

Pam Howland, JD

Living the Life She Wants to Live



For sixteen years, Pam Howland worked at Holland & Hart LLP, a large regional law firm in Boise. The experience she gained there was invaluable, but after Pam made partner, she began to realize that big firm life was no longer working for her on several levels.

One issue involved Pam's desire to have a more flexible schedule and to spend more time with her children. Pam's daughter, Kennedy, has Type 1 diabetes, so Pam needed more control over her schedule to take Kennedy to doctors' appointments and to otherwise help her manage her blood sugar.

"It was super stressful. Kennedy was diagnosed as a five-year-old, so for many years she was unable to manage her blood sugar by herself. I would be texting the school four or five times a day and then texting the after-school nanny four or five times a day to check in on Kennedy," she says. "I was spending a huge amount of time coordinating with someone else so they could take care of my child. This was distracting and frustrating. Although my co-workers at the firm were always supportive and understanding, I began to feel like firm life wasn't working for me."

In addition, as the years at the firm went by, Pam realized she wanted to create a different type of practice than the one she worked in at the firm. "I started to think there might be something for me out there that would help me have the type of clients and the type of practice I wanted and that would help me maintain balance between my personal life and work life."

So, in February 2016, she launched Idaho Employment Lawyers, PLLC, a boutique firm dedicated to handling Idaho employment-law issues. In addition to her employment litigation practice, she counsels employers on how to avoid litigation on topics related to discipline, termination, retaliation, internal policies and procedures, and evolving laws. She also does a lot of public speaking to various professional groups throughout Idaho and has developed a branch of her firm that provides training to employers on various employment law topics, such as anti-harassment and anti-discrimination, supervisor training and ADA training.

“I started my own firm so I can control my schedule. Now I can schedule my work around all the things my kids have going,” she says. “If one of my kids is ill, I can work from home. If they have an event, I can be there. I look back on all those years and with the law-firm structure, it’s a lot harder to do that when there’s an expectation that you will be in the office and when you’re on a team of people working on a case where others are counting on you to be there. I feel like starting my own firm was the only way for me to live the kind of lifestyle I wanted and to have total control over my schedule.”

From a Stable Salary to Uncertainty

Although the move turned out to be incredibly positive for her entire family, Pam says it took a solid year and a half to get comfortable with the transition because of the financial uncertainty. “When you walk away from a good salary at a stable firm, it just feels scary,” she says. Her husband, Wade, had some trepidation about her decision, too, but he supported her every step of the way.

She and Wade did a lot of financial planning before Pam launched her firm so they could avoid surprises. And while she was at her previous firm, she maxed out her contributions to her 401(k) plan to save for retirement. Wade has done so, too.

Pam misses the administrative support she had at the large law firm. Now that she has her own firm, she wears a lot of hats—she does her own billing, pays for malpractice insurance, keeps up with her state-bar fees, and handles her own technology upgrades. But the effort it takes to line up all those resources herself is worth it.

“It’s so much more rewarding because now, when I get a client, it’s *my* client. I work hard, I manage my cases, and I make more money,” she explains. “Everything is a lot more gratifying. I develop personal relationships and enjoy working closely with my Idaho clients to resolve their problems. When you’re at a large firm, a lot of those things are beyond your control. Now I have complete control over how my cases are staffed, how much client involvement I have, and what my rates are. It’s fun to be in the driver’s seat.”

A friend of Pam’s encouraged her to start her own practice years ago. But for years, Pam did not take that suggestion seriously because of the huge amount of risk and uncertainty involved.

She says, “I have a friend from law school who has her own practice in Las Vegas, Nevada, and she loves it. She had said for years, ‘You should do this.’ I would say, ‘No, it’s way too risky. I would never start my own firm. No way.’ But after the years went by, I realized I really was looking for a different type of practice and that the risk and uncertainty were worth the potential upside.”

Prior to launching her own firm, Pam had a handful of years where she questioned if she should have gone to law school at all. But soon she realized she had just reached a crossroads in her legal career where it was time for her to make a change. “Today I tell new law-school grads, ‘There are a million things you can do with a law degree. If one legal job doesn’t work, you’ve got to jump ship and find one that does.’”

A Strong Foundation of Financial Stewardship from an Early Age

Even though starting her own firm was stressful, Pam had a strong foundation of good financial sense, even at a young age, because her parents taught her how to manage money.

When Pam was a kid, she actually made a budget to figure out what to do with her allowance. “I might want to spend ten dollars on something and then save some money to go to the fair with my friends,” she remembers. As soon as she got a part-time job during high school, her parents set up a checking account for her.

She grew up on a farm, and her parents both worked full time. Chores were a big part of her summers off from school. “My parents were pretty good about paying allowance, but we had to do a ton of chores,” she says. “We had a lot of flower beds and a giant garden, so we spent a lot of time weeding. We cleaned out the barn and took care of the cows, and I cleaned house and cooked meals.”

Pam is attempting to pass on those valuable lessons to her daughters.

“My parents paid for my undergrad degree. I think it’s really important to help your kids get through school,” she says. “I also think it’s important to teach them to have a strong work ethic and to save money. My parents were very hard workers—they still are. So, we are trying to point our kids in the right direction to help them find careers they like and to instill a strong work ethic.”

From Marketing to Sales to Law

Pam began college as an engineering major and then switched to marketing. “I went through my undergrad years not really knowing what I wanted to do exactly,” she recalls. “I thought communications, marketing, and working with people would be fun.” She graduated from Montana State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Business in 1993.

Her first job was in sales. “For three years, I sold these giant electronic signs that display the time, temperature, and a message,” she says. “I knew I couldn’t do that forever. After three years, I was burned out and was thinking commissioned sales were maybe not the right path for me.”

She considered pursuing an MBA but wasn’t sure what to do next. Later, someone she met in college planted that seed for her to go to law school. “Life throws you curves and takes you down paths, and things happen for a reason,” she says.

Pam dated someone who was going to law school, and the two of them talked about law school a lot. That relationship failed, but she kept thinking that law school sounded interesting. So she enrolled in law school when she was twenty-seven. In May 2000, Pam completed her JD degree at Gonzaga University School of Law in Spokane, Washington, graduating *summa cum laude*.

Even when she graduated, Pam wasn’t sure which area of the law she wanted to specialize in. She had worked for the US Attorney’s Office in Spokane during law school and thought she might pursue criminal law and become a prosecutor. Then she moved to Boise and,

while working at the Idaho Supreme Court in a clerkship, applied for jobs at large firms. When her clerkship was done, she ended up in civil practice.

“For probably the first ten years I was at the firm, I was happy there,” she says. “It wasn’t until years later that I started thinking I could see a niche in Boise for an employment-law defense practice, which is what I do now. No other firms had really targeted that market. There is a big difference between the way that big firms and small firms’ function. A lot of big firms in town have employment-law attorneys, but those rates are higher. I saw a need for a local practice that serves local companies at more affordable rates.”

More Time with Her Daughters

After “jumping off the ledge and just going for it,” Pam was thrilled about being able to manage her schedule around her kids’ school hours and activities.

“Most days, I can drop them off at school. And most days, I can go to whatever school events they want me to go to,” she says. “I got to go with Addison to her fifth-grade campout for two days. I look back now, and I don’t even know how I did it for all those years in a more formal work setting—orthodontist, dentist, and doctor appointments, endless after school sporting events and tutors. How did I ever work like I did?”

Pam’s daughters are teenagers now, and she enjoys picking them up after school. When she was first able to do that, she was amazed at how much she learned from her daughters on the ride home from school.

“In that first hour after your kids get out of school, that’s when they want to talk. If you’re not getting home until six or six-thirty at night, they’re kind of shut down by then because they’re tired and they’ve already talked about what happened in their day,” she explains. “When I can be there at three-thirty to pick them up, I learn a lot more.”

Her Biggest Challenges: Staffing and Delegation

Pam says one of the toughest parts of owning a law firm is staffing—figuring out how much help she needs, and when. “As a lawyer, if you can’t meet your deadlines, that’s a huge problem. You’re going to lose clients and face malpractice,” she says. “But on the other hand, you can’t overextend, or nobody gets paid.”

She started out by herself but now has a staff composed of a part-time office manager, two full-time associates, and a law student who helps out with research.

Delegation is difficult, too, for tasks like client billing. “That’s so key to the business that I have a really hard time letting go of some of that stuff and delegating it to others,” she admits. “That means I’m spending a lot of time doing stuff that isn’t the best use of my time. I have to figure out what to delegate, and to whom.”

Pam’s staff members are people she knew already or people whom others referred to her. For example, one of the attorneys working for her has been a close friend since law school. Her office manager is another friend of hers. She met her other associate attorney years ago and

reconnected with her recently. “I let fate send people in my direction,” Pam says. “I also try to keep contacts open with people coming out of law school and clerkships who are looking for jobs.”

Her advice to other business owners is, “Hire people who know what they’re doing, and trust them.”

Having the Time of Her Life

Every day at her law firm is different, and Pam says that makes it incredibly fun.

“I never know what’s coming. We get new cases every week,” she says. “It’s fun and exciting to get the right team in place to take it to the next level. I’m having more fun now than I’ve ever had.”

Her client base continues to grow, and she works with many large businesses. When she first developed a business plan for her firm, she thought she would market to small and medium-sized businesses in Idaho. But a lot of large businesses have come her way because of her reputation and through referrals from other attorneys or clients. Pam is always surprised at how much work she generates from speaking engagements, too.

While some people might define success as having the corner office, the mahogany desk, or the impressive title, Pam defines success as doing what you like to do and being able to set your own schedule. She is definitely successful.

“Now I am able to live the life I want to live,” she says. “We take trips and have adventures and experiences. I just love the concept of living the life you want to live.”

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