

Student vacation program*

Mbuso Zungu, Johannesburg Bar

I've arrived ... only just!

On arrival, Sunday 24th one could see the happiness on the faces of the participating students, a safe journey had been completed and the world-renowned Johannesburg had promptly welcomed the group. A sense of wonder and anticipation filled the hearts of the participants; one could not predict what the whole experience would entail. A twinkly feeling and jovial mood were not far off. 'You need to make the most of the experience and you should leave the university as better and improved graduates who can hold their heads up high, in confidence, from the knowledge and insight gained from the vacation program'. That was the parting message from Ms Ramacio Calvino, lecturer at the University of Zululand.

Group 21 welcomed the students with open arms; a feeling of warmth greeted the group upon arrival at the chambers on Monday morning. One might add that the group was punctual, something well-noted by co-coordinator Adv Laurens Malan: 'You guys are well before time,' he said with a wide smile. The students were then introduced and subsequently paired with their mentors. With no lapse of time, the pupils immediately accustomed themselves to the new environment and engaged in the tasks assigned to them.

One can never stress the importance of punctuality enough: 'You are never late to any court!' said Willie as we entered the court's parking bay. 'But what if the tyre of the vehicle is punctured on your way to court?' asked one of the students inquisitively. 'Did you foresee the possibility?' retorted Willie. The student went silent because he grasped the lesson. It became clear to all pupils that late arrival at court was inexcusable unless owing to health-related matters.

The group of students had always spoken about how they dreamt of seeing

an argument between two opponents in a High Court play out. It was Tuesday and some pupils had the opportunity of going to the South Gauteng High Court, the group arrived at court before 9 (true to Willie's words) and didn't know what awaited them. The parking bay was its usual busy self: it consisted of about 5 floors and the indication was that of a busy court. When the group made it to the reception area they were pleased to rub shoulders with legal practitioners: 'I've never seen so many advocates in one place, this is surreal to say the least!', remarked one of the students. An atmosphere of liveliness and anticipation swept across the reception hall. Apart from their identical dress code, the practitioners appeared cool, calm and ready to argue.

Everyone was in a rush to get to the notice board and peruse the court roll and to record the number and courtroom at which they were to appear. Whilst the buzz of the morning entangled the area, one of the students professed: 'I'm thinking to myself this is it! I have forever longed for the opportunity to be in the nucleus of things, the competitive nature of the profession is what kept me on my toes. Unlike in medicine, education and hospitality [everyone smiled as he alluded to the hospitality industry] nothing is cut and dried in this field!' He paused to for a moment. Each member of the group was amazed with the vision expressed by the fellow. He continued, 'There is pressure to produce and deliver quality service, just an hour in and I'm thinking I could suitably adapt to this environment, the profession compliments my qualities', he said tongue in cheek. 'You could adapt!?' interjected Nobuhle, 'I've never known you to be good at matchmaking!' she spoke to giggles all around her.

Entry into the courtroom was intimidating. Practitioners seated on their designated seats, chatting silently away to each other. The room is big but only one seat remains unoccupied. The seat is bigger than any other in the court room and is made of leather reddish in color

that is clearly for the presiding officer. The students were smiling and seemingly appreciative of the occasion; all present were filled with enthusiasm. They were clad in traditional black and white suits. A practitioner came over and asked one of the pupils 'in which matter are you appearing?' The concerned pupil was amazed at this elevation but politely answered: 'I'm here for observation', the practitioner nodded in disappointment. 'Hey we got through to making an impression! How awesome?' he thought to himself.

Many issues were canvassed during the two-week period at the bar. The engagement on various matters, legal and social, left participants with an invaluable knowledge base. Some may take some of the lessons for granted not knowing the importance of the tasks engaged upon. The impression left on the pupils was gigantic and will certainly be of great importance moving forward. Advocates are appreciative and courteous individuals. Invaluable lessons of respect, punctuality, ethics, critical thinking and a range of key aspects involved in practice, were extracted.

The gap bridged between lecture room and actual practice was immense. The programme addressed the proper structuring of heads of argument. Law practice is a different ball game to law school. Practice is a somewhat, relaxed, informal but in many ways intense process. Seeing the law play itself out in practice was simply enriching. When the substantive and procedural aspects marry it makes for a intriguing union.

The days spent at the chambers at the chambers were equally as productive as those spent in court. The experience offered great insight into the workings of the profession. One can't help but cherish every hour spent in the shadow of each mentor.

Mentors were open and accommodative and glad to answer the most trivial question. The relaxation and readiness to interact on the part of mentors was greatly welcome by the participating students. **A**

* This piece reflects on the two-week period spent at the Bar under the stewardship of Malan and Stockwell SC. The vacation ran from 25 November to December 6.