Alumni Offer Incoming Students Food for Thought

REMEMBERING THE WARM welcome his parents gave his own law school friends, Brad Winters, JD ’81, enjoys carrying the tradition forward by inviting incoming law students to his home for dinner.

Winters, a local litigator and partner with SNR Denton, and his wife, Jill Winters, JD ’80, chief field executive officer for United Healthcare Medicare and Retirement, are among dozens of alumni who participate in the student dinners program. Since 2006, the Orientation week gatherings have offered first-year students the chance to chat in casual settings with their hosts and other first-year students about law school, the legal profession, and the St. Louis area.

“Most of the students are uprooting their lives and showing up fresh in a place where they know so few people,” Brad Winters says. “From day one, they’re in a stressful environment, but at least they’ll start law school knowing some classmates and alumni. It’s a great program, and we love being part of it.”

Caliber of Students Impressive

Every year, Joe Pereles, JD/MBA ’78, now vice president of development and general counsel for Drury Hotels Company, treats a half dozen or so student guests and their spouses to dinner at Clayton’s Café Napoli.

Pereles and his wife, Brenda, wrap up the evening with a homemade touch—Brenda’s “world famous” chocolate chip cookies. It’s a comforting conclusion to an always lively gathering during which the students never fail to impress Pereles with their life experiences, maturity, and achievements.

“I don’t know if I would have been admitted in my day with this current crop of students,” Pereles says. “They are just outstanding, a very bright group of young adults. Many of them have worked before graduate school; three of the five we had dinner with last time had majored in Chinese studies, and they’d all been to China.”

Jill Winters shares Pereles’ assessment. “This group is bright, articulate, and excited, and they understand the challenges that are ahead of them—they’re much better prepared than I was,” Winters says. “They also are all committed to making a difference.”

But even this outstanding collection of students can always benefit from a little advice from their predecessors, according to Kathryn Koch, JD ’84, of counsel, and commercial/real estate/bankruptcy attorney with Goldstein & Pressman PC. She and her husband, Mark Arnold, JD ’77, partner at Husch Blackwell LLP, offer guidance to the students.

“We don’t mince words,” Koch says. “We tell them, ‘You’ve got to work really hard, you’ve got to treat it like a job, and you’ve got to get involved with your professors—don’t be intimidated; they want to be involved with you, too.’”


“A Nice Break

For the arriving students, the dinners offer a rare resting place during a week of rapid-fire on-campus interactions.

“It seemed like the majority of the time, I was talking with someone for maybe a minute or two and then introducing myself to another new person,” says first-year student Dave Collier. “That was great, but the alumni dinner actually gave me a chance to sit down and really learn about a few other 1Ls in detail—where they were from, what experiences they’ve had, how they got to law school, and what they want to do.”

“It was a nice break from the grind of the first week when we had a lot to absorb,” agrees first-year student David Helfenbein. “And it was great to hear from others who’ve been through it—and survived.”

Some students choose to perpetuate the relationships with their hosts, most
of whom offer a business card with the promise of continued help. Jill Winters hopes that future contact will ultimately include receiving something special in the mail from students she’s hosted: a wedding invitation.

“Brad and I met in law school, and I always wonder as I look at these students if, just maybe, I’m playing matchmaker and some other very lucky couple at my house is starting a relationship,” Winters says.

Another kind of long-term commitment, season tickets for the St. Louis Rams, prompted a student to get back in touch with Pereles.

“I had mentioned at the dinner that I have Rams football tickets, and the student asked me, ‘The Rams are playing my favorite team, the Chargers. Could I purchase your tickets for that game?’ and I said, ‘No, but I’ll be more than happy to give them to you,’” Pereles recalls. “His team lost, but it was fun for him to go to the game.”

Salvatore Gianino, JD ’07, enjoys keeping in touch with the students he’s taken to P.F. Chang’s in Brentwood, Missouri, every August since 2008—after all, they’re only a few years behind him in law school. Gianino’s near-peers often have new concerns following their first semester.

“By January or February, they start thinking about job applications, extracurricular activities available at school, and how to apply to be on journals,” says Gianino, an associate in the intellectual property services practice at Armstrong Teasdale LLP.

Some of his 2008 group showed their appreciation for his help six months later by repaying his original favor. “They ended up treating me to pizza,” Gianino says.

While the law school incoming classes typically consist of about 260 students each year, there are only enough hosts for about half. Dinners fill up according to who RSVPs first. The Law Alumni Office is always looking for more local alumni dinner hosts and other volunteers.

“For those alumni who don’t do it, you should,” Pereles says. “It’s a good way to meet the young students who will be following in our footsteps, and it’s a nice way to give back to the university.”

For more information on hosting a dinner, contact Julie Pole (julie_pole@wustl.edu) or visit the website: law.wustl.edu/alumni and view the link for volunteer activities.