

You Went Where?

I Used to Think My Résumé Was Impressive—Until I Moved to Washington. An Australian Degree Means About as Much as One From Transylvania. By GRACE KESSLER

WHEN PEOPLE AT MY WASHINGTON JOB ASK WHERE I WENT TO law school, I answer, “Australia.” As if Australia were a school.

As far as Americans are concerned, if you’re foreign-educated, you might as well have gone to the University of Southwestern Transylvania. Perhaps Oxford and Cambridge have enough name recognition to impress, but if I tell people here that I went to the University of Sydney, they raise their eyebrows and say, “Oh, how interesting—do they teach in English there?”

It’s strange, really: You knock yourself out getting into the best university in your country, compete with all the other overambitious kids who did the same, come out with fabulous degrees, and then ship yourself over to a place where it’s all invisible.



WHEN I FIRST CAME here, the United States was in a recession. People told me there wasn’t a job for a lawyer in the entire country. I followed every lead and hardly got a single call back. This would have been unthinkable in Sydney; my degrees and grades would have been irresistible there. Or so I imagined.

After months of looking—and having a marvelous time being unemployed—I got two job offers. One was from a boutique corporate firm, and I suspect they were just looking for warm bodies. The other from was a multinational consulting practice; it had an Aussie who desperately needed help with his foreign desk.

There’s something of a thrill selling yourself in a place where your credentials mean nothing. It’s just you and the interviewer, and you have to impress him—always him—in the

Grace Kessler (gracekessler@aol.com) practices law in the District.

half hour he gives you to overcome all the prejudice arising from the fact that you don’t have any name brands in your “marketing documents” and you don’t have a clue about what he does or what he may be hiring you to do.

It was my accent that the consulting firm fell in love with, and my quaint foreign expressions and the intensity of my desire to stay in this country, even when that meant taking a leap into the unknown.

I landed the job mostly by chance and bravado, and then did what my résumé really shows I can do: read, write, and speak.



I’VE MOVED FROM JOB to job in the States, each one building on the last. The education section of my résumé has been pushed farther and farther toward the bottom. Recently I discovered that one of the founding thinkers in my field—financial engineering—came from the University of Newcastle in Australia, an even more obscure school than mine. I felt instantly connected with him and his dark beginnings.

The author with her husband and child at her Australian alma mater. Americans ask: “Do they teach in English there?”

When I go back to Australia and my compatriots find out I was in the 99th percentile in the high-school baccalaureate and have a First Class Honours in law, they give me a knowing nod. They understand what these things mean. Then they ask me what I do now. I just say I work for the US government.

“That’s it?” they say. “That’s what you did with all your credentials?”

I smile. What would it mean to them if I told them I’m an adviser to an undersecretary of the Treasury? As far as Aussies are concerned, that’s about as impressive as an education from the University of Southwestern Transylvania.