Successful attorney credits LRS law clerk experience

by Brian Knavish

The ACBA's Lawyer Referral Service (LRS) matches people with legal needs with attorneys qualified to handle their specific cases. In a three-part series, the Lawyers Journal is looking at the LRS from the point of view of a former LRS law clerk, LRS panel attorneys and clients. This week, we present the perspective of a law clerk.

Alexander Guminski is a successful, practicing attorney with Sommer Law Group in downtown Pittsburgh.

Just a few years ago, however, he was in his 2L year of law school at the University of Pittsburgh and needed a job. Guminski learned that the Allegheny County Bar Association’s Lawyer Referral Service (LRS) was hiring law clerks, so he applied.

“At the time, I was only interested in finding paid employment, but in retrospect, it was one of the better decisions I made during law school,” he recalled.

He was hired and before long, he was fielding phone calls from prospective clients. Members of the general public call the LRS when they need an attorney to help with a wide array of legal matters. LRS representatives answer calls, gather details, and then refer each client to a panel attorney who is qualified to handle the specific type of case. At any given time, the ACBA has between one and three LRS law clerks on staff performing these duties.

“We count on our law clerks because often they are the first legal resource that members of the public encounter when reaching out to the ACBA for help,” said attorney Whitney Hughes, director of the LRS.

Guminski got paid for his time as a clerk, but he soon realized that he was earning something even more valuable to a law student – practical experience.

“My prior experience was minimal in that I only worked at the public defender’s office. But after a few months at the LRS, I had a working knowledge in the areas of real estate, business, family, personal injury, bankruptcy, and medical and professional malpractice,” he said. “I was exposed to issues in the law I never knew existed.”

That proved valuable from both an educational and career development standpoint.

“Being an LRS clerk was very helpful as I was trying to figure out what type of law interested me,” he said. “Seemingly, every call that came in exposed me to a new area of law.”

These days, Guminski – who is now an LRS panel attorney – works in several areas of law, including real estate, business law, intellectual property, personal injury and criminal defense. He credits his LRS work as one of the reasons for his versatility.

Hughes explained that there’s more to the experience gained by LRS law clerks than exposure to different types of law.

“Not only do our clerks gain experience that is likely to help them pick the areas of law they’d like to practice in, but the role also teaches the basics of client interaction, which is an invaluable skill to possess no matter what type of law you practice,” she said.

Guminski echoed those thoughts.

“Calls would come in, and I would ask the client, ‘Have you been injured? Did you lose money? Did you lose a job?’ and questions like that. Now, when I have a client consultation, I know the type of questions to ask,” he said.

Guminski encourages current law students to pursue opportunities with the Lawyer Referral Service.

“The experience was invaluable,” he said. “It was my job to know every little detail about a potential case. The clients were depending on my ability to understand the issue and direct them to the attorney who would provide the solution. I needed to be patient, to be sympathetic, to be a good person. It made me the lawyer I am today.”

The ACBA is currently looking for LRS law clerks. Anyone interested should contact Hughes at whughes@acba.org or 412-402-6703.