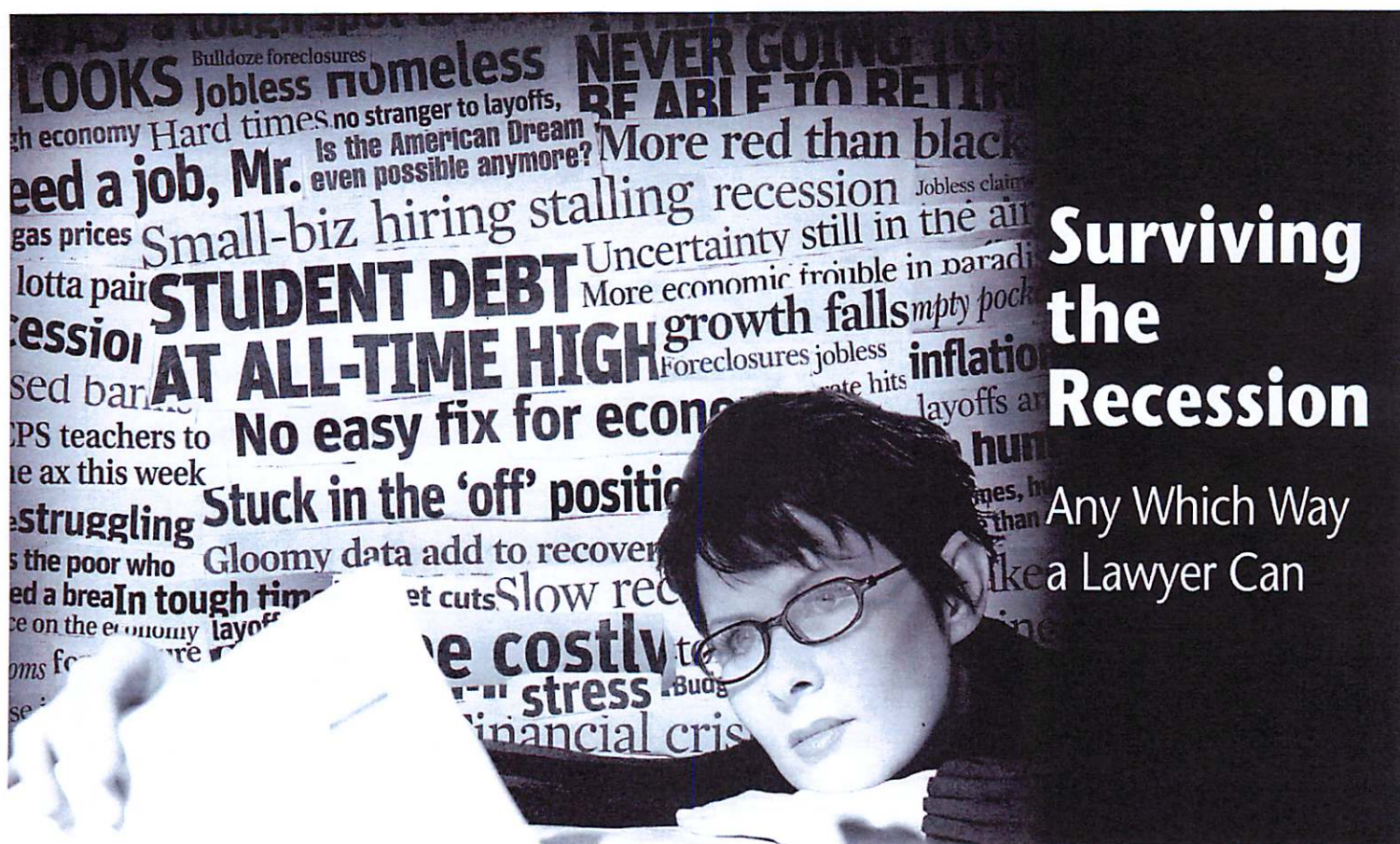


Perspectives

A Magazine for and about Women Lawyers



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Changing Course Midstream

By G.M. Filisko

Is it time for a change?

"Sometimes we find ourselves in a job where it's worked for a long time, but you need a change," says Elizabeth Murrill, a former law professor who became a Supreme Court fellow and is now deputy executive counsel to Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal. "You shouldn't be afraid of that change. There are a lot of things we can do with a law degree, and practicing at a firm isn't even the beginning."

Murrill says the keys to landing a new, challenging job are identifying your passion, creating a plan to find a job that allows you to pursue your passion, and being open to every opportunity—even if it's off the beaten legal path or the move seems risky.

"There's risk in making any kind of change," says Maryann Williams, a family law attorney for 20 years who's now director of section services for the Indiana State Bar Association in Indianapolis. "You go to school to practice law, but you ask yourself, 'If I don't practice law, am I doing something less than the law?' When I was meeting people through my new job for the first time, I always said, 'I practiced law for 20 years,' as though that

gave me more credibility. I found I was apologizing a lot. Now I don't, and I couldn't be happier."

Be Your Best Advocate

Sarah Feingold's plan was quick and targeted. Feingold was challenged by the work she was doing as an associate

at a mid-sized Rochester, New York, law firm. But she wasn't passionate about it. All the while, she was selling jewelry she designed on Etsy Inc., a Brooklyn, New York-based website that provides a forum for artists to sell their creations.

"I was getting good experience at the firm, but I wasn't helping artists the way I was hoping to as an attorney," Feingold says. "I realized I could wait around for someone to give me work to further this passion, or I could do it on my own. I thought what Etsy was doing—giving small artists a place to make money—was really cool. So I started researching the company. I wrote to the support team and pitched myself as a speaker on artists' intellectual property rights. When the CEO got back to me, I did a pitch for him to hire me, and it worked."

Etsy's first and only in-house lawyer says she learned plenty from that experience. "Lawyers are risk averse, and we all think there's this path of getting a new job that involves going to a headhunter or tracking job postings," Feingold says. "But when you think outside the box, you never know what'll happen."

Serena Minott, a formerly disillusioned big-firm associate, also suggests forging your own path. "I was really tempted to walk away from the law entirely, but I gave it another go because I believed I could build a different kind

of practice actually enjoying what I do," explains the cofounder of Minott Gore, P.A., a Miami-based trademark and corporate firm launched in July 2007.

"When you're an associate, the pace is fast. You turn in your work and move on to something else. Today, we represent small-business owners in a very relationship-based practice. Every day I'm excited to go to work because I love talking to and working with clients."

Feingold also cautions against talking yourself out of any opportunity. "I've learned not to be afraid of the word no," she says. "I already didn't have the Etsy job, and the worst that could have happened was that I continued to not have the job. Don't be your own worst enemy and make something not happen because you're scared. Have faith and confidence."

Erin Nealy Cox agrees self-confidence is critical, and this includes trusting your gut. "Undermining your own self-confidence affects how others view you and how you view yourself," says the former assistant U.S. attorney for the U.S. Attorney's Office in the Northern District of Texas who is now executive managing director and deputy general counsel at Dallas-based Stroz Friedberg LLC, an international data security firm. "Trust your instincts. You can make charts and do a pro-and-con list, but you have to go with your gut. If there's a little voice holding you back, listen to it because if you have too much fear about a change and make it anyway, you may instantly regret it. But if there's a voice telling you to go for it, listen to that, too."

Be Patient for Your Dream Job

Carmen Gonzalez's plan was more long-term than Feingold's. But as she moved from a law firm to an in-house position and then to a government post, each step pushed her closer to her ultimate goal of landing in academia. "You have to prepare yourself for your ultimate job even if it's not part of the job you're

currently doing," explains the environmental law professor at Seattle University School of Law. "I knew it would be extremely useful as a teacher to have worked in a law firm and in government. So I was laying the groundwork for the broad experience that has been very useful in my current job."

What made Gonzalez hesitant to shoot for academia earlier? "I'd been thinking about going into academia for a long time, but I didn't want to make that move yet," Gonzalez says. "It was the move that seemed fraught with the greatest peril. You either get tenure or you don't, and if you don't, it's over. I had terrible nightmares, of women especially, being denied tenure because two were while I was a student at Harvard."

Initially, Gonzalez also wasn't sure how she'd perform as a professor. But while working at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, an opportunity to test her teaching skills fell into her lap—and she embraced the challenge. "I was asked to put on a seminar for Mexican environmental officials on environmental enforcement," she explains. "It came at the eleventh hour because someone dropped out, and it was very challenging because I had to learn the material in a week and present it in Spanish! I knew by saying yes that I'd get in the door to doing international environmental work. But what I really learned was that I truly enjoyed teaching."

Gonzalez also had trepidation about the scholarship requirements of academia. However, in her government job, she had time to begin thinking about the policy implications of applying and interpreting environmental laws. This made her realize she'd relish having the time to do scholarship and write. With that realization, Gonzalez knew there was no skill-based reason for her to put off the move to academia, and she began seriously pursuing an academic post.

Setbacks? Keep Moving Forward

Even if your next career move is sudden and unplanned, you can land on your feet. Penny White is living proof.

By 1996, the voters of Tennessee had twice elected White to the Tennessee Supreme Court, and her colleagues had selected her to serve as chief justice. In June of that year, what White and her colleagues on the court thought was an innocuous opinion—the judges ruled that the state hadn't met the requirements necessary for a defendant to be put to

One key to a new, challenging job is to be open to every opportunity that allows you to pursue your passion.

death—caused an uproar over the death penalty and led to her ouster in a retention election six weeks later. "I would have been the first female chief justice in the state," she says. "It ended up taking 12 more years for that to happen." (Janice Holder was the state's first female chief justice from 2008 to 2010.)

The loss shook White to the core, and she says her reaction is an example of what not to do if you're faced with an unexpected job setback. "The blow was so devastating that it really unsettled my passion for the system," White explains.

"I plunged myself into the remaining tasks of my job—ridiculously so—continuing to work on projects until the next justice was appointed, even without pay. I just stayed busy. Maybe part of it was denial. Maybe some was my thought on my importance in the role."

Luckily, White got a call from the dean at Washington and Lee University School of Law in Lexington, Virginia, offering her a one-year teaching position. That led to two more one-year teaching posts. But if it weren't for another colleague's encouragement, White wouldn't be in her current job as a law professor and director of the Center for Advocacy and Dispute Resolution at the University of Tennessee College of Law at Knoxville.

"I applied for the job twice and was rejected both times," White recalls. "The third time, the dean called and said, 'We'd like you to apply.' I said, 'This is getting a little old!' She couldn't say I was going to get the job, but she was so encouraging. And isn't it interesting it was a 'she' who reached out to me? It's about knowing your sisters. She knew I wouldn't likely put myself back out there again after having been turned down twice. The intuition she had to reach out to me certainly made a difference."

The lesson from White's journey? Follow the three Ps: patience, perseverance, and setting aside your pride. Even the best get the wind knocked out of them during their legal career. "It doesn't mean you won't get there," White says. "I have a magnet on my refrigerator that sums it up: You're bigger than anything that can ever happen to you. You have to remember that what's inside of you is still there. Don't give up if you don't get what you want the first time." ●

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