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Here Come the 'Come-Back' Lawyers

Thomas Adcock

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While perusing The Wall Street Journal one morning about a year ago, Amy Gewirtz had a lightbulb moment that resulted in a unique curriculum experiment soon to begin at Pace Law School.

"New Directions," set for a May 21 launch, is a two-semester certificate program of study and externship for attorneys who have temporarily left practice and now want to return.

What inspired Ms. Gewirtz was a Journal account of a program at Dartmouth College's Amos Tuck School of Business Administration especially tailored for women executives wishing to re-enter corporate life after having left to raise children.

As associate director for alumni counseling and relations at Pace Law's Center for Career Development, Ms. Gewirtz asked herself a seemingly natural question: Where is such a program for women lawyers?

Nowhere in the state of New York was the answer. And apart from the Boalt Hall School of Law at the University of California, Berkeley, nowhere else in the country.

After consulting with others - including colleagues at the Westchester Women's Bar Association, the New York chapter of Flex-Time Lawyers, the New York City Bar Association and her own dean - Ms. Gewirtz's original question expanded to men and women attorneys furloughed for any reason.

Then came a working group to plot the particulars of "New Directions."

Ms. Gewirtz drew into this circle Deb Volberg Pagnotta, an attorney with Interfacet, a White Plains consultancy on employment discrimination issues; Maja Hazell, assistant dean for career development at Pace Law; White Plains solo attorney Rita J. Tino, co-chairwoman of the Lawyering and Parenting Committee of the Westchester women's bar; Mark R. Shulman, assistant dean for graduate programs and international affiliations at Pace Law; and Jody Fay, president of the Westchester women's bar.

It was not difficult for the group to win the blessings of Pace Law Dean Stephen J. Friedman.

"I wish I'd thought of it," he said.

Next question: What to teach?

Anticipating that most of the expected 20 or so inaugural class of New Directions students would be parents with children still at home, said Mr. Shulman, "We wanted to identify legal employment markets in the kinds of areas where flexible work relationships are possible."

In the geographic realm of Pace Law - Westchester, Dutchess and Rockland counties and neighboring Fairfield County, Conn. - that means matrimonial and family law.

"We like the idea that we're helping [lawyers] whose professional lives have given way to family responsibilities

who can then build on that family experience as they resume professional careers," said Mr. Shulman.

In the future, the school plans to add real estate law, employment law and trust and estates concentrations to New Directions.

But before classroom work begins - two sessions a week from June 4 through Aug. 20 - students will undergo a week-long "boot camp" designed to refresh lawyers' abilities with the basic tools of the job market.

"We'll focus on areas such as how to craft a resume, how to approach an interview, how to use the Internet for legal research, communications skills, networking and marketing skills," said Ms. Pagnotta, who ended the litigation phase of her career when she and her husband adopted a baby six years ago.

Classes will be conducted by local practitioners with expertise in issues such as prenuptial agreements, families in crisis, fertility, adoption, immigration, divorce, domestic violence and same-sex relationships, said Ms. Pagnotta, who was named director and master teacher of New Directions.

"We'll actually go through a trial or alternative dispute resolution," said Ms. Pagnotta. "When people finish this program, they'll have a comfort level hitting the ground."

The "final piece," she said, is a 10-week externship beginning in September.

"That gives them the opportunity to use their skills, and to start up a networking process," said Ms. Pagnotta.

New Practice Areas

Ms. Gewirtz, who has long counseled what she calls "come-back lawyers," said it is helpful for them to select entirely new practice areas.

Such was the case with Karin T. Antin, a Pace Law alumna who took 15 years off to raise her son, after which she returned to her alma mater to pursue an LL.M. degree in environmental law. Previously, she was a corporate litigator and a writer for legal publisher Matthew Bender.

"Women who go back into the profession aren't returning for two or three years, they're going back for a whole new career," said Ms. Antin, an environmental attorney with the Larchmont firm of Kevin G. Ryan. "Employers should take note of this. This group is making an effort to go back to school and to recommit."

Ms. Antin added that by returning to practice she thought it important to focus on a specialty, "to have a tightened skill set that was new and fresh."

In her case, she said, the LL.M. program made sense.

But, Ms. Antin added, "if New Directions had been around, I definitely would have taken advantage."

Ms. Fay, a lawyer with Attorney's Title Insurance Agency in Mount Kisco, said the new Pace Law program would provide an important intangible for come-back lawyers - confidence.

"It will be a stamp of approval, if you will, for returning to the workforce," she said.

Dean Friedman said the new program would be "largely self-funding," at least in the first two-semester phase.

Mr. Shulman said tuition is \$9,000, and that he expected 12 to 20 students at the outset - a range that would provide at least a break-even financial point. Student tuition aid through Pace Law is available, he added.

Mr. Friedman said the externship semester, commencing Sept. 10, represents the school's commitment to an "aggressive job placement process" for New Directions students.

"Like any sale, the hardest thing is to get in the door," he said. "This externship process guarantees that you get over that threshold with at least one firm."

Mr. Friedman said he expects that many of the students will "be highly attractive" to firms.

"They're coming at good functional levels - a fifth or sixth-year associate, for example - and they're coming as very competent, mature people," he said.

Ms. Antin defined "maturity" as an attorney with judgment, perspective and calm in dealing with clients, traits that

develop quickly and necessarily when dealing with a child running a 106-degree fever at 3 a.m.

"The experience might be at a different level," she said, "but it certainly is beneficial."

- Thomas Adcock can be reached at tadcock@alm.com.