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Shanmugam warns new law grads of two traps

Carolyn Quek
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WHEN Law Minister K. Shanmugam started his university studies, he looked at his timetable in horror.

He was a science student in the National University of Singapore (NUS) but changed his mind when he saw in his first week that it involved hours and hours of laboratory work and even Saturday classes.

That was when he quickly switched courses - to law instead.

Addressing 350 new law graduates at NUS yesterday morning, Mr Shanmugam referred to himself as an 'accidental lawyer' who stumbled into law by chance.

In a 15-minute speech peppered with several personal anecdotes, Mr Shanmugam recounted the packed timetable which made him switch courses.

'I thought to myself, I didn't come to university to work so hard,' he joked.

He then saw that a friend who was entering the law school had 'all but 14 hours of lectures a week' and thought that 'sounded much better'.

Mr Shanmugam graduated in 1984 with first class honours, went on to become a Senior Counsel and was widely regarded as being one of the best litigators here.

In May, he took over as Law Minister. It was his first time addressing a batch of new law graduates at their convocation in his new post.

The minister drew more laughs from the audience when he said he had wondered if he should accept the invitation to speak at the event as he wondered if they really wanted to 'have a politician inflicted on you'.

But he agreed in the end because, as he put it: 'To be able to speak to so many lawyers without you being able to respond. You can see what a few weeks in Government has done to my approach to open debate.'

Moving on to more serious matters, the minister said the graduates will find the legal landscape 'quite changed' next year, with them being able to find work with both local and foreign law firms.

The Government had given the go-ahead last December for up to five foreign law firms to practise here in areas such as banking, corporate finance and maritime law.

Mr Shanmugam also told the new law graduates to be 'true professionals' should they choose it as their career.

He said he had seen many fall into two traps while he was in practice: the idea that they can get rich quickly and the pressure to cut corners and win at all costs.

He said temptation came in the form of 'dubious clients or contracts offering shady deals and instant wealth'.

'Learn early that there is no free lunch,' he said.

On the other trap of trying to win at all costs, Mr Shanmugam said the few who succeed by doing so would not have the respect of their peers.

'Decide which you would rather be in 20 years - to be known as a good lawyer who cuts corners or a great professional, a true gentleman at the Bar.'

NO FREE LUNCH

'They wanted to be millionaires by the time they were 30. They wanted to be masters of the universe. But the few who were not bankrupt by the time they were 40 were the lucky ones.'

LAW MINISTER K. SHANMUGAM, warning new law graduates about the pitfall of wanting to succeed too quickly

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