

The summer associate experience: No comparison to in-person experience, summer associates say

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Taylor Lavender (far left) and fellow Barnes & Thornburg summer associates bond with each other during a downtown Indianapolis bike ride. (Photo courtesy of Barnes & Thornburg LLP)

Many summer associate programs were adjusted last year when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Some law firms withdrew summer associate positions altogether while others required the law students to work virtually.

Although collaborating through online platforms and performing research and writing from home is doable, several 2021 summer associates can attest looking back that it pales in comparison to experiencing law firm life in person.

Navigating uncharted waters

Trying to navigate a summer associate position from the familiar walls of her home was challenging, said Taylor Lavender, a rising 3L at Indiana University Maurer School of Law. Lavender, who's participating in her second summer associate program at Barnes & Thornburg LLP's Indianapolis office, said she spent the first few weeks of her 2020 summer associate program working remotely. To put it simply, it was hard.



Taylor Lavender

"I think a lot of people think the summer associate program is all about legal work, and that is a major part of it," Lavender said. "But another part is getting to know the attorneys on a personal level and understanding the firm's culture. I think both of those things are very difficult to do in a virtual setting."

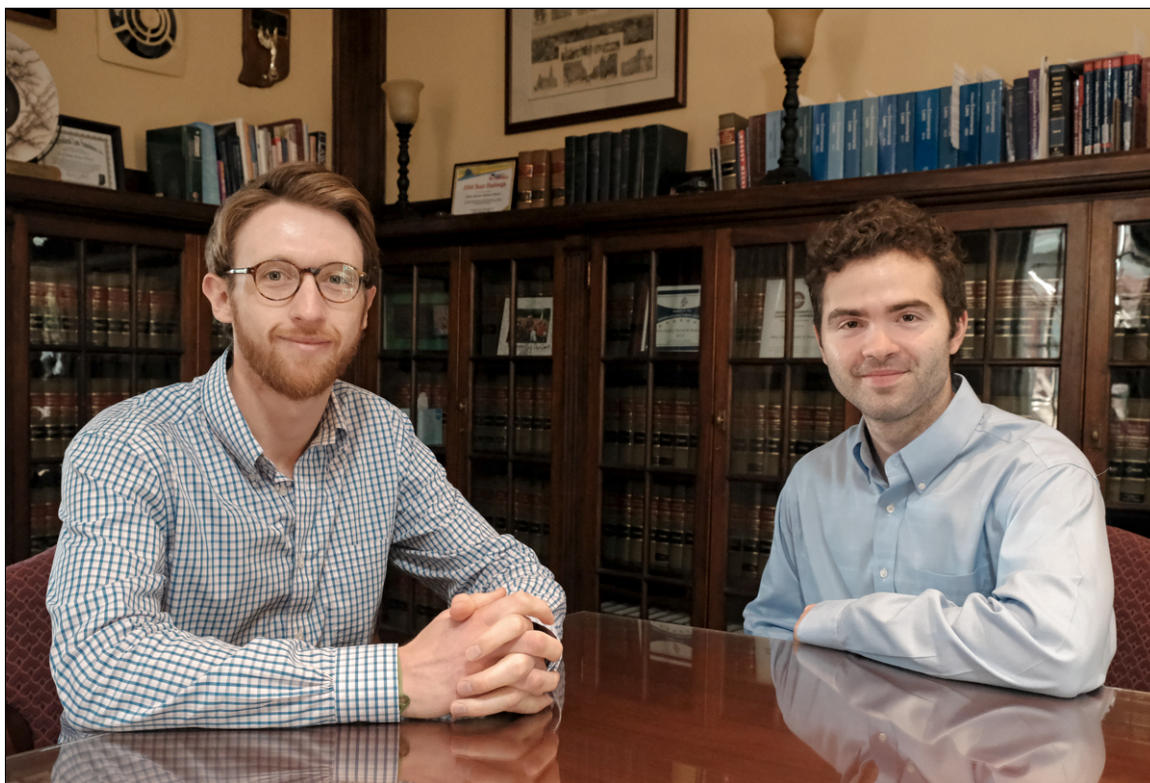
Participating in the program online was stressful, Lavender continued, recalling the experience as being very work-heavy and less focused on personal connections.

But, Lavender added, Barnes put in the effort to make the summer associate program as normal as possible, eventually bringing the students into the office for the duration of the program.

"That makes us feel very valuable, which is good," she said.

Plews Shadley Racher & Braun's two summer associates, Ian Finley and Will Plews-Ogan, agreed that being physically in a law firm office has been a relief.

"I was almost positive that there wouldn't be an in-person option this summer," said Plews-Ogan, a student at Columbia Law School in New York. "I had written it off, and it was a great surprise."



Will Plews-Ogan (left) and Ian Finley have spent the summer working as associates at Plews Shadley Racher & Braun. They say in-person work is preferable to a virtual summer experience. (IL Photo/Eric Learned)

Most of his law school colleagues are not completing their summer associate programs in person, Plews-Ogan said. His experience in Indianapolis makes him feel lucky to have a safe in-person experience.

Finley had similar concerns when he saw many classmates operating remotely for their summer associate programs. But he's been relieved that his own experience can be in person.

"I didn't know if we would get to the firm or not," he said. "I was in person all year at Indiana University Maurer School of Law, which was amazing. It really does make a big difference."

Jorge H. Ortiz, a rising 3L at Notre Dame Law School, has been working in person as a summer associate at Barnes' South Bend office — a positive change from his previous experience in 2020 of doing the program online.

"Working remotely has been very challenging," Ortiz said. "You miss out on some small but pretty important interactions. Working in person at the firm gives you the sense that you are part of the team and more immersed in the firm's culture."



Jorge H. Ortiz

Making the most of it

Although the pandemic continues, Ortiz said this summer looks more hopeful.

As the first person in his family to go to law school, Ortiz said he kept an open mind when coming into his summer associate position and looks forward to having a concrete idea of the day-to-day practice of law.

For him, the best part of the summer associate experience has been working with and getting to know the attorneys in the firm while being exposed to different practices areas.

"They are really happy we are there," Ortiz said. "They have been incredibly generous with their time."

Finley said he loves how busy the attorneys at Plews Shadley have been keeping him this summer.

"They do an excellent job of giving us projects that keep us engaged and allow us to really take what we learned during our 1L year and apply it," he said.

Similarly, Plews-Ogan said working with attorneys who share a common goal has been encouraging.

"We are all trying to do the same work for the clients, and there are no frivolous acts that are meant to intimidate you," he said. "I spend the entire day meeting with real people or doing sound work that is directly pursuant to the goal the firm has for a client."

Social interaction is critical for Christopher Koester's summer associate experience.

Serving as a law clerk for Bunger & Robertson in Bloomington, the rising IU Maurer 3L said that after a year of taking online classes and doing an internship through Zoom, he was itching to have real connection with people in person again.



Christopher Koester

"I was tired of sitting in my house," Koester said. "Try as they might, the Zooms of the world can't quite capture the feeling of real presence."

Koester said he's most enjoyed flitting between law offices and courtrooms, an experience he said has been enlightening and interesting.

Another great aspect of being in person, Lavender said, is being able to connect with the other summer associates in addition to the attorneys.

"It's great when you can talk with them and ask, 'How did you reach out to that attorney?' or 'How did you do this?' Otherwise, you are kind of alone in an environment that's kind of scary," she said. "It's such a new environment, and you want to do well and succeed."

At the end of the day, a summer associate program is what you make of it, Lavender said. If she simply asks, attorneys are willing to give her challenging work that Lavender believes has already given her a head start on her career and has helped build up her skills.

“I’m hoping to gain some realistic experience of what I can expect my life to be like in the future,” she said. “It’s nice to be in a working environment and see what I will be doing for the rest of my life.”•