

A Lawyer



Perry D. McDaniel
Chief, Office of Legal Services
WV Department of Environmental Protection
Charleston, West Virginia

At what point did you decide to go into law and why?

I attended forestry school at WVU and developed an interest in the management of natural resources. I intended to pursue a graduate degree in natural resource policy. After graduating, I worked with the Forest Service for a few years. My interests in natural resource policy developed into an interest in environmental law and policy. I then decided to pursue a law degree which I believed would provide more flexibility for an environmental policy career. However, I did not expect to become a trail lawyer.

What best prepared you for your career?

Courses taught on coal industry issues and on public policy issues. Those courses and discussions with professors helped me put the legal principles in perspective. Success in my career does depend on researching legal precedent and following court procedures. More significantly, however, my success as a lawyer and as a public agency lawyer depends upon my ability to analyze cases from a larger perspective.

In what way does your career satisfy you?

I have a deep interest in natural environment and the impact of natural resource development on the environment. While in private practice, I was able to spend only a small part of my time on environmental issues. Most of the work was pro bono for citizens or environmental organizations. I now have the pleasure of working on environmental law full time. As Chief of the office of Legal Services, I participate in discussions where policy is established. Therefore, I am able to blend my interest in law with my interest in environmental policy.

In your career what do you find frustrating?

Finding time to accomplish all the tasks I would like to work on. Early in my career, I worked very long hours and weekends. Now that I have two young children, I want to limit my weekend and evening work. I am fortunate to have other attorneys assisting me.

As a college student, how did you know for certain that this was the right career for you?

During my undergraduate years, I laughed at the suggestion that I attend law school. I viewed lawyers as prima donnas and generally interested in making money. When I decided to go to law

school, I wanted training to assist me in a public interest or public policy position addressing natural resource development and conservation. In school, I was intrigued by how legal issues and principles were involved in all aspects of society. My interest in addressing problems was cemented by my second year in law school.

If you would like to leave behind a legacy, what would you want it to be?

From a professional standpoint, I would like to assist in developing a regulatory approach to environmental policy that is progressive. In the meantime, I am working for a reputation as someone who is fair, but who diligently and aggressively works to achieve the goal of environmental protection.

Do you feel adequately compensated for your dedication to public service?

During my years in private practice, my firm did not believe in maximizing profits or personal income. Therefore, I was able to donate my services to public interest organizations. In my current job, I am adequately compensated financially. My primary "compensation" is working with professionals throughout the agency who strive to work hard and pursue the mission of the agency.

What advice would you give a college student trying to get into law school?

Go to law school with an open mind; the legal process can often create more problems that it intends to solve and the best solution is often not litigation. I recommend against attending law school just because the job looks cool on television shows. Litigation does not get wrapped up as neatly and quickly as presented by Hollywood. There is a lot of work involved and it will get very tiring unless it is in an area of law which you enjoy. The law evolves even though many of the principles have been established for many years and precedent allows for some predictability in life which assists society in resolving disputes.

Describe the first interview you had in this field. What would you do differently?

I interviewed during my second year of law school for a summer position with the U.S. Attorney's Office and I was chosen for the internship so I must have done something right! I recall being extremely nervous and feeling uncomfortable in a setting with lawyers. I was fortunate in that the interviewers were relaxed and friendly. I learned to be relaxed and not answer in a rehearsed or scripted manner. How lawyers handle situations is often more important than having the facts or law to back up their position. Interviewers want someone knowledgeable, relaxed, confident and self aware.

What particular skills or talents are most essential to be effective in your job?

A good listener; a person will take advice better if they believe you clearly understood their situation and have their best interests in mind before rendering an opinion.

Open-minded; just because something has always been done a certain way in the past does not mean it has to be done the same way in the future

Honesty; every professional must have integrity, but the trait especially critical to lawyers. Many judges and others will agree with you on a confusing issue because they trust you did not misrepresent the facts or law. Representations for being dishonest travel quickly in the legal community and will adversely affect a lawyer for their entire career.

Reflective; Often times a first impression is the right direction to proceed. However, law is often like chess in that you have to think many moves ahead and anticipate the reaction to any action you take.

Courtesy and civility; lawyers do not understand the fear most people have of lawyers or the legal process. For example, if a lawyer pursues a personal injury claim the lawyer will have a process server or a county sheriff's deputy serve the complaint on the individual responsible for the injury. It is best to include a cover letter explaining that service on them is required but that their insurance company should handle the matter for them. Lawyers also need to be civil with one another. Zealous representation does not require screaming at opposing counsel or accusing opposing parties of lying. Law is stressful enough without adding to the unpleasantness of litigation by impolite behavior.

Interviewed by Christina Gardner for a College 101 assignment on 12/01.