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Common Ground: Baker Donelson Associate Rodney Dillard Interviews Of Counsel Vinnie Nelan

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When we see someone for the first time, we ask, "What do you do for a living, where are you from, are you married, do you have children?" Based on their responses to those and other, admittedly surface-level questions, we invariably form opinions about them. We may draw conclusions about their political views and anticipate how they will respond to various scenarios.

I have been an associate at Baker Donelson for a year, and it has been a whirlwind of meeting new people from many offices, backgrounds, faiths, and political views. One person I have had the pleasure to meet and develop a friendship with is Vinnie Nelan. My interactions with Vinnie have reinforced the old adage that you cannot judge a book by its cover. I have learned that, even in our perceived differences, we all have common ground. Vinnie is an Irish American Catholic who grew up in the Bronx and Palm Beach County, Florida. I am an African American Methodist preacher's kid from Birmingham, Alabama. Vinnie has two lovely children and a wife, Valerie Nelan. I'm currently unmarried with no children. Vinnie is a Gen Xer. I'm a Millennial. Please enjoy the following conversation.

Rodney Dillard: What made you want to practice law?

Vinnie Nelan: At the time, I was living in New York City. I was working for my cousin, making minimum wage and living in my uncle's basement. I knew I could not continue to live like that. So, I went back to school for my MBA. While there, I studied with people who were in school seeking to earn their MBA and JD. They were smart, hard workers, and they learned something new every day. That is what I wanted; I wanted a mental challenge that would allow me to earn a living. At the time, nothing special, just survival and the pursuit of happiness.

Rodney Dillard: My journey was similar (minus the basement). I was in my last semester of college and working at a news station. One day, I was on set reading Plato's *The Republic* and the weather forecaster looked at me and said, "You need to find something else to do. No one reads books like this around here." Eventually, I recognized he was right. I grew tired of the repetition of working in the news. I also overheard some of the production staff discuss their salaries. After hearing that discussion, I knew I needed to head in a different direction. Ultimately, I chose law, which I knew would be a challenge. I also knew that if I was successful, I would avoid having the kind of salary discussions I overheard the production guys having.

What led you to construction law, in particular?

Vinnie Nelan: I love tangible things; it is probably why I like construction, land use, and zoning litigation. Working in these areas is especially rewarding, because at the end of a project you can actually see and touch the subject matter. There's a different level of

satisfaction to seeing a completed structure and knowing that you had a hand in seeing it through to completion. What about you? What drew you to tort litigation?

Rodney Dillard: My passion is complex tort, catastrophic injury, and wrongful death litigation. I like those areas because there is a duality to the litigation. In some areas of law, if you are a great brief writer or researcher, you have a leg up. However, with tort law, although you certainly must research and write briefs, you also have to tell a great story. Just as with construction, there's a certain "hands on" approach. It starts with the pre-suit investigation. I visit the scene of the accident, interview witnesses, and inspect machinery to determine causation. To be an effective litigator, you have to leave the office and touch grass. I guess we both have an appreciation for the tactile aspect of our work.

Vinnie Nelan: Rodney, let me ask you a question. As a young associate, what are your thoughts on achieving a healthy work/life balance? When I was a younger associate, I had an experience with a partner who impressed the importance of a work/life balance upon me. He was more than 80 years old. His wife had died, and he had children and grandchildren. However, you could tell that he wasn't close to his family. All he had was his work. I promised myself I would never be that way. I always set out to spend time with my wife and children. As I see it, nothing I do at work matters if I do not prioritize family.

Rodney Dillard: That's a good question. I'm not the best at having a work/life balance. That said, when I prioritize taking a few hours out of the week for myself, be it taking a walk, cooking, or spending time with my family, I see a tremendous difference in how I perform at work. Giving your mind a break from work can make a world of difference in your productivity.

How has your past shaped the way you practice law? Has anything in particular helped you become a better trusted advisor?

Vinnie Nelan: Absolutely. In a prior life, I was an equity trader on Wall Street. In that job you had minutes, if not seconds, to make decisions and respond to market conditions. As a lawyer, I use that experience to analyze information and commit to a course of action. Many people are afraid to be decisive, but you have to be willing to be firm and take a position. That experience also helped me to be consistently responsive to communications. Trust me – even if I've just received a message, I'm working on it.

Rodney Dillard: Although I've never been an equity trader, I learned some of those lessons in a different way. As I was growing up, my parents always told me, if you take a person's money, you owe them a quality work product. That always stuck with me. As I entered the workforce, I always wanted to make sure that I was known for being present, reliable, and trustworthy. I wanted people to know that I cared about anything I put my name on and that I would always earn my spot.

How we found common ground in our perceived differences.

Throughout this exercise, Vinnie and I learned that while we share many differences, we also have plenty of common ground. Vinnie's formative years were spent in Florida, while I lived my entire life in Alabama. He was sent to New York by his parents in the hope he would receive a great education where he could learn in a safe

environment. That was not a concern for my parents, because I was raised in a small town where everyone knew one another. Vinnie was raised in an era where cell phones were futuristic devices seen only on *The Jetsons*. While we grew up in two totally different eras with unique challenges, we both became first-generation college graduates, and ultimately the first attorneys in our families. We recognize that everyone has differences, but when we take the time to get to know one another, we all have things in common that can be a catalyst to building a strong team and friendship.