

- MARGARET L. BEHM -

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I grew up in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, in the 1950s and 1960s. The town revolved around the courthouse square, one high school, and a small town university. Despite prescribed roles for women, my parents’ example fostered my road to independence.

My parents were fiercely independent. Although early marriage was the norm in their time, they spent their twenties as working, single adults and married in their thirties, in 1950 after World War II. My mother, Adeline Dismukes, traveled as a young woman to DC to work on the Manhattan Project and, after the war, was secretary to the Allied Commander in Berlin. My dad, Howard Behm, was brilliant at math and was captain of an artillery unit that marched through the Hürtgen Forest. My parents met in Berlin, first settled in New York, and after I was born, moved to Murfreesboro. My twin sisters were born 11 months after me.

My father, now dubbed a Yankee in Murfreesboro, was viewed as an outsider. As I grew up, I was one of the few students whose mother had to work. My mom was a legal secretary who was as bright as the lawyers. She knew all the legal players in town and ran the office. When I was at the law office after school, clients would leave the office thanking lawyers for helping them.

My dad had several jobs, but after working as a nursing home inspector and being troubled by what he saw, he used his math acumen to help an entrepreneur start and run a successful group of nursing homes. Both parents liked to take charge, but they weren’t their own bosses. After listening to their frustrations through the years, I knew I needed to develop the skills to determine my own destiny.

Thankfully, the law school doors opened for women. After I graduated from the University of Tennessee College of Law in Knoxville, I was lucky to get a job at Legal Services in Nashville, thanks to my future husband who knew the director. I was one of a few lawyers from the University of Tennessee in a city dominated by Vanderbilt lawyers. Firms were reluctant to hire women, unless they were at the top of Vanderbilt's class, or well-connected, or both.

After four years at Legal Services, I knew I wanted to be in private practice in Nashville, but I also knew I didn't want to be in a large firm. The opportunities were limited. In addition to having a desire to control my own destiny and not be pigeonholed, I also had an inner passion to demonstrate that women could run a business. Even without a business background, I wanted to give it a try.

I decided to find a law partner who was well-respected in the community. Marietta Shipley was a district attorney handling child support cases. In 1980, we formed Shipley & Behm, the first women-owned law firm in Nashville. We practiced together until Marietta became a trial judge in 1990. In 1988, we had merged with my husband's law firm. Now the firm is called Dodson Parker Behm & Capparella, P.C., and sometimes Behm & Them! We have 12 lawyers, and seven of them are women.

Today, 30 years later, I'm grateful I took the plunge—and believe me, it is a plunge. When we started our firm, we had no client base because our previous clients qualified under poverty guidelines. What we had, however, was an incredible, supportive group of male and female lawyers who wanted to see us succeed. These lawyers and our friends were our top referral sources. In fact, today lawyers and community leaders still comprise about half of our referral sources. Client referrals, which started at zero, now represent the other half of our referrals.

Getting started, Marietta and I were active in many organizations, especially women's organizations. Our office became a place for proactive pursuits and socializing. These meetings kept our firm on the minds of many and are part of the fabric of history of the women's movement in Nashville.

In developing our practice, we took cases in which we had no prior experience and found prominent lawyers in the field to help us. We kept in touch with these lawyers, and down the road, we received referrals from them. These

lawyers also helped us understand how to charge for our services. I found myself telling folks I handled cases that I wanted to handle, not just the actual type of cases I was handling. This both increased our business and helped me develop a practice around the areas of law I enjoyed most.

Getting financing for our new business was tough. Male loan officers were not accustomed to women starting businesses. Worse, interest rates were hovering around 18 to 22 percent. Eventually, we decided to diligently search for a woman commercial lender and found one! We obtained a \$25,000 line of credit, secured by Marietta's certificate of deposit—in a larger amount. All I could have put up as collateral was a used vehicle worth \$1,000 at best.

I was fortunate to start a business without debt. After a couple of years, our firm no longer needed the line of credit. Since then, we have never taken out a loan to finance operating expenses. We survive by eating what we kill every month. When we have a good month, we save, and then we take a nice draw. We have used multiple methods of billing, including value billing, for years. With this method of cash flow, the firm has survived with relative ease through four recessions, including the current Great Recession.

One of the biggest factors in our success has been the quality and loyalty of our staff. Probably due to watching my mother, I especially view our staff as essential to our success. Our office manager has been with us for over 25 years, and the paralegal with whom I work has been with the firm for 12 years. Also crucial to our success has been our responsive and innovative technology contractor.

As for lawyers, we look for certain types. Our lawyers do interesting things with their lives, things which may be wholly unrelated to the practice of law but which demonstrate uniqueness of character. We look for a passion and commitment to community service. Finally, we find that those who understand the entrepreneurial spirit are quicker to understand how to function in a small law office. These qualities demonstrate a commitment to service, and this responsiveness to clients from our staff and lawyers is the key to our success.

From a management point of view, we have to stay on top of issues, even though we can tire of addressing the same ones repeatedly. However, if these issues aren't addressed directly and quickly, more damage is done, and more

nonbillable time is needed to fix the problem. Like all firms, we face the challenge of keeping good lawyers and allowing for flexibility while meeting expectations. My biggest pet peeve is dealing with annual health insurance rate hikes, which, according to the insurance companies, are triggered because we employ so many women of childbearing age. Thankfully, we are healthy overall, but our commitment to insuring our small group is a challenge.

As I look back, my joy in owning my own business is intertwined with my love of practicing law. The skills I use for problem solving in the business are the same skills I use for solving the problems clients bring to us. As with all law practices, there have been tense times and intense periods of work. But, I make good money and have the freedom to practice in the many areas I enjoy, areas that change through the years. As a business owner, I understand my business clients. Additionally, I have had the flexibility to teach at the law school, work in political campaigns, and assume leadership positions in the community. Most of all, I have had the independence that has allowed me to be a Girl Scout leader, coach my children's sports teams, and attend those important childhood events.

Thirty years ago our firm needed a line of credit to rent some affordable space. Now, we own a beautiful building in quaint Germantown, close to downtown Nashville. Like the courthouse square in Murfreesboro, there are sidewalks, restaurants, a mix of businesses and residences, and plenty of street parking. We are in a new space, but we still operate under the same old business model—a model that allows clients to leave our office thanking lawyers for helping them. What a great place to go every day.

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