



June 2017

Issue No. 104

OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

HOW MENTORSHIP GUIDED ME TO THE RIGHT CAREER PATH

In law school, my career focus was plaintiff-side environmental law. Midway through law school, however, I shifted my focus to incorporate environmental justice, which encompasses the strategic and disproportionate targeting of people of color with environmental waste. Employment opportunities were limited when I graduated from law school, so I broadened my options to consider other areas of practice.

At the time, Judge Angel Lopez had a law firm that primarily practiced criminal indigent defense. Judge Lopez became my mentor and profoundly shifted my career direction. He helped me to cover the cost of the bar exam and offered me a job after passing the exam. I attribute my success today, in large part, to him. I worked for Judge Lopez for a year and a half and loved it. I felt good about what I was doing.

Criminal Defense to Legal Aid

About a year and a half later, I wanted to broaden the category of people I protected, and I wanted to do it in a civil, rather than criminal, capacity. I started looking for another job – this time more strategically. My mentor sent me to a diversity conference where I met legal aid attorneys and the director of the farm worker program. Everything gelled for me. The work would include environmental justice advocacy, as I would be representing migrant and seasonal farm workers on health and safety, wage and hour, and discrimination claims.

A position opened up with the Oregon City Legal Aid office and I applied. I was

hired for a split position that served both farm-worker and non-farm-worker clients. I did everything under the sun – employment, housing, family law, domestic violence, and public benefits. I did outreach with legal aid lawyers and paralegals to advise workers about their employment, housing, consumer protection, and health and safety rights. Over a five-year period, I had the opportunity to litigate several cases in these areas of law on behalf of all legal aid low-income populations.

In 2004, Oregon Law Center opened up a position at the Portland office, and I jumped at it. It was a generalist position covering 10 counties. I narrowed the scope to housing and employment and was eventually promoted to managing attorney. I formed a unit that, for the next five years, did primarily civil rights work in consumer, housing, employment, and public benefits. The position was challenging because I had never managed before, but I had a supportive boss. It was very fulfilling and was one of the happiest periods of my employment history. I might have stayed there for the rest of my career, if not for what happened next.

From Legal Aid to DOJ

In 2009, the incoming Attorney General recruited me to create a civil rights unit within the Oregon Department of Justice. Working for the DOJ was a real transition for me because I had never worked for the government before. It was a great honor to represent the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries (BOLI) in fair housing enforcement. I also enjoyed litigating

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cases under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) and under state consumer protection statutes against notarios publicos. The position expanded to providing general counsel and working on policy and legislation in the areas of consumer protection and hate crimes.

From DOJ to Private Practice

After almost four years at DOJ, I decided that it was time to make a transition in employment. While I wanted the security of a steady paycheck, I had difficulty imagining working for anyone else. Two positions and other avenues for reemployment opened up during this period, but I could not commit to submitting applications. This steered me ultimately to conclude that it was time to open my own law practice. With the encouragement of my spouse, who is my biggest supporter and source of support, I took a leap of faith and started my practice in September 2013. I was fortunate to have the support of my colleagues both within and outside the legal community, who sent me referrals, primarily on employment matters. I attribute my success to that support and the benefit of great clients along the way.

At this point in time, I am incredibly satisfied with private practice. I work a mile from home. I bring my dog to work. I get to pick my clients. I get to pick my cases. I get to monitor my caseload (a work in progress). I can focus on quality rather than quantity. It's validating to get paid to do the work I love.

I just completed a two-week jury trial with a large verdict on behalf of two workers who experienced race discrimination and retaliation in their employment. This further reaffirms that I am on the right path and that there is no limit to what we can accomplish with the benefits that the practice of law has to offer to the community.

Parting Thoughts

Going back to the beginning, what I've learned is not to foreclose opportunity. When doors open, jump if it feels right, even if it was not what you originally intended. We work in a very supportive legal community. If you're doing good work, the private bar, government, and nonprofit employers will honor you for it by providing opportunities for employment.

My success has largely been due to mentors I have met along the way, whether they were in my intended practice field or not. Trust your gut. Find people you respect in the practice and learn from those individuals. Cultivate those relationships. I wouldn't be here today but for a number of people who were key to guiding me along the way. Even if you have a fixed idea of what you want to do, don't be exclusively wed to one employment path because opportunities will present themselves along the way. I still rely on mentorship within the legal community.

Finally, avail yourself of resources. Contact the Bar for ethics advice to check your analysis. This has been invaluable to me. The PLF is also a huge resource. If you want to start your own practice, meet with a practice management advisor who can give you practical advice on how to run a business. They are very helpful and poised to help you succeed.

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The author's name has been included at her request.