

Chicago Lawyer

An International Perspective: Why did I become a lawyer (in the U.S.)?

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By Kwabena Appenteng
Greene and Letts

Second to "How do I pronounce your name?" the most common question I am asked is, "Why did you decide to come to the U.S. to practice law?" In an admittedly pathetic attempt to be humorous and evasive at the same time, I typically respond with "I'm still trying to figure that out myself," followed by an ostensibly confident chuckle. But when I was fortuitously asked that question around the time of my second anniversary as a lawyer last month, I stood in a state of consternation, unable to articulate anything other than, simply, "I don't know."

Although I had been asked that question many times before last month, I had never actually stopped to answer it. Obviously, there was a reason I decided to flee my home and become a lawyer in the United States. Up until my second-year anniversary as a lawyer last month, however, I really had not given it too much thought. Ironically, as fate would have it, as I began trying to formulate reasons why I immigrated to the U.S. to become a lawyer, I found myself confronted with reasons why I maybe should not have made the 4,000-mile journey and the three-year, \$100,000 enrollment that followed.

A seven-day, 60-plus billable-hour week to begin the month served as a painful reminder of the vast number of hours lawyers in the U.S. frequently have to bill as they work on cases. In the weeks that followed, I watched lawyers around me diligently work to defend their clients against claims such as "I was discriminated against when the shop I frequently steal from asked me to leave" to "The police officer that arrested me is liable for using force to prevent me from continuing to assault him." Both reminders of the many plaintiffs who use the legal system as means to get-rich-quick, as opposed to a forum in which to seek redress or reparation. Strangely enough though, these are both reasons I decided to cross the Atlantic to become a lawyer.

As any plaintiff's lawyer can attest, the U.S. boasts more lawyers per capita than any other nation. As a first-year law student still assimilating into U.S. society, I remember convincing myself that the exorbitant number of lawyers in the U.S. was a product of the country's love to litigate - as though underpasses around the country were



littered with posters of Uncle Sam pointing his finger at passing young men and women, declaring "I need *you* to become a lawyer."

Two years later, however, I realized that the American fondness for litigation and sending its children off to fight for "justice" in courtrooms around the country is the byproduct of a Constitution and set of laws that ensure that every citizen's civil rights are protected, and all citizens are entitled to their day in court when they feel their rights have been violated. Without the abundance of lawyers, continuously filing lawsuits and arguing for changes in the law before appellate and supreme courts, the progressive, democratic society that so many flock to the U.S. to enjoy would be a very different place.

Thus, in a way, the many billable hours and frivolous suits that lawyers face each day can be deemed a good thing.

After typing that last sentence my fingers began to quiver at the realization that I had just labeled billable hours and frivolous lawsuits "a good thing." But as someone who has lived and traveled throughout nations where the oral and written arguments of even the best lawyers cannot defeat rigid cultural laws, no matter how unjust or inequitable they may be, it is difficult for me not to appreciate the influence that lawyers in the U.S. have.

The recent case of Steven Monjeza and Tiwonge Chimbalanga may help to illustrate my point. In a case that made headlines around the world, Monjeza and Chimbalanga were sentenced to 14 years in jail in Malawi for celebrating their same-sex engagement before a wedding planned for this year. Despite their lawyer's valiant efforts to get the court to see that the men posed absolutely no threat to society and that the men's constitutional rights had been violated, the court held that their actions were "against the order of nature" and sentenced them to 14 years in jail in order to "protect the public from people like them."

While the case of Monjeza and Chimbalanga could never end up on the docket of any judge or lawyer in the U.S., their case reminds us that in many countries outside the U.S., unyielding cultural and religious laws limit the freedom of lawyers to protect even the fundamental human rights of their clients, let alone file suits seeking redress for purported infractions of these rights.

As demanding and frustrating as being an ARDC card-carrying attorney may be at times, surely our freedom to effect change makes it worth it.

As good as I may look in a stiff, white horsehair wig as a British barrister, my decision to begin my legal career in the U.S. is something I have never regretted. Clichéd as it may sound, every licensed attorney in the U.S. is bestowed with the power to impact society and the laws that govern.

For me, the opportunity to spend time practicing within the largest legal system in the world is an invaluable experience. One that I hope I will now be able to go through only having to explain that my name is pronounced " *Kwa-beh-na* ."

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