

Women in the Legal World

The Associate: Finding a Firm That Fit

While it may sound like a cliché, as long as I can remember, I've always wanted to be a lawyer. I even chose a Political Science and History major in college because I thought that particular undergraduate combination would prepare me best for law school. It wasn't until my senior year that I even entertained the idea that I might not get into law school - and wondered what else I would do. Luckily, I didn't have to come up with a new plan. I entered the University of Montana Law School directly from college and, although I didn't think 22 was very young at the time, looking back I now realize how naïve I was and how minimal my life experiences were compared with my peers.

My other goal was to practice in my home state, Montana, and I chose litigation as my specialty even though I had no real idea of what it took to be a litigator, nor the challenges that would face me as I left the safe cocoon of law school.

Following law school I entered a three-year clerkship with a Federal Magistrate Judge who proved to be a wonderful mentor. My clerkship was an invaluable experience, and each day provided something new



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and exciting, including the opportunity to observe many fine attorneys at work.

Leaving my clerkship was hard, but I was excited to begin my practice. After interviewing with several firms, I joined a moderately sized firm that specialized in insurance defense. That's when I realized that law school had failed to teach me so much that I needed to know upon entering practice. As law students, we were all warned about the "steep learning curve" of law practice, but I really did not understand what that meant. On my first day of work, I walked into my new office and found a pile of case files waiting for me. Many had been languishing for some time and needed immediate attention. I remember sitting down, wondering where to begin. I had walked in with the fantasy that I would be assigned a mentor who would help me through at least my first day. I left realizing I was on my own to figure it out. I spent the next year working extremely long hours, feeling very alone and with the constant nagging thought that I was not accomplishing much. I obsessed about my billable hours and how I could eek out a few more.

While I enjoyed my co-workers, the environment and structure of the firm, the job did not provide what I needed at that point in my career. I started questioning myself and my career choice. I felt like a failure. And worse, I felt stuck. I started to second guess my decisions and wondered if this was really what I wanted to do with my life. All the while facing the dilemma of having high student loans, a mortgage, and a family that relied on my income. I struggled with the thought of leaving the profession, but I was afraid of trying something new.

Thankfully, I had a few trusted friends who encouraged me not to leave the profession. They encouraged me to look for a better "fit," and, when an opportunity presented itself at a different firm, I decided that this time I would be very honest about what I was looking for in a practice. I discussed mentoring and my desire to have a balanced life.

The honesty must have been appreciated because I shortly was offered the position.

The transition was seamless and it amazed me how two firms could have such similar practice areas yet create such different working environments. That is not to say that one environment was good and the other was bad. It was all about the "fit." My new professional home focuses on a team effort, from the attorneys down to the support staff. I receive the guidance I feel I need and the support I had been looking for.

I am currently expecting my first child, and I know that the road ahead will be a challenge - a scary yet exciting one. In a profession where the norm is 12-hour days, seven days a week, I've opted to be involved in my child's life. This has now become a possibility for me because I found a firm that is "family friendly." My colleagues do a great job of obtaining that balance. They coach their children's soccer teams, volunteer with community organizations, and value weekends with their families. I continue to struggle with the balance of work and my personal life and wrestle with trying to excel professionally. However, I no longer struggle with my career choice or the feeling of not fitting in. I think that I have found the balance that I need, and I am glad that I did not abandon my profession prematurely.

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The Partner: When Things Don't Turn Out Right the First Time

Unlike many of my friends, law school was never my "end goal" during college. My decision to go to law school happened effectively by default. As an English and Foreign Affairs major at the University of Virginia, I realized as I neared graduation that my opportunities for gainful employment after graduation were limited at best. With an eye to continued schooling, deferral of my employment decision and a realization that a law degree would help me in whatever my ultimate career would end up being, I enrolled at the University of Richmond School of Law.

In law school, I met my future husband (also a lawyer) and learned through my first year internship that I didn't want to be a "real" lawyer and litigate. I didn't want to step in after a dispute was underway and try to put the pieces back together; I wanted to anticipate the challenges, think about the "what if's" down the road, and try to navigate a course that would enable me and my client to avoid them. When I returned to school in the fall of my second year, it was with a fresh dedication to develop and hone business law skills. I sought out as many non-traditional law school classes as possible, diving in headfirst to classes in corporate finance, securities law, negotiation, health law and an international business clinic.



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By the time I completed my second year summer internship and was offered a job in a large law firm after graduation, I was convinced that I was going to be a corporate health care lawyer. In my mind, my day-to-day practice would ultimately involve advising hospitals, long-term care facilities and physician practices on the unique business challenges facing that industry. I chose a firm with a growing health care practice group and read as much as I could in my free time. But within nine months of starting my legal career, virtually the entire health care group had taken leave for new firms and the health care specialty in the business group had evaporated. Realizing that in order to stay employed, I needed to have skills that were relevant to the non-health care lawyers, I retooled my practice to be a more traditional corporate, M&A practice. I did well in this practice group for a bit, but then the infamous "dot-bomb" hit and I was again struggling to find work at my then-firm.

These were scary times for me and my colleagues. As first- and second-year associates, we were sure that at any moment, someone was going to ask us to leave the firm. Retooling had worked for me once, so

I decided to retool yet again and start assisting the wildly busy transactional real estate attorneys. Ironically, property law was the one class in law school that I just didn't have any affinity for and yet, when faced with the practical application of property law, I just couldn't get enough. The deals were interesting, I could see and touch (either in person or through the review of title and survey documents) the property that was at the heart of our deals and because the group was busy, I was given tremendous responsibility. Not long after pretending to be a real estate lawyer, I knew that real estate law was the practice area for me.

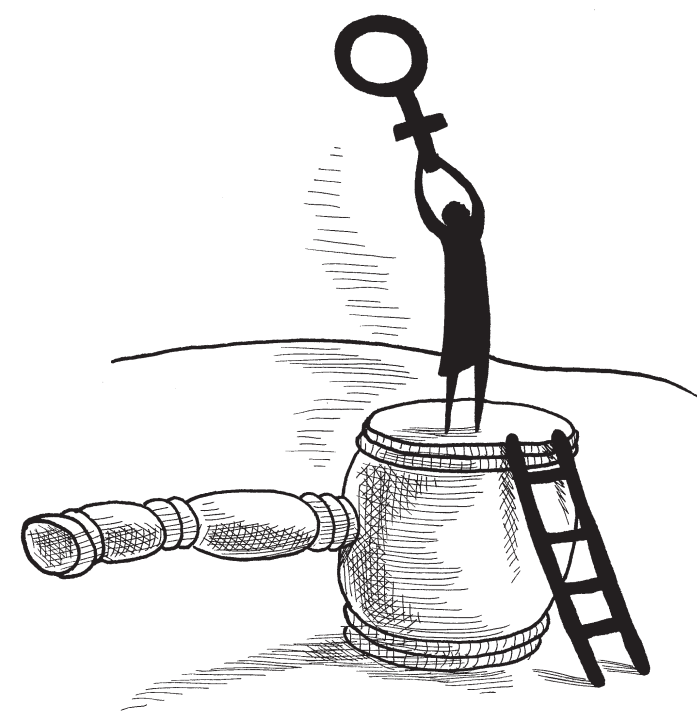
For three years, we worked essentially round-the-clock to close deals around the country. I negotiated with lawyers 20 years my senior and closed 9-figure deals. It was sexy and it was exciting. It was also exhausting. As I neared my fifth year of practice, I was craving something different and new. I was still debating whether "different and new" could occur within the confines of a strict legal career in a large law firm and had all but concluded that I would not be practicing law for much longer when I met Tony Calabrese. Tony, the head of the Cooley Godward Kronish Land Use and Zoning practice in the Reston office, was practically giddy when he talked about the projects and zoning throughout Northern Virginia that he'd touched over his nearly 20-year career. I didn't know if leaving my transactional roots was going to be a good move, but I was committed to a change and open to the possibility that if things didn't work out, I would find another opportunity either within or without the law.

Less than two months after joining Tony's team at Cooley, I knew that I'd made the right choice. For more than six years, every day has been an adventure - in a good way. Like my property professor said 12 years ago, property is unique and they're not making any more of it. In a rapidly growing area like metropolitan Washington DC, projects are sophisticated, often controversial and ever evolving. The policies that shaped developments 20, 10 or even five years ago are antiquated today and our projects must reflect that or risk failing before elected officials and the public. Today, almost six years after becoming a land use and zoning lawyer, I am as enthusiastic about my practice as I was when I started.

Since I embarked on my legal journey 13 years ago, I met and married my husband, a busy lawyer who loves what I do not: being in court every day. We have two beautiful daughters, 3-years-old and 18-months-old. I had my first daughter as a sixth year associate and my second daughter approximately 15 months before making partner at Cooley.

I like to think that my meandering career path provided me with important life skills that have made me better equipped to handle the work-life balance questions all professionals seem to face these days. First, resiliency and adaptability are key. Not every day is going to go as planned, just as my path to becoming a corporate health care lawyer didn't unfold as I'd expected. But being able to let go of the things that didn't turn out "just right" and move onto the new version "just right" allows me to see as much joy as possible out of every single day.

Second, I love what I do - everything I do. I love being a mom, I love being a wife to my wonderful husband and I love my job. It doesn't mean that I love every moment of every day, but it does mean that even when



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any element of my day-to-day life isn't terrific, I can take comfort in knowing that soon, I'll move on to another role: mom, wife or lawyer.

The advice I try to give young women considering this career is live your life and run your race - not anyone else's. Had someone told me when I was in law school that I'd end up being in real estate, I'd have laughed myself silly. But here I am and can't imagine doing anything else. But this path, this journey and this life wouldn't be the choice of every person. Not comparing my path to someone else's path and choices has been rewarding and I believe, has allowed me to focus on the things that matter to me.

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