

Opening Statement

TEN THINGS I LIKE ABOUT BEING A LAWYER

NANCY SCOTT DEGAN

The author is a shareholder with Baker Donelson Bearman Caldwell & Berkowitz, PC, New Orleans, and chair of the Section of Litigation.

Over the years, many people have asked me why I enjoy being a lawyer in general, and a litigator, in particular. In this age where it seems more fashionable to criticize than to celebrate what we do, I take this opportunity to share some of the things I like about being a lawyer (in no particular order).

More importantly, I want to know what you like about the practice. Please email me at ndegan@bakerdonelson.com. I hope to share your responses in future Section of Litigation publications. Then, perhaps, we can officially declare it acceptable—even cool—to like what we do, and eliminate the apologetic explanations in which we often engage when introducing ourselves as attorneys.

1. No day is like the day before. Variety is the spice of life, and this is nowhere more obvious than in the practice of law. One breach of contract case is not the same as the next—even if the contract is the same. Similarly, no two tort claims are alike, even if only the plaintiffs are different. Being

unable to predict what each day will bring makes it easier to get out of bed in the morning.

2. What we do is relevant. Read the newspaper. Watch (or listen to) the news. It is all about people making, breaking, or enforcing laws; communities invoking or violating the rule of law; and society's challenges in determining what the law should be in a rapidly changing world. And we get to be part of that. Lucky us.

3. We are professional problem solvers. Each case is a puzzle, and we put the pieces together. That is a heady responsibility and a stimulating process. Whether we are donating our time, getting paid hourly, or being compensated based on the result, it is exciting—and largely gratifying—to make a living by helping to solve other people's problems.

4. We possess the power of change. Like the proverbial “man of steel,” we can make things happen. If you don't believe me, volunteer to do pro bono work at your local homeless shelter. The knowledge

and know-how we possess as lawyers can change lives.

5. We work within a system that creates order out of chaos. In 1774, John Adams aptly observed that we are a nation of laws and not men. On many occasions we have witnessed the invaluable advantages that result from a society where laws—not people—rule. Imagine the chaos that could have ensued had there been no system for deciding the 2000 election. And we get to work within that organizational network every day.

6. Real and fictional, we have great role models. What do Clarence Darrow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Atticus Finch have in common? They were all lawyers. Add to them Abraham Lincoln, Mohandas Gandhi and Saint Thomas More, and you get my point. We are professionals who stand on the shoulders of giants, and their successes help us improve our craft.

7. We have options. We can pursue many different careers as lawyers: private practice, public service, business, banking, corporate counsel—the possibilities are many. Few professions offer such variety.

8. We are surrounded by interesting people. As in everything else, people make all the difference. And lawyers get to deal with captivating people every day. Our clients each have a story, and we get to play a significant role in telling it. Our colleagues and judges are often equally—if not even more—interesting.

9. We get to see the results of our work. Whether we win or lose a case, consequences inevitably ensue. Said another way, what we do matters to our clients and others. That's powerful.

10. Rituals and traditions abound. After 31 years, I still feel butterflies when, sitting in court, I hear the knock on the door as the judge enters the courtroom and the minute clerk announces that “court is now in session.” I still enjoy extending and receiving “professional courtesies.” “May it please the Court” and “Wherefore” are terms fondly ensconced in my personal lexicon, and I prefer to “take a deposition” than “depose.” The rituals and traditions seduce me.

What do you like about being a lawyer? ■