

## Young Attorneys Who Go Solo Face Hurdles but Reap Rewards

Hope Caldwell  
The Legal Intelligencer  
February 6, 2006

A new year always pushes people to make resolutions -- some vow to lose weight, find love or quit smoking. For young attorneys, starting one's own firm or business might be a goal, but for some it always remains just that: a goal.

For Alan Nochumson, though, that goal has become a reality in 2006. This year will be unlike any year before, because his goal was to start his own firm and he is acting on that resolution. At 31 years old, Nochumson this month will join the ranks of about 5,000 solo practitioners in the five-county region. He is one of the many young attorneys who have struck out of their own recently, turning away from the firms where they found their footing and starting down what can be a very rewarding, if not extremely challenging, path. According to Mark Tarasiewicz, the director of publications and new media for the Philadelphia Bar Association, it is estimated that solos make up about 27 percent of the total number of lawyers and about 59 percent of the total number of law firms in that area. Nochumson left Funk & Bolton, a Maryland firm that he helped get established in Philadelphia, after a few years. It was his third law firm job since graduating from Washington, D.C.'s George Washington School of Law in 1999.

"It was not the right fit exactly, but it gave me the training wheels that I needed to start my own firm," Nochumson said.

He said he wanted autonomy -- no doubt he will find out quickly how much autonomy he really has in specializing in real estate, litigation, employment and labor, and land use and zoning. In addition to his new firm, Nochumson also set up a title insurance business, Bear Abstract Services.

Nochumson is taking his clients with him to his new firm because he was one of the few attorneys to practice real estate at Funk & Bolton. He hopes to continue growing his book of business from small companies and entrepreneurs. "To start counseling a young company when they are small will allow them to trust my counsel even more by growing with them," he said.

### **TIMING IS EVERYTHING**

Nochumson's first step in this new endeavor started several months ago with a detailed To Do list. He formed a corporation, Nochumson P.C., and he worked with an accountant to get help on the necessary business aspects -- bank accounts, insurance and tax identification numbers. He e-mailed an announcement to family, friends and colleagues, and is even planning on hosting an open house wine and cheese event to give everyone an opportunity to visit his new office in Center City. Nochumson's biggest fear, like many others, is not having enough time.

For attorneys working at firms, finding time to meet all of the requisite billable hours is the stressor that overtakes each day. However, for the solo practitioner, the stressor in their day is not limited to the billable hour but rather to a myriad of other concerns: marketing, administrative work, filing motions, arguing motions, answering the phone and paying the office bills, to name a few. The list goes on for solo practitioners trying to start their own business while providing a valuable

solo practitioners trying to start their own business while providing a valuable service to their clients.

For Shanese Johnson, 34, who started her own firm last year, time management is one hurdle she is always trying to clear. "The continuing problem I have is never having enough time to do everything," Johnson said. "You just can't do everything, and you have to send work elsewhere." After spending a majority of her day in court, Johnson often spends the remainder of her day returning phone calls and actually doing work.

She shares office space with another attorney, and although she does not have a secretary or an associate yet, she said she will likely need to hire a secretary before 2007. She currently pays a paralegal to assist her with pleadings and filings, which allows her to focus her energy somewhere else.

When Johnson made the decision to leave the firm of Dessen Moses & Sheinoff (now Dessen Moses & Rossito), she sought out the opinion of her parents.

"My mother said I had never yet worked for someone smarter than me," Johnson said. "I was able to be financially successful this year, and I didn't realize that I would be so successful."

After practicing for 10 years, Johnson said she always wanted to start her own firm, but when her firm lost its contract with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, the firm changed dramatically. She had found the push she needed to go out on her own sooner.

She had about 20 clients at the time and brought those with her, plus a few more, when she formed Shanese I. Johnson & Associates P.C., specializing in family and domestic relations law.

Johnson advertises in the Yellow Pages, but said she has not received any clients from it. Rather, most of her clients come from referrals from other clients or attorneys. She volunteers for the People's Law School and makes time for speaking engagements at her high school alma mater, Philadelphia High School for Girls, as well as Graterford State Penitentiary to discuss domestic relations. These events grant her more exposure and, thus, more clients.

"People are respecting me for my work in family law. People who don't even know me are referring me work," Johnson said.

### **CONNECTIONS ARE KEY**

Nochumson and Johnson were fortunate because they were able to start their firms with already-established clients. Others are not so lucky. Harper Dimmerman, whose father owns his own business, used that innate business acumen to start his own firm two years ago.

After graduating law school at the University of Miami in 1999, Dimmerman, 33, moved to California to take a stab at representing writers of film and TV. He ended up in Philadelphia when his father had an opportunity to work in a more legal role and to learn more about running a business. He then worked for an insurance defense firm for about a year before making the decision to go solo.

"Several different factors made me decide to do it -- the primary one was desperation," Dimmerman said. "I wanted to make a living, give myself the chance to practice and make my own way."

The problem was building a book of business without any previous clients from which to draw. He found the answer by focusing on making each of his real estate and family law clients happy -- one client at a time. Like Nochumson, he also has his own title insurance company, DST Land Transfer Inc.

"I try to focus heavily on client satisfaction," Dimmerman said. "I've been fortunate to have a network of people to access for guidance from legal issues to adequately screening clients."

Dimmerman manages this level of focus with various tools. He said that he uses the legal researching tools through the local and state bar associations because

they are included as part of the membership. He also bought software to manage client contact information.

While he said he's conservative with his spending, he admits he went into credit card debt and tapped his savings to pay for the start-up costs of the phone, Internet and malpractice insurance. His only regret right now is that he would not have taken cases in New Jersey, because logistically it made scheduling difficult. "One person does not make enough of a firm to handle cases in another state or even other counties due to travel time," Dimmerman said. "And it ends up detracting from my ability to serve my clients who live right down the street."

To help handle his cases, Dimmerman said, he hired a law clerk and previously had part-time clerks and summer interns.

Overall, solo practitioners enjoy the freedom that running one's own business brings. Attorney Mike LiPuma said he loves making his own schedule, especially with the help of technology. His laptop and BlackBerry allow him to work from anywhere.

LiPuma, 36, originally from Missouri, started his career at bigger firms and created his own firm after about eight years in practice. "I wanted a greater sense of running my own cases, and I was thrilled at the thought of running my own business," he said.

Similar to Dimmerman, LiPuma comes from entrepreneurial family roots in St. Louis. His first three steps prior to starting his own firm were saving some money, creating a business plan and reading "I'd Rather Do It Myself: How to Set Up Your Own Law Firm" by Stephen Gillers.

"You really need to give serious thought about where the business is going to come from, but I've never regretted being able to make my own schedule," LiPuma said. LiPuma worked at Wolf Block Schorr & Solis-Cohen prior to going solo two years ago. He was able to take a few clients with him after agreeing to do so with the firm. He said they were very supportive, and they refer him business from time to time.

Practicing business litigation leads to an overbooked schedule oftentimes for LiPuma, who graduated from University of Pennsylvania School of Law in 1994. "When you get really busy, there is no one to help you," he admitted. "It gets scary at moments, but we usually work a way out of it with rescheduling with opposing counsel and judges."

For young attorneys ready to start their own firms, there is no set of qualifications that one must have, but there is a lot of planning to consider. Regardless of background, though, the trials and tribulations of a young attorney opening his or her own practice are usually fairly similar. The one common theme they all share is resolving how to find more time to get everything done each day.