

Behind the Scenes: A Peep Into the Life of Law Professors
Zainab Adejumobi with Professor Kim Brooks

We often speak about what students go through, students are stressed and tired. However, over the summer, I got to see what professors go through. I decided to have a sit down with a law professor (Professor Kim Brooks) and get into the mind of our professors. This was our conversation:

Zainab: Hi, Professor Brooks

Prof. Brooks: *Hi, I am excited to be able to have a conversation with you about this, what professors do.*

Zainab: So, you have a full-time job, you do research work, you reply to emails, make PowerPoints, mark papers, you have a family, and a life outside of all of this. How do you balance everything?

Prof. Brooks: *Everyone working in law has to grapple with trying to determine the balance they want in their work life and personal life. The challenge is when we go looking for models in other people because there is no one size fits all approach. For me, the art is in not worrying too much about the line. I think of it as I have a highly integrated life. Your life becomes an amalgam of the things you are excited about. If you hate a chunk of the things you are doing, whether it is in your personal life or work life, then you need to stop and re-tool. You need to take out the things that make you unhappy.*

Zainab: I have always wondered about professors, you teach the same material over and over to students in different years and different sections, does it get boring at some point?

Prof. Brooks: *No, it does not get boring. I am sure that I say the same things year after year and make the same jokes and laugh at them even if no one else thinks they are funny. Even if there is some kind of repetition in what I am doing, I am always responding to the class. Last year, we did not get to meet face to face, and students struggled with the learning environment. As a prof, I felt way less excited about my classes because I could not connect with students. I had not appreciated how much I read from the conversation in class, I read the room, I see who is taking notes, who is not taking notes, who is nodding off, etc. and I use it to determine where we are going to go next. Even though the framework of what we teach is sometimes the same, it is different with every class.*

Zainab: That is a good segue to my next question. Sometimes professors come to class, make PowerPoints, and try to engage students, but the class is so quiet, crickets, students are not engaging. Sometimes profs ask questions, and nobody responds. How does that make you feel?

Prof. Brooks: *A lot of things can be going on there. That happens more and more as the term progresses. At the beginning of the term, it is more interactive, and students are engaged. As the term goes on that disappears. Students get busy, they get tired, they do not do the readings because they have sixteen other things to do. You want to anticipate that there would be some engagement drop-off. Sometimes it is a function of us not being the best profs that we can be. Sometimes I think we suppress students' enthusiasm for a subject by not affirming their contributions. Sometimes students speak up and put themselves out there, and we want to provide feedback to the student, which can discourage them. We should give students a positive experience to keep them engaged.*

Zainab: Sometimes professors have favorite classes and students with whom they have an amazing teacher-student bond. How do you feel when they graduate and leave?

Prof. Brooks - *I have some favorite things and one of them is student graduation. It is an amazing thing to get through law school. I remember it for myself and see it in students too. I see how much time and effort students put into their legal education and I find it to be moving to see students have a moment when we all celebrate and recognize that. It is really fun to see people launch off. The thing I love the most is when ten years later you hear from somebody out of the blue who says "hey, I just want to tell you, this is what I am doing now", and it is really cool to see that they went out in the world and got up to that. People would have such different and unpredictable paths, and you constantly get to be a witness to people's stories, and that is a gift.*

Zainab: In your life outside of law school, like at home, for instance, do you ever find yourself slipping into lecture mode and lecturing people?

Prof. Brooks - *I hope not, but I am loud. When I get home, I can get loud and be yelling away as if there were fifty people in the house. I hopefully do not keep the lecture part of lecture mode.*

Zainab: At times, law schools have three-hour classes, and you stand in front and lecture, do your legs ever hurt?

Prof. Brooks - *I teach a three-hour class every now and then when I teach corporate tax, and I would never design something to be three hours of standing. It would be boring for people, so you would want to break that up with different things. It depends on the class.*

Zainab: There is no summer school in law school, so profs get the summer off, is that a really good perk of the job?

Prof. Brooks - *There are three major components of our job - one of them is teaching, the others are research and doing service to the institution, the faculty of law, and the community that you are a part of. Everybody has a different relationship to the three parts. One of the core ways to use the summer for me is to have an uninterrupted chunk of time to get research projects*

moving. So, you want to get them moving well enough so that during the academic year when you are teaching and doing lots of service, you can still keep the research projects moving. The summer really gives you that breathing room.

Zainab: I would say that students put in about 35 hours a week in their studies. How many hours a week goes into behind the scenes of you prepping for classes, marking papers, and everything else?

Prof. Brooks - I think it depends a lot on how many times you have taught a course. What really surprised me in my first year when I first went from practice to teaching is that getting the teaching ready and teaching was more hours than my practice. It was amazing how much work I had to do to get ready. That stage in your life is exhausting. This is my 20-something year teaching tax. I have been through the curriculum 20 times, so I have a good feel of the curriculum and how it goes. I like to keep myself challenged by reading new cases and changing the course structure every 4 to 5 years. In years when I make those changes, it is about the same amount of work as when I first started. However, in between, you can get it down to some sensible period of time. Most professors would tell you that it takes them about 2 or 3 hours to get ready for every hour in class once they get good experience in the course, and then you mark on top of that.

Zainab: Students have breakdowns, what is the worst student breakdown that you have ever seen in law school?

Prof. Brooks - None of them are bad to me because I think it is really important for all of us to have the experience of coming up against our limits. It is hard to say this to law students, but law school is a safe space to break down. Most of your profs are there to cheer for you, student support is here to back you up. There is a whole cluster of people that are there to help you figure out how to get through those moments. You want to have that experience before it happens, and you are more isolated. You do not want to have your first work-based crash when you are 35 and in a small firm and there isn't any trampoline net to catch you, and you have kids, and are exhausted all the time and have lost track of your friends. I have seen all kinds of students struggle with all kinds of different things throughout the years, and you have huge empathy when it happens, but we are here to make that a survivable experience. Life would have its hills and valleys, and it is important to figure out how you are in that before you find yourself in practice.

Zainab: We like to think all our law profs were nerds in law school, but is that really true? Or was it a mix of studying and Domus for you?

Prof. Brooks - I think I was a serious nerd, and I have always been a serious nerd. For the first time when you are in law school, you are competing for that. There are other people in law school who are as nerdy as you. I think you just embrace that.

Zainab: Do you have any regrets from law school? Things you wish you did more of or things you wish you did less of?

Prof. Brooks - *No. So much time has passed, I think if you asked me that 5 years after I graduated, I might have had something to say, but now when I look back, I think it was all worth it.*

Zainab: Thank you so much, Professor Brooks.