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IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

NAVIGATING THE WATERS OF CAREER TRANSITION

In late 2007 the so-called Great Recession hit, and, like so many others, I spent the next several years floundering and thinking about making a career change. I was ready for a change, but I did not know what else to do besides practicing law. It was the only job I had held as an adult. When I met people for the first time, I would introduce myself as “I am an attorney,” not “I practice law.” Being a lawyer was the way I saw myself.

I struggled for years to find an alternative to practicing law. I went to Bar seminars, joined transition groups, did private counseling, met with friends, and asked their advice. I could not find a type of work that seemed to fit. Nothing resonated with me.

At some point I asked myself what I liked to think about and what I enjoyed doing. I thought about books I liked to read. I started thinking about the things that gave me pleasure. I asked myself, “What sections do I go to when I visit Powell’s Books?” “What types of documentaries do I like to watch?” “What do I do with my free time?”

Asking these questions led to this: I have always had a love affair with boats. I have been a sailor a good portion of my adult life. One of the great joys in my life is setting sail for parts known or unknown. One of my pastimes in Portland was to sit and watch ships transit the Willamette River.

Having practiced international trade law overseas, I have also always been fascinated by the movement of goods

across seas and all the accompanying economics and legalities. Believe it or not, I find it endlessly curious how a blow-dryer made in China ends up in a bathroom cabinet in Tualatin.

I decided to go back to school for an LLM in Maritime Law. After being accepted at several programs, I started calling maritime attorneys and asking whether this course was a viable economic option. The consistent answer was negative. According to the ten or so attorneys, professors, and career counselors with whom I spoke, there was not enough work in this area to make it a worthwhile move. The end game was going to be an air-conditioned office in a Houston high-rise. I would not have lasted ten minutes in that environment.

By October 2014, I was actively looking for work outside the law. I came across a posting for a job at the Port of Portland in international sales. The job required the kind of knowledge I would have acquired with the LLM. It occurred to me to look for work at a port.

With a little investigation, I discovered 23 public ports in Oregon. I resolved to talk to several port managers and sent five or six emails to the ports on the Columbia River east of Portland. Five port managers responded, and I set up five appointments. I asked if my skill set would be transferable. They all said yes. I asked if my background would qualify me for a management position. They all said yes. I inquired if there were actual jobs and job openings, and they each assured me that I

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would find work if I were willing to work outside the Portland area where I lived.

After my first trip, I decided with some excitement that this was a field that held a great deal of promise, that I was qualified, and that there were jobs. I resolved to meet the remaining 16 or 17 public port managers in Oregon.

At some point, I decided to commit to this career path and started thinking about how I would develop my résumé. I knew that a traditional lawyer résumé with no port work would generate no traction. So I called one of the port managers I had met close to Portland and asked him if we could create an internship that would benefit both of us. He was delighted. I also found an online class in port management run by a well-known trade association; I eventually completed the course and received a certificate. Finally, I created a blog for port commissioners on the laws relevant to ports. I never published the blog, but it gave me something else to talk about and a solid background that was helpful to me later.

In my travels, I met a port manager in southern Oregon. We spoke at length, and she invited me down for a visit. We spoke and emailed after that, and she invited me down again and then again. We were becoming friends.

I knew she was planning to retire, and it was my intention to apply for her job. In July 2015, she told me she was not yet ready to retire, and I replied that I was disappointed because I wanted to apply for her job. After a long pause, she told me she was shocked because she perceived I would have needed a larger enterprise to hold my interest and match my skill set.

A few weeks later, a staff position at her port opened up. She called and offered me the job at a steep pay cut. Before I could object, she pointed out that it was a way for me to learn about the business and her port, and it would position me to take her place when she retired the following year. I would learn the business from the dock up. I swallowed hard and accepted her offer.

I moved down to southern Oregon and went to work on her staff. I enjoyed the work, the environment, and the people, but I was bored and needed more challenge.

To stay engaged, I started creating projects in the

port office. I started updating the port's accounting system, rewriting their ordinances, and migrating old and dated office practices to the digital world. I sought out economic projects, such as bringing a sternwheeler back and renovating an old Coast Guard building. I worked on environmental projects to control erosion. I also worked hard to contribute to ongoing efforts to keep the navigable waterways free from natural obstructions.

Four months later, a general manager position opened at a larger coastal port. My boss encouraged me to apply and wrote a supporting letter. I applied for the job and was unanimously hired by the members of the Port Commission. The risk I took by closing my practice, moving from Portland to rural Oregon, accepting a significant pay cut, and starting over was paying off.

Now, every Friday morning just after sunrise, my harbor-master and I inspect the docks, wharves, and other infrastructure that is the heart of maritime trade and commerce in the area. We often watch the sun break over the mountains or the fog get blown out to sea. I am grateful to have the new dawn in my life.

Here's what I have learned:

I was able to move forward when I started asking myself what I liked to do and what I liked to think about. When I finally started seriously thinking about careers in those areas, my thinking started to focus.

● **Test your theories.** I started with a hypothesis: It makes economic sense for me to get an LLM. To test this, I spoke with a lot of people – enough people to feel confident I was getting good advice – and received a consistent negative message. In making the decision to look for port work, I spoke with at least 40 people. Again I received a consistent message, but this time it was positive.

● **Networking is crucial.** In fact, I now count the people I first met at the Oregon ports when I was starting my career transition as my friends and colleagues. And, conversely, they seem to take some pride in watching me grow as a professional. Someone you know will help you, but first you may have to meet that person. Network deliberately, with intention, and with a plan. Network with specific goals in mind, including what you want out of your follow-up.

- **It is, in fact, who you know.** However, I always thought that people got jobs from someone they had known for years. It does not have to be that way. You can create helpful relationships out of thin air and in a couple of months.

- **Once you make your commitment, go all in.** Accept that sacrifice is part of the process. You may have to take a step backwards to go forward. If that is the case, then make your time and effort count by staying focused on the end game.

- **Transition is seldom a question of resources, but it is always a question of resourcefulness.** When I started researching the port industry, I had no resources there. I created them. It was my resourcefulness that got me in the door.

- **The last word goes to regret.** I regret that I did not make my decision to leave law ten years earlier. More often than not, regret is about the things we do not do. If you take action, even if it is not the “correct” action, at least you will have done something to further your life. It is truly better to make a carefully planned move that turns out to be “wrong” than to suffer the long-term regret of inertia.

I am enjoying my new life in southern Oregon and am thankful for the new opportunities to continue to grow and to learn.

GRATEFUL FOR THE NEW DAWN