May 2014

Dear Family or Friend of a Bar-Taker:

First, congratulations on the upcoming graduation from Santa Clara Law of your family member or friend! “It takes a village” to support a successful law student, and we thank you for the time and resources that you have already shared with your student over the past years.

The journey is almost, but not yet, over. The graduation ceremony conveys a “J.D.,” but a significant hurdle remains before your graduate enters the profession of law: the Bar Exam. Whether your graduate plans to take the California Bar Examination or an exam in another state, in July or in February, it will be the most challenging test he or she has taken in law. Santa Clara Law has prepared your graduate well, and we are confident that your graduate will, like most of our graduates, pass the examination on the first administration. However, it will take another sustained effort from him or her – and you!

We write to give you some background as your graduate embarks on the Bar preparation process. We hope this letter may serve as a catalyst to conversations between you and your graduate about specific issues that may be helpful to work out before intensive review for the Bar begins.

The test: California’s Bar exam spans three days, each with six hours of timed, “closed-book” testing in three formats. On the first day, a Tuesday, takers write three one-hour essays in any of 13 subjects (up to three combined in a question) in the morning. After a lunch break, takers return for a single three-hour problem that requires composing a real-life practice document from a “file” and “library” of around 25 pages that must be digested on the spot. Wednesday poses 200 multiple choice questions covering six subject areas in two three-hour blocks (1.8 minutes per question). Thursday is a repeat of Tuesday. Sustained memorization, concentration, and energy are required to sit for the exam, which is often administered in convention centers with a thousand other nervous test-takers.¹

The Bar preparation process: Given the array of 13 subjects and hundreds of rules within each subject, the review process leading up to the Bar is grueling. Review courses often allow only a day to review all of the material typically covered in a semester-long course. If a student hasn’t taken every subject tested, this period also requires learning and understanding a new subject.

¹ More information on the California Bar exam and its processes and structure is available at http://admissions.calbar.ca.gov/Examinations/CaliforniaBarExam.aspx
One estimate is that successful bar takers devote more than six hundred hours to bar preparation, memorizing rules of law, and practicing multiple choice, essay, and performance test questions.\(^2\)

How can you help?

- Recognize your graduate is not “free” after walking across the stage to receive a diploma. Don’t schedule a big trip or expect help around the house again; after years of waiting, you’ll need to wait a few months more.

- Allow your graduate the time and space needed for full-time review. Imagine every final exam period in law school strung end to end.

- If you are in a position to reduce burdens of work, finances, commutes, or child/elder care, consider what might support your graduate. Some will benefit from moving home to save money or from daily tasks such as cooking or childcare. Others should probably avoid the disruption of a move, or avoid settings that impose distractions, other obligations, or guilt when studying needs to be their top priority.

- Manage your own expectations, but be clear about what you need. If that is not compatible with your graduate’s focused bar preparation, you will need to work out a new approach together.

- Don’t be offended if your graduate needs to spend time away, or spends more time with study group members than you. Respect this as the full-time job that it is.

- To quote the partner of a successful taker: “Remember that time off from studying doesn’t necessarily mean time with you.” Your taker may not be up for a nice dinner conversation after a day at the library. Many takers report that the most they can muster is going to the gym or watching a movie. Try to schedule a few low-key, restorative times to be together away from the books, but don’t expect more.

- Appreciate the stakes: visualize and support success, but don’t add to your graduate’s stress by expecting a “sure pass” or minimizing the task. Many brilliant and successful attorneys did not succeed the first time, but finally prevailed.

We are happy to hear your concerns or answer any questions. Again, thank you for all you have done already. We join hands with you to support your loved one in this final step to becoming a lawyer.

Best regards,

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