at Bread for the City?” “I never do the same thing every day,” was his immediate reply. Since Bread for the City reaches out to so many people, as the Legal Clinic Director, Mr. Vergeer works on cases, and hands out cases and tasks to the lawyers that work for him on a daily basis. The cases they address include landlord agreements or disagreements, family disagreements, domestic violence, receiving federal benefits, and protecting fathers from having to pay too much for child support. Mr. Vergeer himself is famous for his work on housing and tenant law, which is why he won the 2010 Jerrold Scott Prize. When I asked Mr. Vergeer about how it felt to win the Jerrold Scott Prize he claimed, “It was like winning a career Oscar,” because most people win that award for everything they have done within their field of law. Mr. Vergeer was also very humble to state that he did not know why they were offering that award to him, based on the several people who had received it before him that were legends in his field.

After asking him about his reward we were at the food truck and decided to eat Mediterranean Food. We sat in the grass and Mr. Vergeer wondered why I had decided to ask him questions, and I told him I wanted to learn about non-profit organizations and how lawyers fit into the nonprofit picture. I did not tell him I was interviewing him for a class assignment because when I originally contacted Mr. Vergeer I was not thinking about the class assignment. It was not until after I asked to meet with him that I realized how close the interview was due that I decided to use my talk with Mr. Vergeer for my class assignment. After explaining why I was speaking with him, I inquired about what the best part of Mr. Vergeer’s job was. His response was exactly what I expected, after hearing him talk about Bread for the City. He loves to be hands on and helping people get what they need. The best part is that his job allows him the freedom and ability to do that.

How did Mr. Vergeer get to Bread for the City? As I knew from the internet, once he joined Bread for the City he never looked back. But to start from the very beginning, Mr. Vergeer started applying for law school after he graduated from his undergraduate degree in political science. Although he had a problem, his grades were not good enough to get him into the law schools he was applying to. But after 3 years of applying and working as a waiter and other odd jobs he finally got into law school at the Catholic University of America’s Columbus School of Law. Which is kind of ironic, that it took him three years to get into law school because since he was 10 years old Mr. Vergeer claims he knew that he wanted to be a lawyer. Mr. Vergeer originally planned on being a public court defender working for a year as an intern during law school in a public defender’s office. Then when he graduated law school he was offered to work as a public defender or to be a clerk for an Appellate judge for a year. He chose to be the clerk for an Appellate court judge for the District of Columbia because that is not a position to turn down lightly. His new job, after law school, as a court clerk was one he loved, his favorite part of this job was that was working on a variety of court cases and, he claimed he adored “the trill of writing decisions for the judge to make in court.” The only downside to choosing the Appellate Court position is when Vytas left his job at the Appellate Court he missed out on his chance to be a public defender since they had closed the opening. So Vytas sent out his resume to every non-profit in the area of DC. One of the places that responded was Bread for the City, and the rest is history. Although, he did confess he took a short break from Bread for the City in 2000 to work on a housing project. The point of the housing project was to win a grant to provide cheap housing to people in DC. Nonetheless, he made it very clear that he was always planning on coming back to Bread for the City after the Housing project. When he came back from the housing project in 2002 he set up bread for the Cities legal clinic at their Southeast center where he has been working ever since. The worst part about everything Vytas stated, talking about his job at Bread for the City, is that he cannot stand to see people suffer. Which is what makes some of his cases so difficult, because many of the people who come to the clinic have mental illnesses. This prevents them from getting jobs and poverty prevents them from getting the help they need. One of the things that Vytas said to me that really stuck was “I can’t change everything, no matter how hard I try” which was a big reminder that you really cannot change everything.

This was not the only reminder that Vytas gave me during our interview. When I asked, “What is the best thing I can, as a student, do to prepare myself for the future?” He huffed “now I am going to sound all sappy but…” then he told me to really not limit myself, he had always dreamed that he would be a public defender and that was always his vision but he never ended up there. Instead he has got to do this amazing opportunity that has given him so much more than he imagined. He also told me to be flexible, work hard and always keep a balance. Balance he alleged was something that was absolutely necessary to life, in law school he knew he wanted to be a public defender but he still took classes on environmental law and accounting law just to get the new experiences and keep a level more rounded experience to his education. So if his plan A didn’t work out it would not take him long to come up with a plan B.

I actually did not even ask Vytas until almost the end of our interview about what is different about working for a non-profit compared to a law firm? He said he gets to do more hands on experience and is not sitting all day in an office reading case law and documents. That was just not the type of law for him, while also stating that the pay at a corporate firm was much better. He did tell me a story about one of his clients that really proved just how much he really could not be a corporate lawyer. One of his clients is a hoarder “just like ones you see on television” Vytas indicated, the problem is she is being threatened to be thrown out of her apartment. Vytas and a couple of the other lawyers from Bread for the City decided to help out as much as they could a side from just their legal services by grabbing some garbage bags and helping his client over the course of several weekends clean out her apartment to prevent her from becoming evicted. The case is not over yet because she still has one room left to be cleaned, and the landlord is demanding that the apartment be cleaned out or she has to leave. I was very impressed that Vytas would take the time to go and help out one of his clients.

Reflecting on my conversation with Vytas I realized that you do not always have to fit into a small box that people put you in. Vytas certainly was not what I was expecting because I was expecting a reserved, well dressed lawyer that was ‘the shark’ for the underdogs. While Vytas is definitely ‘the shark’ for the underdogs he is not very reserved, chooses not to dress to the nines and be whoever he wants to be. This is no easy task! There are several lawyers who I work with at the Attorney General’s office who fit the typical lawyer description, and while I have been in DC they are who I have based my picture of what being a lawyer is about. By simply being himself, Vytas helped shatter by boundaries of what it means to be a lawyer.

One thing Vytas also did was make law school less scary. I have kind of been obsessing over what to do to get into law school without really doing anything just to get there, kind of saying I need to do x, y and z, but not really doing x, y, and z. It has just been a very daunting process that has seemed to be too much for me to handle. Vytas by not being successful right off the bat and still getting to become this amazing lawyer has eased my fears about not succeeding right away, providing me with the reminder that as long as I keep trying things will keep happening.

At the end of the interview Vytas did share some people for me to contact. They are Patty Mallany-Fugere who is the director of the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless and Amber Harding who works for Patty. They would be good people to contact to learn more about housing law and what happens to homeless people regarding the law, since I am not sure exactly what legal services homeless people need. He also recommended, Hannah Lieberman who is a part of the Neighborhood Legal Service Program and Judy Sandilo who he claimed does more policy work than hands on experience. Even after talking with Vytas I am not sure if housing law is the direction I want to go. The summer before I went to Nazareth College I had an internship at Seneca County. There I worked with housing law to put together a housing proposal. Which allows Seneca County to apply for a housing grant to give the county more subsidized housing and homeless shelters. While that was interesting it was not my true passion and I do not think that at this point in my life housing law is either. So talking to people that do not deal directly with housing law might be helpful. I am excited to contact all four of them and learn what I can from them because I learned more than I was expecting to from Vytas and I have the feeling these women will prove to be just the same.

Sometimes people are not what they seem, by just reading there bios on-line you do not really understand the full picture. Vytas as I have previously claimed was not what I expected and exactly what I needed to hear. He made me realize it is really okay if I do not get where I am going in the one straight path and that chaos theory is a reality that leads people down magnificent paths that they never thought they could travel on. Even though I have not yet found that piece of law that I know I want to practice, deciding that type of law has become a less daunting part of my life. That has relieved some of the pressure to know exactly what I am going to do for the rest of my life.