

Break into Law

TWIN CITIES DIVERSITY IN PRACTICE

Paths to Success: An Interview with Larry Zelle

14 MAY

It is clear that the successful and prominent attorneys in our community are gatekeepers to success. They have attained achievement and are formally and informally chosen to be mentors for younger attorneys amongst their ranks. **Cornell Moore** (http://www.dorsey.com/moore_cornell/), Board member of Twin Cities Diversity in Practice from **Dorsey & Whitney LLP**, along with associates, **William Hughes** (http://www.dorsey.com/Hughes_William/) and **Mike Blackmon** (http://www.dorsey.com/Blackmon_Mike/), recently sat down with **Larry Zelle** (<http://www.zelle.com/attorneys-96.html>), co-founder and partner, of member firm, **Zelle Hofmann Voelbel & Mason LLP**, to hear what he had to say about his path to success, his mentors, and what challenges young attorneys face in today's legal market.



Larry Zelle

1. Please tell us about how and where you began your legal career?

I began my legal career in private practice at the law firm of Robins, Davis & Lyons (now Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi LLP) after clerking at the Minnesota Supreme Court for Justice William P. Murphy. I knew that I wanted to be a trial attorney, and I appreciated that I was able to start trying cases early in my career. I believe that my early mentors and clerkship with the Minnesota Supreme Court were both instrumental in affording me the opportunity to begin trying cases within my first year of practice, during which I tried a total of ten cases, two of which were in federal court. I also was able to make appellate arguments because of my experience gained from clerking for Justice Murphy. By the time I was thirty, I had already obtained a \$100,000 verdict, which in today's dollars would probably be over \$1,000,000.

2. As a young lawyer, tell us about mentors that were instrumental in your early development. What type of guidance did they provide?

Robins, Davis & Lyons co-founder Solly Robins, along with then managing partner Bud Orren, and Minnesota bail bondsman Bud Goldberg, were invaluable early mentors for me. From Solly Robins, I learned to be a perfectionist about my work. He taught me that my work product should have at least four drafts before the final is submitted to a client or the court. Although my early court appearances as second chair to Solly were great learning experiences, he cautioned me not to emulate him. Instead, he encouraged me to find my own style and develop my own techniques in the courtroom. As managing

partner, Bud Orren was a guide whose leadership pointed me in the right direction. Similarly, Bud Goldberg was instrumental in my development. I met Goldberg after arguing a motion in District Court. Shortly thereafter, he introduced me to most of the Hennepin County judges, clerks, and bailiffs. That enabled me to feel more comfortable in court early in my career, and helped me learn my way around the courthouse. Moreover, Bud Goldberg was a lifelong friend to whom I could turn whenever I needed help.

3. Have you thought about intentionally repaying the help you received as a young lawyer, and if so, how have you helped young lawyers transition into legal practice, and what types of leadership, mentorship, and advice have you provided?

I started mentoring others early in my career at the Robins, Davis & Lyons firm. It has been very fulfilling to see my mentees grow and take leadership positions as their careers have progressed. Several of my mentees actually became partners at Robins, Davis & Lyons and departed with me to become the leadership of Zelle Hofmann. My mantra for mentorship has been to give young attorneys an opportunity, responsibility and guidance. In some instances, mentoring has gone far beyond mere legal career advice, and I have developed close relationships of trust with those mentees. The greatest piece of advice that I can provide to young attorneys is to take virtual ownership of every client matter and case in which you are involved. In other words, imagine that you have primary responsibility for the particular matter on which you are working. Through this process, one will be stimulated to think more critically, ask better questions to the assigning attorney, and have greater development in one's career.

4. How have you provided leadership and mentorship to young attorneys?

After I became Co-Executive partner at Robins, Davis & Lyons, I began to work with many young attorneys who were assigned to some of the larger cases I handled. Many of those attorneys have since achieved their own successes, and are now partners at law firms throughout the Twin Cities and elsewhere. In working with attorneys, I gave extensive responsibilities to all associates, allowing them to make meaningful contributions to the cases. They knew that their work was valuable and communication was encouraged. Beyond creating an environment that fostered the professional development of attorneys in the legal sense, I developed a relationship of trust with younger attorneys that also fostered the professional growth of my mentees.

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5. What is one of the biggest challenges that you see young attorneys facing, and do you have any advice as to those who are facing such a challenge?

Among the biggest challenges is making certain you are able to gain significant and meaningful experience early in your career within the given practice area you are involved, whether that is in the transactional or litigation realm. It is important to take virtual ownership of the matters in which you are involved, even at the beginning stages of your career. This will enable you to become fully immersed in the issues, and make you more comfortable when asking informed questions or making intelligent suggestions to the assigning attorney.

6. What advice do you have for young attorneys who may not have identified a mentor but are interested in doing so?

Make certain to first answer for yourself the area(s) of the law of interest to you that you would like to pursue. Once you have made this determination, it is important to seek out the attorneys who have created a successful career in those areas, and whom you admire. It is important to keep in mind, also, that you will want a mentor who has a commitment to your professional development, will advocate for you, and has the willingness to advise you with candor.

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