Q&A with Jenna Ruth Johnston

What advice would you give a young woman considering a career in the law today?

The first thing I would say is to try everything. I think the study of law and the opportunities in the legal profession are very much like the medical profession, where you think you know what you want to do while you’re in school but you find that when you’re out there, you fall in love with something completely different. You think you’re going to be a dermatologist and end up being an optical surgeon.

My first thought was that I was going to be a labor lawyer in Detroit, but there were no opportunities at my first law firm in that area. Luckily they had a habit of rotating associates through the various departments. One morning I woke up and thought, “I really like what I’m doing!” And there I was, in corporate transactions and real estate.

Have you personally experienced any advantages or disadvantages in the legal industry because of your gender?

I graduated from law school in 1980, and at that time there were not a lot of women going into the big firms, and when we were there, there was absolutely no flexibility for gender. Out of 120 attorneys in that firm, there were no female partners and the firm’s rigidity was a major factor in that disparity. Since I was already 30, I was ready to start my family there but there was no opportunity to take a part-time position and no alternate arrangements for family leave. The “flexibility” that was
afforded to a woman then was that she could go home. So I went home for 10 years — I did not want to be working 90 to 100 hours per week and give my children to someone else to raise. I did a lot of private practice and had the luxury of taking things that I wanted to do and not taking things that I didn’t want to do, and further refining my instinct for what I ultimately would be doing. The other wall that I hit going in-house after the children were in school — becoming an in-house counsel — was that companies didn’t feel compelled to pay in-house lawyers, especially women, commensurately with what they pay their law firms. So it was a struggle to get the salary in line with the work I performed for the company. I felt that management respected my knowledge and work, but because I was a female they rationalized that my pay could be less than my male predecessor. It was an education process on both sides and I [became] a better advocate for myself.

What advice would you give someone about negotiating compensation?

I’m just as guilty as most women about not looking out for myself. There were times in my career when I was the breadwinner in the family and I didn’t feel like I had a lot of negotiating room; just take the salary and be grateful. But you need to stay on top of the salary surveys. The advent of the Web has made things so much easier for us to track what’s going on in the compensation world. Before you pretty much had to make friends with someone in HR who was working with Mercer or another agency’s compensation surveys. But now you can go on the Internet and plug in your experience, what you’re doing, where you live and all the necessary parameters to come up with a pretty good idea of what the value of that position should be in your location. Then you have to resolve to advocate for yourself and act upon that resolution by engaging a mentor or negotiating directly with management.

What kind of steps have law firms and other legal employers taken in the last few years to create a better working environment for women? What else do you think needs to happen in this area?

I’ve seen a lot more flexibility for the younger attorneys — male and female — in working out family issues and allowing time off, or flexible hours, than we used to allow. Technology has become the friend of these attorneys. If you have a laptop computer and access to a phone line, you can be where you need to be electronically. You can participate in conference calls, you can be drafting and returning documents, you can work with a lot more flexibility than was available even 10 years ago.

The other thing we have to be cognizant of is dealing with aged parents, and requiring some flexibility at the other end of the life spectrum. In addition to child care, employers need to help provide for adult day care and give employees the ability to telecommute to facilitate attending to the needs of adult parents.

Diversity and inclusion have become the gold standard in hiring [and] promotion, making the path smoother for women, but it’s still up to the individual to prove her worth. While I still see inequities in firms and corporations, the gaps are becoming smaller.

What sort of structures need to be in place to increase the number of women law leaders at top law firms and in corporate counsel capacities?

Mentorships are a terrific road to success. Women are rising in what we call the shared services side of corporations, but not as quickly on the business side. Legal services provide good corporate opportunities for women in terms of work and visibility. Working in a corporation, you need a mentor — and that can be a woman or a man — but someone who will hold you accountable to your personal business development plan, whatever that plan may be, and someone who will also help you try everything. Business and law are changing so rapidly these days that what you knew last year will be out of date quickly. You have to be open for change and every opportunity to increase your knowledge and value inside the corporation. You can’t just come to work everyday, keep your head down, and do the job. You have to be alert and you need that mentor or mentors to help keep you on your toes. And mentorship is a big commitment. Those of us who are further down the road have to make the commitment to the younger folks to assist them in the same way.
You had mentioned that there may be more opportunities for women in shared services. What do you mean by that?

Shared services are human resources, purchasing, finance, audit, accounting, or legal services — the folks who help the core business run. They are not out there selling the product; but assisting those people in getting the product out the door and bringing in the sales dollars. Typically the shared services don’t have the one-to-one customer contact and they don’t get the glory, but they keep the wheels on the bus. I see more women rising to vice presidencies and above from the shared services than from the business side.

What impact has a career in law had on your personal and family life? Do you have any special techniques, methods and philosophies to help you maintain a work/life balance and be a successful lawyer? Also you mentioned that you stayed at home for 10 years — how were you able to make the transition from being at home to returning to a full-time career?

When the principal of the elementary school suggests that it’s time for you to find something else to do instead of trying to run the school with him, then it’s time to go back to work! I’m a doer — whatever I’m engaged in, I am 100 percent engaged in, and at that time I had to let the teachers and the principals take over and get back to work. To do that, I had to have a partnership with [my] family. They know that I am healthier and happier when I have meaningful and interesting work to do, but on the other hand, the house needs to run — the family has obligations and interests that need to be attended to — so on weekends we set the plan for the week. We knew that groceries were bought, the house had been cleaned, the wash had been done, the calendars marked, and we knew we were ready to rush headlong into the week with a plan in hand.

My husband and I were, I don’t want to say strict parents, but we were very engaged. People laugh when I say the children did not have computers and televisions in their rooms because we wanted to know what they were doing — we wanted to be part of their lives. We didn’t want them to check out and be separate from the family. Unless there was an emergency, I was home for dinner. Dinner might be late, but I was home for dinner. But we had planned all those things in advance; we knew what would be on the table, and we were ready to rock and roll.

The other thing is simply this: be in the moment! When you work, you’re not going to have many opportunities to have time with your family, so if you’ve chosen to participate in something, be there! Don’t be checking your e-mail and returning phone messages. You need to be there so you won’t look back and say, “Golly, where did the time go?” because you were there. And that’s how we worked, enjoyed our family and made it through. Now my son is in law school. My daughter, who will graduate from Texas Christian in May, is planning on going on to graduate school in Toronto.

What other careers and life choices did you consider before deciding on a career in the law? If you were not practicing law and you could not be a lawyer, what would your dream career be now?

After getting my BA I worked in communications and public relations, and I loved it. My job had to do with cancer, and that wore me out. It’s a very emotional topic, and back when I was doing it in the 1970s, before law school, people weren’t very forthcoming in talking about it. I was trying to “sell” information and services to people who didn’t want to “buy” them, didn’t want to talk about the entire subject. When I was offered the opportunity to get an advanced degree for a government program we were working on, [I] politely refused, and looked at my other options. My skill was in writing, so law school was a natural choice for me.

What would I do if I stopped working today? I would travel! I’d become a travel junkie, and I would write a book about it. My perfect career would be to travel and identify opportunities for humanitarian efforts and facilitate them. I do a lot of volunteer work now. I’ve come full circle back to cancer initiatives as a breast cancer survivor, and I work with the Susan G. Komen affiliate for Northwest Arkansas. Survivors don’t want cancer to define their lives, but it’s something we can’t deny as part of our life experiences. My children are grown and I have a little more time that doesn’t need to be focused on the family, so I find myself going back to my first loves and giving back in those areas. I also work with abused and neglected children as a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) volunteer. It is great work, and Washington County has one of the best
judges I have ever seen. She loves those children and we’re talking about some pretty difficult children because of what they’ve been through. It’s a pleasure to serve as her eyes and ears to help get those kids through the system, and hopefully out of the system, as quickly as possible.

**How do you expect the practice of law will change in the next ten years?**

It has changed so much in 25 years. When I started at the law firm, if you were assigned a secretary who had an IBM computer — it wasn’t even a computer, it was a typewriter with a 10 page memory — you were on the top of the heap. Faxes came in on thermographic paper and were essentially unreadable and cell phones were cumbersome and very rare.

Now we are constantly being required to move faster, to turn out more work more quickly, and we don’t use secretaries hardly at all in the corporate setting. We work off our computers with an administrative assistant who takes care of the administrative details. I think it’s just going to get faster, and I think people are going to have to specialize in their subject areas even more. And they’re going to be required to keep up with technology because it changes every year to eighteen months. It would be extremely difficult to take 10 years off now like I did because I was in the bubble before computer usage became the norm.

As an example, I’m looking at a contract life cycle management system to help manage documents and databases that I’ve been keeping in Word or Excel and managing in my own way that works for me, but my personal system doesn’t really make the information readily available to other people in the organization. I am exploring how the technology can step up what I’m already doing and provide more accessibility and value to the corporation.

It’s amazing. I really can’t picture what in-house work will look like in 25 years. Now when you leave the office you should have your Treo or BlackBerry with you so that people can reach you for an instant response. It used to be that when you were in your car you had quiet time! You knew that your drive from the office to a meeting, or from home to the office, was thinking time. Now everything is beeping at you and there is very little time for deep, thoughtful analysis that we used to have time to do. We’re expected to respond pretty darn quickly to any request, and that can be frustrating.

Even now it’s hard to manage time and in the future you will have to really commit to being your own advocate. It goes back to those special techniques you use with your family. You schedule a get-away with your husband or go visit your sisters for a weekend without any electronic gadgets. I encourage people to do that. I also remind them that there’s no reward for not taking your vacation. People don’t pat you on the back and say what a good little soldier you are for slogging through, so take your time off and regain your perspective. People need to be able to get away, and employers should respect and encourage that regeneration time.

What won’t change is the need to always keep learning, the need to keep your focus and the demand that you always offer the best work you can do in whatever situation or opportunity is before you.