



Journeys: Branching Off

Three local attorneys and their decision to go solo

By Elizabeth Blust

Many law students and attorneys dream of working for a large firm with dozens of attorneys and a large support staff, and for many that dream becomes a reality. But people change, and some lawyers at large firms find themselves dreaming a different dream, one that would take them into the world of the sole practitioner or smaller partnership. Are these sweet dreams, or nightmares? Three local attorneys who started big and went solo shared their stories with *San Diego Lawyer*.



James lagmin

Williams lagmin, LLP

When James lagmin took over as managing partner of Gomez lagmin in early 2013, he saw it as a natural progression of his career. He had been training many of the new attorneys, particularly in catastrophic personal injury cases. This practice group had about seven attorneys, with a handful of others focusing on mass torts, and support staff of 15. As the firm continued to grow, so did the administration. "I was getting farther away from my clients, delegating more," lagmin said. "That's what managers have to do."

But lagmin found he missed the regular interaction with his clients. "On the plaintiffs' side of personal injury cases, my clients have suffered significant loss.

They may be badly hurt or may have lost a loved one. They are going through a difficult period. I not only navigate the legal system for them, I absorb the stress and uncertainty so they can heal."

While it may not surprise anyone to hear he missed the client relations, he was a little surprised himself by how much he missed his contact with the legal system.

"I love the law. I love my practice. I love doing depositions. I learn a lot, meet people. They don't always like me, but if they understand it is a system and a process, it can be a good experience.

"By the last half of that year [as managing partner], I began having these realizations that I was spending a lot of time in meetings. I was staying later, and I had a harder time 'turning it off' when I got home."

He sought counsel from an old friend, SDCBA Past-President Jon Williams, who at the time was partnered with Steve Boudreau and who had been with Higgs, Fletcher & Mack, LLP and Ross, Dixon & Bell, LLP. "Jon is smart and a good listener," lagmin said, "he also knew that Steve was thinking about retiring." Williams told lagmin he was very talented and that he was ready to take the leap to solo practice. Williams said over and over again: "Do this, and in six months' time, you will have no regrets."

"It was hard to think about making that transition when I had a home, kids, and a

mortgage," lagmin said, "but my wife helped me see that having balance and stability was more important than the financial rewards of being the managing partner at Gomez lagmin."

lagmin realized that being a manager was not his calling. He left Gomez lagmin on a Tuesday and started Williams lagmin the next day. Now, Williams and lagmin share an office in a nearly 100-year-old building on State Street. They run separate practices, with Williams doing exclusively appellate work, and lagmin focusing on serious personal injury cases. Boudreau is Of Counsel. "It was tricky that first year," lagmin said. "I worried about balancing costs and overhead." lagmin said he was fortunate that he learned how to do fundamental administrative tasks, like service, filing and NODs, early in his career, so that he knew how to do those things after years of having a staff to do them for him.

Now in his second year with Williams, lagmin is feeling reconnected with his clients. His wife is his accountant. He has control over his schedule, so he can spend more time with his two young sons. "I'm blessed and privileged to be able to help people who are going through [difficult times]," he said. And he has advice for anyone considering "going solo," especially with a practice built on contingent fees: "Be the best lawyer you can be, manage your overhead, and be a good saver."

Randy Rechs started as a clerk with health care defense firm Neil Dymott at a time when the firm had about 40 lawyers and was launching its satellite office in Palm Desert. After about three and a half years there, he left to form a partnership for about a year before going truly solo.

"I'm glad I worked in a big firm," Rechs said. "I worked with great lawyers and learned from the best. Because of that experience, I was able to hit the ground running when I was ready to start my own firm."

"I wanted to be able to pick and choose my own clients. I wanted the flexibility to have a family and set my own schedule. I wanted to try my own cases and do my own thing."

Starting a small firm and then a solo practice had its disadvantages. "Of course, you've got issues with making your overhead," Rechs said, "because in the

beginning, you don't know how much work you're going to have, you have no regular paycheck. You go from a firm that was good to you, with benefits and two secretaries and then it's just you. You're the one dealing with the furniture and the phone lines. It was a real struggle for about six to seven months, but by the end of the first year, I felt that good things were happening.

"I have three children, and I was able to coach all of their teams, be at all their games and their plays, all those things."

Rechs represents mainly plaintiffs these days, a switch from his days with Neil Dymott, although his practice is still "100% civil litigation." He regularly hires clerks and interns, some of whom have become associates before moving on. "I have a business model," he said. "I don't want to have to get too big, where I would miss the kids."



Randy Rechs

Law Office of
Randall C. Rechs

Patti Zlaket began clerking on a limited basis at Casey Gerry while waiting for February 2009 bar results. The clerking led to contract work which led to her becoming an associate there in 2011.

"It was wonderful, without question, working with seasoned, experienced professionals," she said of her years at Casey Gerry, a firm of about 15 attorneys and 18 support staff members. "It was the perfect place to begin my career as a lawyer. They became my mentors and gave me the opportunity to grow in the profession."

So why leave? Zlaket and her father,

former Arizona Supreme Court Chief Justice Thomas Zlaket, "had often talked about how cool it would be to work together," the younger Zlaket said. "He's 73 now, so we realized that if we were going to do this, we needed to do it!

"There were a lot of wonderful reasons to stay where I was, but the window of opportunity to work with my dad was a small one."

Zlaket left Casey Gerry in November 2014 and opened her plaintiffs' litigation practice in downtown San Diego in January of this year, partnering with her father who enjoys a thriving practice in Tucson, Arizona and is also licensed in California. "I have the freedom and independence to run my office in San Diego," Patti Zlaket said. "Dad has experience with mediation and arbitration, and he has done expert consulting, so we're hoping to bring that into the practice as well."

As for the transition to a small practice, Zlaket admits that "for all the planning, there were a million things I hadn't thought about. At first, there was a constant reprioritization – like you want to research which accounting system to use, but you really need to buy letterhead – but I'm in a nice rhythm now that I've been at it for a few months."

Zlaket, like lagmin and Rechs, notices

that being a good lawyer does not automatically mean being a good business manager.

"Like most people who make this jump, it's wonderful to have flexibility and independence, to chart my own course, to decide what kind of practice I want to have, and to make those decisions for myself and my clients. I know how to be a good lawyer, but I'm still learning how to be the best business manager I can.

"I had become spoiled having had so much support at a large firm – plenty of letterhead and pens, someone to answer the phone," Zlaket said. "Now when I put something in my 'out' box, nobody comes!"

Even when our dreams come true, they are still subject to reality checks. As the characters in the Stephen Sondheim musical *Into the Woods* tell us at the beginning of Act II, "Wishes may bring problems such that you regret them/ better that, though, than to never get them." Fortunately, none of these attorneys expressed any regret in changing what they wished for and making those wishes come true. 🍷

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