

Laying down the law degree

From “The People’s Court” to Common Ground,
some law alumni thrive in nontraditional jobs

BY JANET WALDMAN

Airing dirty laundry in public may be embarrassing, but it’s definitely lucrative for the plaintiffs and defendants who choose to spar in “The People’s Court.”

Walter Gorelczenko ’00, senior legal researcher for the show taped on Fifth Avenue in New York City, explains that appearing on camera is a win-win proposition, even for the losing litigant. Any monetary judgment awarded to the plaintiff is paid from a producer’s fund; thus, the plaintiff is assured that payment will be made.

Although Gorelczenko does not practice law, he would not be able to perform his duties without the knowledge he gained in law school. He combs small-claims court dockets in New York for pro se cases that might make “interesting TV,” collaborates with producers, and works to get the litigants to agree to appear on the show. He briefs Judge Marilyn Milian on the cases she will hear and researches any

applicable laws from the state in which they were filed.

Another alumnus engaged in a nontraditional or alternative law career is Katy Frankel ’08. Her JD was a stepping-stone to what she calls her dream job. In March 2009, Frankel began working for Common Ground, a New York City-based nonprofit dedicated to ending homelessness through innovative housing solutions. She blends her passion for sustainable design and her legal education as the organization’s Connecticut housing development project manager. Common Ground has developed more than 3,000 units of housing nationwide for formerly homeless and low-income individuals, often renovating historic buildings that have fallen into disrepair.

Doretta Sweeney, associate director of career services for the law school, says there have always been students who pursued law degrees to enhance established careers, but she has noticed an upswing in alumni pursuing alternative careers since

the economy’s downturn in 2008.

In April, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the legal sector shed 1,100 positions during the month, which came on the heels of 1,000 lost jobs in March, according to an article in the Connecticut Law Tribune. And between April 2009 and April 2010, the bureau reported that the legal industry has lost a total of approximately 28,000 jobs while the national unemployment rate hovers around 10 percent.

“Traditional opportunities have contracted because of the economy, and a lot of firms have cut back on new hires or have had layoffs,” Sweeney says. She notes that health care and financial compliance are hot right now for job-seeking lawyers.

Courting litigants

Gorelczenko has been a fan of “The People’s Court” since Judge Joseph Wapner presided in the ’80s and early ’90s. To Gorelczenko, a good case is one in which

articulate litigants prepare well to present the facts of their case from behind the two familiar lecterns labeled plaintiff and defendant in the oak-paneled studio where “The People’s Court” is taped. Milian’s decisions are binding.

He says nothing annoys Milian more than unprepared litigants who fail to bring documents to support their cases. A peek behind her desk reveals a computer monitor on which a producer can communicate information to her during the taping. Next to the monitor is a collection of reading glasses in different hues so she can match her blouse choice of the day, and over to the side, latex gloves for examining evidence. The gavel rests on top.

Cases run the gamut from dog bites, faulty car repairs and stained clothing to tenant-landlord squabbles and fitness club memberships, says Gorelczenko, a resident of Rego Park, Queens. Before Milian, he worked with “People’s Court” Judges Edward Koch, the former mayor of New York City; and Jerry Sheindlin. Milian, who began in 2001, is open to what both sides have to say, but her strength is in cutting to the chase, he says, adding that she is “completely different from other TV jurists who are more in your face.”

His favorite case involved a Connecticut plaintiff who appeared twice over a few years before Koch and Milian. “The context of the cases was almost exactly the same. He befriended women at their place of work in New Haven and offered them rides home because they didn’t have cars,” he explains. When the women did not want to socialize with him further, Gorelczenko said the plaintiff sent them a bill for the rides and filed a court action.

“There was no true merit to the case, but he was a character, a bit of an older gentleman whose presence in the courtroom made the cases interesting and outright funny. Needless to say, he lost both times,” Gorelczenko says.

He has fostered working relationships with court clerks who sometimes provide a heads-up on an interesting case. “They are glad that we take them because pro se cases are the biggest burdens on the court,” he explains. Just when he thinks he’s seen it all, a new case comes along.

Gorelczenko earned an undergraduate degree in political science at Fordham University in 1990. He worked in the human resources field for a while, and issues he dealt with, such as sexual harassment, stirred his interest in law school. At the end of his first year at Quinnipiac, he was looking for a paid summer position in the legal field. His brother, Andrew, now production manager of “The People’s Court,” told him the show was starting production in New York with Ed Koch. They interviewed and were hired a few months apart. After graduating law school, his position became full time.

The most difficult and sometimes frus-

trating part of the job is making sure litigants show up on time. They cancel for reasons that range from no babysitter to snowy weather to simple cold feet. “It’s a big blow to me and to the producer because without litigants, there is no show.” Even when two parties agree to appear, Gorelczenko must make sure their cases are continued in the courts of origin in case one of the parties backs out.

One would presume that the losing litigant would be happy the judgment did not come out of his or her wallet, but for many, it’s not about the money. Gorelczenko says, “People just want to be heard. Often, it’s the principle.”



Walter Gorelczenko '00 in front of Judge Marilyn Milian's desk in “The People’s Court”

Thinking like a lawyer

Common Ground's flagship Connecticut development is the former Capitol building on Bushnell Park, renamed The Hollander. It contains 70 apartments, 56 of which are occupied by a variety of people who qualify for low-income housing.

Frankel's office, on the roof of this building, affords a commanding view of downtown Hartford. The city's first green roof—4,000 square feet of flowering plants and vegetation—lies outside her office window. Frankel was always interested in architecture. While earning an undergraduate degree in history at Cornell University, she worked for an architect and soaked up information on urban planning issues. "I knew I wanted to work in this field, but didn't know what my role could be," she says.

Before law school, she worked as an editor and contributing author on a variety of design publications, including "Spectacle" by architect David Rockwell and "Design Like You Give A Damn," a book profiling humanitarian design projects around the world by nonprofit Architecture for Humanity. One of her articles was about

The Andrews House, a former lodging house on the Bowery of Manhattan rehabilitated by Common Ground. During that assignment, she met Common Ground founder Rosanne Haggerty, who encouraged her to go to law school.

At Quinnipiac, she focused on environmental law and headed the Environmental Law Society. She also was drawn to intellectual property, especially copyright law. After her first year, she took on an extracurricular internship or externship each semester and summer. She recalls Professor John Morgan emphasizing that there was more to law school than books. "He said, 'You have to get out there and see how lawyers do their work.'"

While an intern at Creative Commons in San Francisco, Calif., she authored an article titled "Copyright Protection for Architectural Works: How Can Creative Commons Encourage Collaboration Among Socially Responsible Architects?" that was published in the ABA's *SciTech Lawyer* in Spring 2007. During law school, she maintained a research position with Creative Commons and clerked for Judge Howard T. Owens Jr. in the Connecticut

Superior Court. She also interned with an intellectual property firm in Stamford, Conn. She passed both the Connecticut and New York bars, but jobs were scarce. "After I graduated law school (in 2008), the legal job market was imploding and the world was upside down," she said.

Frankel took a job as a legal researcher for the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, completed a pastry apprenticeship and taught skiing in Vermont on the weekends. During this time, Frankel reached out to Haggerty for advice. Recalling her work reporting on The Andrews House, Haggerty asked her to write, edit and manage the production of a book cataloging the reinvention of The Andrews.

Once the book was done, Haggerty sent Frankel to Hartford to support the launch of the newly finished Hollander building. Now, she is working on a 56-unit apartment building called Cedarwoods in Willimantic, Conn. "I am securing the project financing with various state agencies while simultaneously working with our architects and lawyers on building contracts."

Her environmental law class with Professor Jeffrey Meyer has come in handy, as has her land use class with Associate Dean David King. She stays in touch with Professor Neal Feigenson, whom she considers a mentor. "He is a dynamic thinker and I find that with all the QU law professors. The best part is, you don't feel like a number. They really get to know you, are accessible and really love to teach—and that's not easy to find."

Frankel has returned to the law school to audit poverty law and nonprofit law classes and plans to take tax and real estate transactions to round her skills. She says she refers to her law textbooks on her office shelf regularly.

At Quinnipiac, she learned to think like a lawyer. "I can flex my muscles because I studied these areas," says Frankel. Her sister, Sara, earned her JD from QU's School of Law this past May.

"For example, I use my legal skill sets to translate what the lawyers say to the architects. There's no shortage of challenges or needs, and every day is different."



Hartford's first green roof lies outside the Common Ground office of Katy Frankel '08.