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Recommended Citation

Bowden, Michael, "Trending @ RWU Law: Michael Bowden's Post: How Law School Gives Politicians A "Running Start" 09-08-2017" (2017). *Law School Blogs*. 482.

https://docs.rwu.edu/law_pubs_blogs/482

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September 8, 2017

Michael Bowden's Post

How Law School Gives Politicians a "Running Start"

Posted by Michael Bowden on 09/08/2017 at 11:51 AM



How do you get from law school to City Hall (or the State House)?

With a lot of passion, persistence and hard work, a group of six alumni told a sizeable audience of mostly 1Ls on Thursday.

The program, titled “**Running Start: Careers in Politics & Government Service**,” featured five RWU Law alums who are making a difference in their communities through government service. Organized by the law school’s Assistant Dean of Students (and Providence School Board member) **Lorraine Lalli ’01** and Professor of Legal Practice **Jenna Hashway ’11**, the panel included:

- State Senator **Dawn Euer ’10**
- Providence School Board President **Nick Hemond ’12**
- Legal Counsel for the Rhode Island House Majority Leader **Matt Jerzyk ’08**
- Rhode Island **Attorney General Peter Kilmartin ’98**; and
- State Representative **Camille Vella-Wilkinson ’06**

Attorney General Kilmartin opened the program with a thoughtful keynote on the importance of passion in pursuing a career in the public sector – adding, however, that hands-on legal training also contributed a lot of “bang for the buck.”

“It’s an exciting time to be in law school,” Lalli noted in opening the panel discussion. The alumni panelists added that it’s also an exciting time to be in government.

“There’s no place where you can impact people’s lives more directly,” Hemond said.

“It’s about looking for wrongs and making them right,” Jerzyk said. “You can’t change laws unless you’re in politics.”

“*People are more engaged than they’ve ever been. There’s a lot of energy in the system, and that’s healthy. ~ Dawn Euer ’10*”

But it can be a demanding career choice.

“Once you become an elected official, you never take that hat off,” said Vella-Wilkinson, explaining that her constituents regularly approach her in the grocery store, in church and on the street to talk about their concerns and ask her for help. “You can’t help get wrapped up in the issues,” she noted, so you’d better like the work a lot (she does).



The panelists all agreed that their legal training gave them a vital edge in their work. Hemond, for example, pointed out that law school teaches students to spot and accurately assess the strengths and weaknesses on both sides of an argument – and then to think in terms of finding practical solutions.

“You begin as a passionate advocate, and then you temper your passion with logic,” he said. “You find solutions. You compromise. As a lawyer in politics, that’s important.”

Vella-Wilkinson said law students and lawyers also hone an ability to focus on issues under pressure and time constraints, both in the classroom and in the courtroom. That's a big advantage in legislative work, where "you must actively listen and you use that skill to advocate for or against a bill," she said.

"You also learn to study your opponent's argument until you know it better than they do," a skill that gives one the upper hand in almost any negotiation, Jerzyk added.

When an audience member asked whether the ascendance of the Trump Administration had damped the panelists' passion for social justice, they unanimously replied that the effect was, in fact, just the opposite.

"More and more law students are realizing that if they want change they have to do something about it," Jerzyk said.

"People are more engaged than they've ever been," Euer added. "People are learning how [advocating for political change] works, making mistakes, learning the ropes. There's a lot of energy in the system, and that's healthy."

(Photos by Kimberly Wineman, used courtesy of Camille Vella-Wilkinson.)

