

THE DAILY RECORD

LAW, REAL ESTATE, FINANCE AND GENERAL INTELLIGENCE SINCE 1908

Legal Currents

Don't believe the hype

This column, featured every Monday, tackles timely issues important to the local legal community.

*"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I — I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."
— ROBERT FROST, "THE ROAD NOT TAKEN"*

BY NICOLE BLACK

Daily Record Columnist



NICOLE BLACK

In a Dec. 13 Legal Times article entitled "Obama's Road Not Taken," Barack Obama's career path to presidential candidacy was hailed as daring and unusual.

It seems Obama, an outstanding Harvard Law School graduate by all accounts and former president of the Harvard Law Review, rejected the "obvious path" that would have led to sought-after judicial clerkships, which in turn may have led to partnership in a large law firm, a judgeship or law school faculty position.

Obama's decision to return to his native Chicago to practice civil rights law and pen a memoir that later became a best-seller seemingly mystified many of those already well-entrenched at the "top" of the legal hierarchy. It was downright unthinkable that a talented young man like Obama would reject the career trajectory that law students are taught is the only path to true success and prestige.

The problem with this perspective is that it fails to take into account that the definition of success varies greatly from person to person. One's frame of reference tends to alter the concept of success as well.

In law school, success generally is defined by two discrete groups of individuals — law professors, whose careers, quite coincidentally, followed the very same straight and narrow path that they assert leads to a "successful" legal career, and law school administrators, whose primary goal is to maintain admission levels by enticing potential stu-

dents to attend through promises of six-figure incomes and corner offices with a view.

The message is received loud and clear from the moment one steps foot in the hallowed halls of law school: Only the best are a success, while those languishing in the bottom 90th percentile are anything but.

And so it comes to pass that once-compassionate human beings enter law school aspiring to make a difference in the world and, within weeks, become heartless, cutthroat law students. The fear of failure becomes almost palpable as the vast majority of students are

lured by the false sense of security that accompanies the attainment of success within the desolate and delicate realities of the land of lawyers in the making.

Three years later they emerge from the depths of the law library, blinking hopefully at the harsh glare of daylight, only to find themselves, a short time later, in a windowless, gloomy office in the bowels of Big Law, surrounded by countless boxes of documents not yet reviewed, Blackberries superglued to their hands, pockets lined with money they've no time or energy to spend.

Maybe, just maybe, Obama had the right idea. At the very least he had the foresight to realize success is in the eye of the beholder. He resisted the pressure to conform to the expectations of those around him and stayed true to his ideals.

By all accounts, Obama has achieved success on his own terms. His career trajectory — one rarely given credence in any law school — should give all depressed lawyers and lawyers-to-be a sense of hope. Forge your own path, stay true to your dreams and, most importantly, don't believe the hype.

Nicole Black is of counsel to Fiandach & Fiandach. She also publishes a popular New York law blog, Sui Generis, nylawblog.typepad.com and a blog devoted to legal humor, Legal Antics, nylawblog.typepad.com/legalantics.