Four graduates explain why judicial clerkships are a smart move for law school graduates.

Marlene England

Long before donning caps and gowns, School of Law students begin to chart their career paths. Will they be litigators or corporate lawyers...specialize in antitrust cases or the public interest sector...enter private practice immediately after graduation or devote a year to a judicial clerkship?

Clerkships are typically one- to two-year temporary positions in state, federal and specialty courts around the country. It is a priority of the School’s career development office to place graduates in clerkships, which law school officials view as extensions of the School’s experiential learning programs. Approximately 25 percent of School of Law graduates apply for and are hired as clerks each year.

The School’s commitment to clerkships includes a full-time staff member who coordinates the clerkship program, a streamlined
learn from a skilled jurist and to observe the inner workings of the judicial system. Moreover, clerks have an edge in competing for subsequent jobs with both private and public-sector employers.”

In the profiles that follow, four graduates describe how their clerkship experiences paved the way for professional success.

“The best way to learn”

After his second year at the School of Law, Gregory Bedward ’99 was one of 300 applicants vying for a judicial clerkship at the Maryland Court of Special Appeals. He was among the 26 accepted and began his yearlong assignment with the Hon. Andrew Sonner the summer after graduation.

Because the 13 judges on the Court of Special Appeals hear cases appealed from the Circuit Court, Bedward and his fellow clerks were exposed to many different areas of the law. “It was all very interesting and really ran the gamut—from criminal, family, and commercial law cases to appeals from individuals without attorneys,” he recalls.

As a clerk, Bedward spent hours a day carefully honing his writing and research skills. “When you do that much research, you learn to do it very efficiently,” he states. “It was a huge plus to read tons of appellate briefs from veteran lawyers and to learn from what they did wrong—and what they did right.”

Now an associate at the Baltimore offices of Venable, Baetjer & Howard, LLP, Bedward feels that a judicial clerkship is the best preparation for a career in private practice. “If you think you come into a large law firm without having done a clerkship, your first year as an associate may seem like an extension of law school,” he explains. “Coming to Venable after my clerkship, I felt that people trusted me and gave me more responsibility because I had this wealth of experience. When you know how the legal system works and you know the right questions to ask, you’re able to play a more active role.”

Bedward adds that he is proud to have the highly regarded position of clerkship on his resume. “It’s not a job that pays well, but it’s not about money as much as experience,” he says. “A clerkship gives a lawyer a competitive advantage and an opportunity to advance your career. I absolutely believe it’s the best way to learn.”

“A very valuable experience”

Bridget Eng Calhoun ’97 agrees. “The salary is low but the experience is so worthwhile. Too often, people want to graduate from law school and move quickly to get a job,” she continues. “What they don’t realize is that a clerkship gives you a different pedigree, and it’s something you can put forth as a selling point throughout your career.”

After her clerkship for the Hon. Walter E. Black Jr. on the U.S. District Court for the District of Maryland, Calhoun entered private practice as a third-year associate at Crowell & Moring, LLP. a
Washington, D.C.-based law firm that focuses on litigation and antitrust cases. “Rather than make me a first-year associate, they essentially gave me credit for my clerkship,” she explains, adding that she came to Crowell & Moring with an in-depth understanding of how litigation progresses through the federal courts.

“My clerkship gave me such wonderful, behind-the-scenes insight and helped me develop a comfort level with how the legal system works,” Calhoun continues, citing the advantages of working with—and learning from—accomplished lawyers. “The whole legal process was demystified for me. I realized you don’t have to be a wonderful orator to be a successful litigator. It’s how prepared you are and how well you know the facts that give you a favorable decision from the judge.”

Calhoun’s professional goals changed as a result of her clerkship. She had planned to focus her career on corporate law but is now more inclined to do litigation. Regardless of a lawyer’s area of interest, devoting a year to a clerkship—and the intense legal analysis and writing that go along with it—will be a tremendous benefit, Calhoun reflects. “I worked hard and learned a great deal about the legal community. For me, it was a very valuable experience.”

“The intellectual give-and-take was beneficial”

A judicial clerkship provides a unique opportunity to work one-on-one with an experienced judge, who often becomes a mentor to beginning lawyers. During her clerkship on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, Tracey Cote ’98 benefitted personally and professionally from the example and advice of the late Hon. Francis D. Murnaghan.

“It was thrilling to work for someone who inspired so much love and respect among other clerks and his colleagues,” Cote says. “Judge Murnaghan had such good ideas on balancing work, life, family, and one’s sense of commitment. It was extremely helpful to me to find someone in a senior position who was very successful and who valued that balance.”

Each afternoon, Cote and the two other clerks for Murnaghan arranged a tea break. “We’d troop into the judge’s office with the tea cart and cookies, and we’d talk about anything and everything, particularly the cases we were working on,” Cote recalls. “The intellectual give-and-take was beneficial to all of us.”

Cote’s clerkship also helped her to fulfill her personal goal of serving the community. “One of the most thrilling aspects of working for a judge is knowing that everything you do has an impact on someone’s life. Your decisions have far-reaching implications.”

The Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, which sits in Richmond, Va., and covers a five-state region, hears cases ranging from criminal law to employment discrimination and bankruptcy. Each month, Cote had major responsibility for four to five cases, which helped to fine-tune her research and writing skills. Today, Cote is a tax attorney with Ropes & Gray in Massachusetts, where she continues to apply the discipline and skills she acquired during her clerkship.

“Inside the mind of a judge”

Like Cote, Ranjit Dhindsa ’95 enjoyed a mentoring relationship with the judge he clerked for—the Hon. Lawrence F. Rodowsky ’56 on the Maryland Court of Appeals. Dhindsa sought out a clerkship with Rodowsky because of his reputation in the legal community. “I wanted someone who was well-respected and easy to work with, because I knew that would provide the best professional development opportunities for me,” explains Dhindsa.

“Judge Rodowsky was wonderful. He would pick me up from my home and we’d talk about cases in the car as we drove to Annapolis. It was great to get inside the mind of a judge for a year, to hear his comments about what was effective and ineffective.”

Rodowsky, considered one of the “old school” judges, often referred to common law cases from the 1600s, Dhindsa recalls. For the one to two opinions Dhindsa drafted each month, he frequently researched old statutes and cited century-old cases, which greatly expanded his knowledge of the law. His work for the Court of Appeals was diverse, including equity, commercial law, product liability, and attorney grievance commission cases.

The clerkship taught Dhindsa many lessons that can’t be learned in the classroom. In addition to further developing his research and writing skills, he learned how to take a neutral view rather than an advocate’s approach. He also understands more clearly how judges look at things, what resources they use, and how they negotiate and build consensus among themselves.

Now a sixth-year associate in the general litigation department of Arnold & Porter in Washington, D.C., Dhindsa remains an advocate of clerkships. “With a clerkship, you can let law school soak in, get used to the work world, and get inside the mind of a judge for a year. It’s an excellent transition and an invaluable experience—whether you want to be a litigator or not.”