

# Disgruntled lawyer flees doldrums of 'Real World' grind

**Why I left the Real World**  
**Sam Kepfield**

By now, I'm used to the funny, almost disbelieving looks that I get from people when I tell them that I used to be an attorney.

A real, live, honest-to-God gentleman of the bar sits in their midst — in the history classrooms — as a graduate student in the first semester of his master's program.

"Why are you here?" is the inevitable query. "Couldn't handle the Real World?" Or, "Ah, you're a professional student. I get it."

People have this image of lawyers that they've garnered from "L.A. Law" or any of the other myriad shows about the profession now on the air. (I, by the way, watch none of them.)

You're expected to be some pile-driving, go-getting aggressive automaton who pursues justice or a fee with single-minded intensity. You have to own a fancy new car, dress in suits every day, be impeccably groomed and speak every other word in Latin.

I have friends who fit this mold. They're well-off, but they're also miserably overworked and underappreciated. Most hate their jobs, and would give anything to leave, if it weren't for those damned

student loans to pay back.

I don't fit the mold. But neither am I a dropout who broke under the pressure, nor am I a professional student.

I left law school in 1989, passed the bar in Kansas, and promptly set to work as the assistant Finney County (Kansas) attorney. I was in charge of appeals to the Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court. It was not a glamorous job, being placed out in the middle of nowhere (find Garden City, Kan., on a map if you need convincing), and with abysmally low pay. Even

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though I told myself I wasn't in it for the money, "I HAVE to be worth more than this," was my refrain at payday.

Things went to hell in a handcart from there on out. My boss was a typical anal-retentive obsessive compulsive, with no social life of his own. Therefore, since I wasn't married, I wasn't entitled to one either. Ergo, I was expected to put in at least 60-70 hours a week.

On top of that, my every move had to be watched, since my boss

was in a little turf war with the county commission. The smallest mistake could mean a lower budget, or other incursions on his office. I began to feel like I was walking on eggs all the time.

It finally got to be too much. I'd been thinking about leaving almost from the day I arrived and figured out what the score really was — build a decent record there, then after a year go to some middle-size firm in Topeka, or Wichita, and build a private practice.

But this left such a bad taste in my mouth that after I left, I decided

About 1 1/2 years ago, I finally put it all together, and decided graduate school was the way I wanted to go. Law held little appeal for me. I had always thought, especially in those dark, hopeless days in law school (usually during finals) that what I REALLY wanted to do was teach. The world has enough damned attorneys. What they need is some more good teachers.

And here I am. I haven't totally divorced myself from the law; all my papers due this semester are on some aspect of legal history, and that will likely be my specialty.

My legal experience has also given me an edge. Having been through law school, where three or four hour tests are the norm, and your whole grade for the year rides on that one test — and the bar exam, where your whole career depends on the outcome of one grueling, two-day marathon of essay and multiple-choice, there isn't a test that anyone can come up with in the history department that's going to scare me.

There rewards? You're pretty much your own boss, lord of your own time. I can get up at 7 a.m., go to class 'til noon, come home, do lunch and listen to Rush Limbaugh, sleep for an hour to recharge, and

then research like a demon 'til midnight, with maybe an hour tucked away for a good, hard six-mile run. To a former eight-to-fiver, it's paradise.

On the other side, doing research on the graduate level requires a great deal of ingenuity and originality. It's not easy being brilliant and thinking. Original Thoughts, then going out and doing the archival work to back it up. Quite a change from the law, where originality is discouraged, and hoary precedent is enshrined. I'll take originality every time.

The atmosphere, though, is what really drew me back. I got tired of the stuffiness, the constant need to conform, to be proper, to mouth all the right things, and suck up to all the right people. Here, I pretty much do what I damned well please. Some may be offended, but it's more or less a free environment.

I'm free to be myself and not just another clone in pinstripes and wingtips. That, to me, is the most precious thing of all, and it's why I'm in academia for good. You couldn't pay me enough to go back. Ever.

— Kepfield is a very contented graduate student in history, a disgruntled (but damned good in his day) former attorney, and a Diversions contributor.

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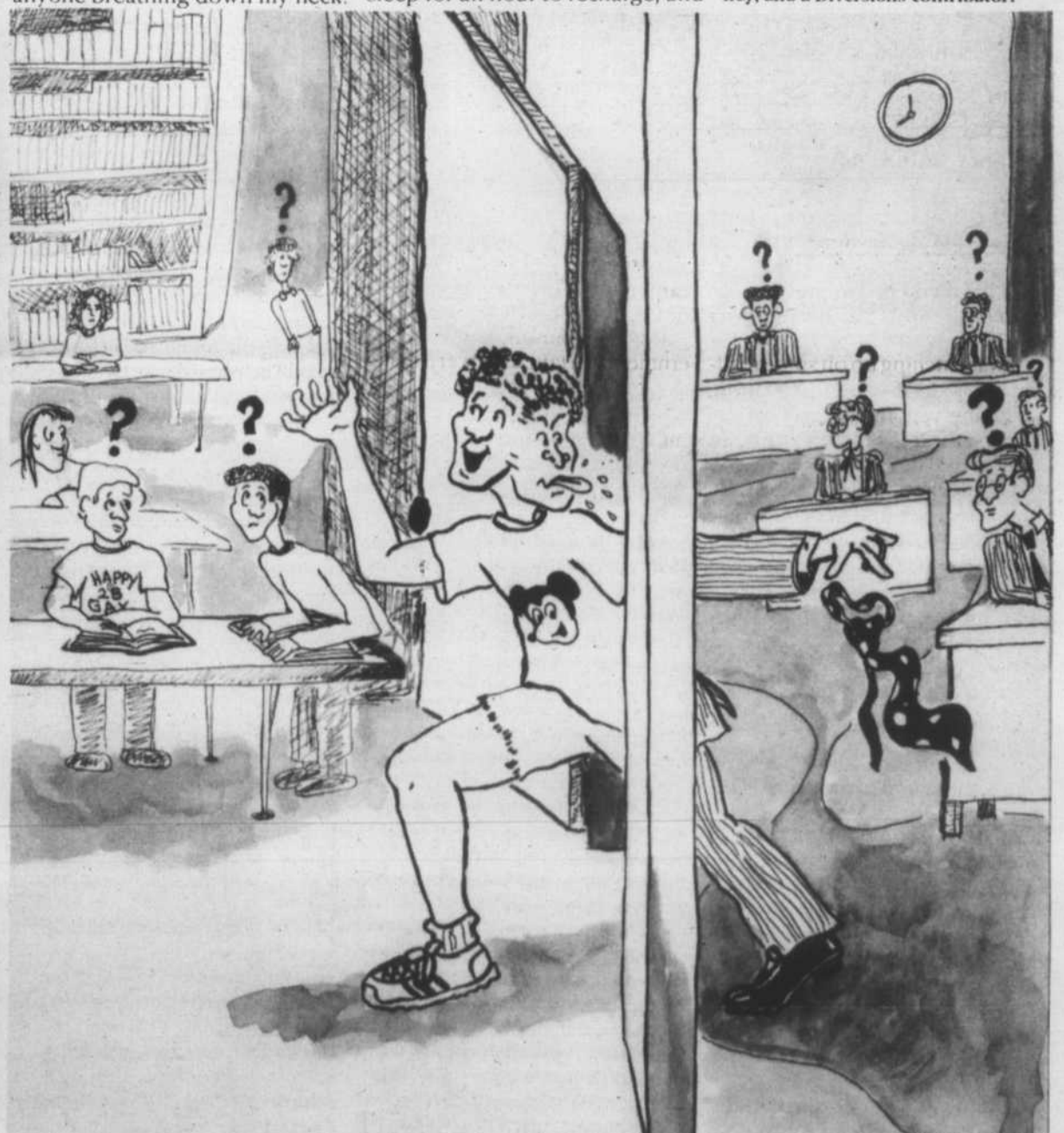
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