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Changing Gears: Life in the Bike Lane

By Stacie Bain

The summer before I started law school, my best friend was riding his bike downtown during rush hour when he entered a crosswalk to cross Alaskan Way. An out-of-town salesman in a rental SUV was driving down Alaskan Way, not paying attention to the road and accelerating as the street opened up from one lane to two after the ferry terminals. The SUV struck my friend in the crosswalk, an event the driver described later as sounding like a "rock hitting the windshield."

The driver received a minor traffic citation at the scene, but the police never filed criminal charges since there were no skid marks from which they could deduce the driver's speed upon impact. My friend suffered a broken femur, a punctured lung and a massive head trauma. His family made the difficult decision to remove him from the ventilator seven days later. I held his hand the day he died at Harborview. I held his family's hands as we sat in Superior Court for over two weeks during the wrongful death trial.

I know that awarding damages doesn't bring back the dead or heal permanent disabilities, but attending the trial and hearing the jury announce the verdict gave me closure and made me believe that justice can be served in the end. Six years later, I am now representing injured bicyclists and their families as a "bike lawyer."

The road to my current job was anything but smooth. For three years after law school, I worked as a corporate and real estate attorney. I spent each day writing contracts and closing transactions, all the while trying to reconcile the dissonance between my job and my personal values, interests, skills and personality traits.

Although I was successful in my position, I ultimately decided that representing large corporations conflicted with my views on the environment and justice. Every time I printed out another 90-page document, I could hear a tree fall to the forest floor. Executing one multimillion-dollar agreement would inevitably lead to more multimillion-dollar agreements. The cycle was never-ending: type, print, repeat. Although it would have been safer for me to continue my career in real estate and corporate law, I would have been stifling my passion for helping real people.

Between college and law school, my professional life was in alignment with my personal life and I was stoked to wake up each morning. I was a bicycle messenger in downtown Seattle. As an avid cyclist, I loved jumping on my bike in the morning, knowing that I was going to be in the saddle all day. I would ride to work, ride around the core all day, ride home after work and then go for fun rides on the weekends.

For me, being a bike messenger was not just about picking up a package from point A and delivering it to point B, it was about doing something that gave me great pleasure and a paycheck at the same time. My time as a bike messenger flew by because I loved what I was doing.

My new practice area puts my professional life



Stacie on her bike.

once again in alignment with my personal life. In fact, they have essentially fused. I'm still a die-hard cyclist who rides bikes for fun, fitness and transportation, but now I'm also a bike lawyer. I get to hang around with bike people and, as a bike person, my cycling experience provides me with special knowledge and insight into my clients' bicycle-related personal injury claims.

Some people hate showing up for class in college, just like some people don't look forward to going to work each day. Choosing the right practice area is similar to choosing a college major — the trick is finding a practice area you enjoy, so that going to work no longer feels like a job.

Maybe you are working for a large private firm and are thinking about making the change to a non-profit or possibly starting to practice in an area of law that is important to you, like animal law or entertainment law. We all have passions outside of work. The ultimate goal is to fuse your passion with your job.

You always hear about the people who love what they're doing and can't believe they're even getting paid to do it. I'm one of those people now. All it took was the desire to make a change and the patience to wait for the right opportunity to come up.

Of course, there are drawbacks to changing practice areas. For starters, you will probably have to go back to earning the salary of a first-year attorney. This can be problematic, especially if you have law school loans that increase each year after law school. But no

matter what income level you're at, you can probably compensate with minor adjustments.

Skip the designer handbag. Trade the trip to Europe for a getaway to the San Juans. Get rid of your car and start riding your bike to work! Faced with the choice between job satisfaction or skipping a few of life's luxuries, the decision should be easy. You managed to get through law school on student loans; you can surely find a way to deal with a little less money each month.

You may also lose big firm perks, like a corner office, catered office parties or the free munchies in the lunch room. I went from a corner office with views of the Olympics and Puget Sound to an office that is one-fifth the size and that overlooks a street in Pioneer Square. I used to look out the window and watch the ferries drift through Puget Sound, counting the minutes until I could get out of the office. I now barely notice the view out my office window because I'm focused on work. Trust me, these benefits become less important and more distant each day.

Another road block to changing practice areas is the lack of experience in your desired practice area. This was especially difficult for me because I had three years of experience as a corporate lawyer, but no experience in personal injury law. My courtroom experience was limited to the cases I handled as a Rule 9 intern for the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office during law school and I assumed this experience would be discounted, since it was criminal law rather than civil litigation. However, some experience is better than none and I focused on the fact that I have been in a courtroom and know how to think on my feet.

If you search through your job history, you can probably find some experience that applies enough to focus in on it in your application materials. Although my current boss was looking for an associate with two years of litigation experience, I applied and ultimately won out over the candidates who had litigation experience due to my personal experience as a cyclist and my clear desire to work as a bike lawyer. If I would have looked at the job listing and drawn the conclusion that I would never be hired because I lacked the preferred experience, I would probably still be writing contracts instead of helping cyclists.

Take a chance on making a change. If you are considering changing your practice area, my advice is to take a leap of faith and make it happen. At my previous firm, two of the partners decided to leave the firm and start a new firm. One of the partners explained to me that he was "re-potting his plant." I especially like that analogy, since it implies that change promotes growth.

After re-potting my own plant by changing practice areas, I am now in an environment where I want to grow and am nourished by a caring and knowledgeable mentor. I love my job and look forward to coming to work now. You should, too. ■

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