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Newark Mayor: Challenges of the Economy Mean Opportunities for Law Grads

Posted by Ross Todd

Newark mayor Cory Booker has some words of advice for students facing deferred start dates: "Stop looking at it as a deferral. Start looking at it as an opportunity."

Booker, a Yale law alum and [former Skadden fellow](#), answered questions Wednesday at the deferred associate job fair organized by New Jersey's Volunteer Lawyers for Justice. Twenty-six organizations from across the state met with about 100 job seekers at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark.

The Am Law Daily joined the media scrum after Booker's speech and managed to get in a couple of questions, as did a handful of others attending, including the [National Law Journal's Karen Sloan](#) and [Above the Law's Kashmir Hill](#). (We've edited the questions for grammar, style, and clarity.)



Could you describe for us what you did as a Skadden fellow?

Sure. I worked for the Urban Justice Center which is an impact litigation as well as direct action organization in New York City started by a phenomenal guy by the name of [Doug Lasdon](#). I started something called the New York Youth Project, which really looked at residential issues pertinent to youth. So I ended up doing a lot of landlord/tenant law, a lot of community organizing—which is really popular in Alaska—and I started building cases against some of the worst slumlords in the city.

What did you learn from that work?

It was really foundational. One of the good things about law students is that they actually can start the practice of law before they graduate. So I started working on a project one summer doing street law in Harlem. I started working in landlord/tenant court, in community development law where we did micro-enterprise. I think all these experiences I draw on today in the work that I do as mayor. Whether it be housing issues,

microenterprise issues, or whether it's educating the average person about what their rights are and how to deal with the criminal justice system. We have things like the Peace Corps, Teach for America, and other programs which I'm a big believer in. The more we can do to encourage people to give a year or two of some direct service, I think we create a much better America. We also advance the causes we all believe in—whether it be better access to justice or greater equality under the law. These are the kind of things we can achieve if we can do in the legal profession as people have done in other professions.

What's your advice to deferred law firm associates?

Stop looking at it as a deferral. Start looking at it as an opportunity. Start looking at it as an advancement in many ways. Here's a chance where you can get powerful experience. The difference between going to a law firm and doing public interest law is that sometimes you can actually go before a judge more quickly in public interest work than you would at a corporate law firm. I remember getting 40 cases thrown on my desk right after signing up to do landlord/tenant law. So, it's a tremendous opportunity to hone your skills, to develop as a lawyer, and make a powerful impact on the community. I mainly celebrate the opportunities that have come from the challenges of this economy.

Maybe you can offer some perspective. How does the difficulty of facing a deferral compare with the difficulties facing a city like Newark during a recession?

Let's put it this way, In the economy, unemployment is sky-rocketing. To be paid to do good in many ways is a privilege. So as I see an economy nationally deteriorating, I see more and more people struggling just to make ends meet. To have an opportunity to go out to do good, to empower folks who are often at the end of their line is a transformative opportunity. I'm just thankful people are doing it and that they're doing it here in Newark.
