

# VLS Alumni: Three Success Stories

By Jo-Ann Gross

Yes! There is life after law school. Although many of us think that law school encompasses our whole lives and that graduation day will never come, law school does eventually come to an end. The next agonizing question that comes immediately to mind is whether or not you will be prepared for your long-awaited legal career.

VLS alumni have proved that they have been more than ready to meet the demands of a host of varied careers into which they entered since leaving VLS. The Forum contacted several alumni who have distinguished themselves in their chosen fields, and have asked them to share their experiences since leaving VLS.

Maureen Phelan '77, is the first VLS graduate to argue before the U.S. Supreme Court. Phelan argued this year's Moot Court case, *Spring v. Colorado*, on December 9, 1986. Phelan is an Assistant Attorney General for the State of Colorado. When asked of her impressions on arguing before the Court, Phelan responded, that "the terror I normally feel before arguing was the biggest I have ever felt." Once the argument commenced, Phelan noted that she felt more relaxed and that the argument was not much different from any other.

Phelan was allotted 30 minutes for her argument. The Solicitor General's Office filed an amicus brief and was given 10 of the allotted 30 minutes. Phelan felt apprehension at the Solicitor's argument, because she described him as resembling "Ghenghis Khan and to the far right of Edward Meese." However, the attorney's argument turned out to be favorable to Phelan since it made her argument, which was to adhere to a strict reading of the Miranda warning, seem quite "modern and more on the liberal side."

Phelan said that she was not apprehensive about arguing until she arrived in Washington. After her arrival, Phelan suffered a "3 hour panic attack. I felt that I had been faking it all along and now I would be found out. I could not fake it anymore." Obviously, Phelan hasn't been faking it, as her argument was very persuasive and Colorado won its appeal.

Asked if she would welcome the opportunity to face the Court again, Phelan was somewhat ambivalent. The experience was "very enjoyable and I would like to do it again, however, the preparation involves a tremendous amount of work; more than I ever imagined." Recently, Phelan's boss asked her to research a case he thought he might appeal to the Supreme Court. Although she would like to face the challenge

again because she found it to be very exciting, Phelan would rather wait a few years before doing so.

After working for a year doing research, Phelan joined the Attorney General's Office, and is now working in the Appellate Division. On her first day on the job, Phelan was handed a pile of cases; most of which had belonged to other attorneys. Within a month, Phelan was in court arguing cases. Most of her time is spent doing research and she finds herself in court only one or two times a month. Most cases can be handled by submitting a brief. Her first time before the Colorado Supreme Court turned out to be a very disquieting experience for her. Phelan is originally from the Boston area, and the recitation of the facts required her to say "the suspect parked the car

Michigan. In November, 1986, Sawyer litigated a case in which a jury awarded his client 1.6 million dollars. *Slinger v. Toro* was a products liability case, in which his client fell and broke his neck after the lawnmower he was using malfunctioned. The jury award was the largest jury verdict ever rendered in Kent County Circuit Court, and one of the top 100 in the history of Michigan. A summary of the case is featured in the center-piece article in the February 1987 issue of the ATLA Law Reporter. In 1982, Sawyer litigated a case in which the jury awarded \$400,000 for a products liability case.

Sawyer has been very busy in a number of different areas since leaving VLS. In 1978, he joined the law firm of Murphy, Burnes & McInerney as an associate. Sawyer gained

mons. In 1986, after Timmons left the area, Sawyer set up his present firm of Sawyer & Thieme, P.C.

Sawyer was on the board of the West Michigan Environmental Action Council for a period of eight years before recently resigning. Sawyer is also a member of the Kent County Republican Executive Committee and is active in local politics.

Sawyer will be at VLS on April 10th to share some of the events surrounding the Toro verdict. Sawyer hopes to share some of the insightful and fascinating elements of the case.

Steven Vogl '82, is a partner of a small law firm, Stevens & Vogl of Shelburne and Stowe, Vermont. After graduation, Vogl worked for three months in the Chittenden County State's Attorney's Office. For

and energy. Vogl said, that "bookkeeping, accounting, purchasing, employee relationships, and developing client contracts took time away from concentrating on the practice of law."

Vogl found, that "client and attorney relations is another area of practice that surprises a new practitioner with its complexities. Law schools cannot teach in classrooms the knowledge needed to work comfortably and effectively with clients and other attorneys. That comes with experience, and is one more reason that gaining experience in a firm with experienced attorneys is invaluable. Law schools should focus more on the needs of the general practitioner by incorporating more internships and clinical programs into its second and third year programs. Participation in those programs is highly recommended."

Although solo practice requires a great deal of time and energy, Vogl was quick to point out the positive aspects of such work. "As a solo practitioner/business person, you can focus your practice on areas that interest you. Nevertheless, you can't restrict your practice to the point of losing revenues. You can define the amount of time you put into the practice, though don't expect any four-day weekends for the first few years. The chances you take are your decisions and the rewards are yours (as well as the failures). In sum, as a solo practitioner, you have the opportunity to build equity in a business that could provide you direct work satisfaction and a good, though not great income.

On the down side of a solo practice are the high investments in terms of time and money. Vogl estimated that a solo practice requires a minimum investment of four years before a steady and marginally decent income could be obtained. Vogl warned "without prior experience in the practice of law, I don't believe opening a solo practice is advisable except for extremely adventurous, high energy, stress-loving people who don't have to make a decent living for several years. Otherwise, enjoy gaining experience and receiving a steady pay check in a firm before practicing on your own."

The three alumni profiled in this story represent only a small number of people who have left VLS to find successful careers in various areas of the law. The Forum hopes to present more profiles in the future. Meanwhile, if you would like to learn more about VLS alumni and their careers, alumni career profiles are available for student use in the Career Services Library.

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*Steven Vogl '82*

across from the bar." When she was through, she found the entire court laughing at her heavy accent.

During her first year, Phelan found going into court to be a very scary experience. When a judge asked a question that was totally off the subject, Phelan often had no answer and replied that she would answer in a letter brief. Now, through years of experience, when these types of questions are asked, Phelan has the answers. "That part of the argument has become a lot of fun, to be able to answer questions that are totally unexpected."

Ms. Phelan found that a general background of the law is helpful for her position. When she applied for her job, Phelan attached a writing sample to her resume. Writing is an important part of her job and she felt that the inclusion of the sample was important in securing the position.

Another noted alumni is Keary Sawyer '78, who practices in Grand Rapids,

valuable trial experience representing a variety of different cases. Although the thrust of his litigation has focused on personal injury, particularly in the area of plaintiff's product liability. Sawyer has also litigated worker's compensation, commercial litigation, criminal defense, and domestic law. Some interesting trials that Sawyer has been involved in include: representing someone who threatened President Carter's life, the "Grand Rapids Flasher", and defending a Chicago labor union affiliate on federal charges for possession of machine guns (His most enjoyable trial).

During this time, Sawyer also found time to manage two congressional re-election campaigns. In addition, in 1982 he became a partner in his law firm. In 1984, he left the firm to run for Congress. The seat eventually was won by his law partner, Gary McInerney. After the election, Sawyer set up his own law practice with Bob Tim-

the next two years, Vogl worked as Assistant Attorney General in the Department of Corrections. His work consisted mainly of researching, filing, and arguing motions. In April 1985, Vogl took over the practice of an attorney who had been practicing for nine years. Vogl was left with a number of active files and began representing clients immediately.

Vogl found the transition of student to private practitioner to be a challenging experience. The decision to postpone opening a private practice until having gained several years of experience is a wise one according to Vogl. "Many of the skills, and much of the knowledge required to practice in a small or solo law practice, are not taught in law schools. It is expected that such experience will be gained after graduation as an associate."

Although one must be aware of the various areas of law and court procedures, the business side of a solo practice requires an incredible amount of time