The voices behind black-robed jurists

Law clerks play important roles in the judicial system

By John Cohen

A major role is played by a judge and his or her law clerks. Although law clerks do not wear black robes, they are often the unseen force behind a judge's decision-making process.

Law clerks, particularly in the federal court system, earn meager wages compared to the salaries paid to first-year associates in major law firms. U.S. Supreme Court clerks, who normally serve for only a year, earn $33,286, said Kathy Arberg, spokeswoman for the court.

The salaries are higher in the top state courts. Court of Appeals clerks, for instance, start at $42,000 and clerkships in the Appellate Division pay $36,170 — more than many young lawyers earn in Albany, but less than a top prospect can command in a New York, Buffalo, Boston or Washington firm.

But the short-term financial sacrifice is usually rewarded later with a higher-paying, career clerkship or a lucrative post with an antitrust firm.

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