

PUBLICATION

Skipping Through the Years: A Conversation About Changes with Courtney Hollins

Authors: Anna Grace Cole, Courtney Hollins

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It was a sunny and busy day in the middle of May, and I'm sitting across the table from Courtney Hollins at Midtown Cafe. Almost exactly three years ago, I sat down with Courtney at this same restaurant when the two of us went to lunch during my 1L summer. The restaurant is a staple for many Nashville natives, and it remains packed even though it is now tucked away among new high-rise buildings that didn't exist just a few years ago.

Anyone who has lived in Nashville for at least a decade or two will tell you how much it has changed. When I came home for breaks during college, there seemed to be a new building going up each time I turned a corner, and it doesn't show any signs of stopping. As Courtney and I sat waiting for our (delicious) lunch orders to arrive, we discussed the shapeshifting of the city throughout Courtney's career as a real estate attorney. While many people can tell you that the city has undergone a lot of construction and change, there aren't too many who can speak to it quite as well as Courtney. The fact is, she has had a hand in many of the projects people now live and work in each day.

When Courtney graduated from the University of Tennessee College of Law, she started looking for a job that would combine her interests and training in both the finance world and the law. She found an in-house role at a financial institution, and for a number of years she used her finance background while working on real estate and special asset matters. A bit down the line, however, after some changes in the law and wanting a change of course, Courtney started looking for her next opportunity. But she struggled to find exactly what she was looking for. So, after sitting on her patio one evening after reaching out to some firms in town, she sketched out a plan for starting a practice of her own. That evening, she decided she could do it.

During our lunch, I asked Courtney what advice she would give to herself as a first-year associate. She reflected on her first few years of practice in-house and then taking the leap to start from scratch and build a practice that matched her vision for her career. "Don't be afraid," she told me. The fear that comes from taking a major career step – or a career *start* – has impacted attorneys for generations. There is no way to know for sure, but I have a good feeling that the first-day jitters I felt on my first day last August were pretty similar to the feelings Courtney had as she walked up to her newly leased office space on Second Avenue for the inaugural day of Hollins & Associates.

When Courtney couldn't find a firm or group that had the work she was looking for, she decided to go out and create it herself. That way, she could do what she *wanted* to do. She did not force herself to go outside the boundaries she set in terms of her desired type of work, but she did push the boundaries of what it meant to be a female attorney and the options female attorneys had in the 1990s. She wanted a specific financial and real estate practice, so she made up her mind to be the first woman in Nashville to create a firm specifically for that, all on her own. As Courtney remarked, while it is best to think seriously about and analyze potential options, that doesn't mean you have to operate out of fear. You can be intentional and careful about a major decision while not letting your fear get in the way.

When I asked Courtney about how the practice of law looks different today than when she first started, she immediately mentioned the role of technology. She started by telling me a story about her last week of law school. All the students in her class were walked, as a group, to the basement of the law library. They wound their way through the maze of bookshelves and, at a carrel in the very back corner, sat a computer.

"Here is a computer," the administrators said. And that was it. The students were turned around and walked back upstairs. They were permitted to see the computer before graduating and starting their careers, but they were not allowed to *use* it.

It would take a few more years before computers became mainstream in law offices, and a bit longer before things like researching case law online was an option.

"How would you research?" I asked. I have memories of my parents referencing a room in their own offices that was called the law library, so part of me knew that some firms had books on hand for research. But how could you keep up with all the different books? Did Courtney have her own set of books for her solo practice?

"The Vanderbilt Law Library was open to every attorney in town. If I needed to research case law, I'd come down here and use the library," Courtney explained. Fortunately for her, she remarked, her practice largely revolved around statutes and regulations, which could be kept on hand pretty easily.

In all seriousness, I did not touch a physical book in the UT law library once in my three years there. On a few occasions, I found myself wondering how long they'd keep the books around. Would they stay where they are, serving as a reminder of the changes the profession has undergone for future generations, or will the shelves and faded books be removed to make room for a new kind of space? The lawyers who have started practicing over the last decade or so have basically had a computer connected to their hip at all times. I can remember the days when my dad would take a call on his flip phone and respond to emails on his Blackberry. Eventually, he consolidated to the Blackberry for both his calls and emails. Now, our phones can do almost anything.

As Courtney shared, these advancements have both strong positives and strong negatives. When she started her career, her practice was very local. She worked on deals in Nashville with people from Nashville. She would send documents through the mail. "You knew that when you sent documents out, you'd probably have two weeks or so before you'd get anything back." Now, you might hear back from a client in as little as an hour. This flexibility and additional means of communication has shifted Courtney's practice from one that largely involved native Nashvillians and Tennesseans to projects that involve people across the world. Technology has provided people from the other side of the globe the opportunity to invest in projects in Nashville. This has significantly increased the size of deals, in terms of both money and physical space.

Early in her career, Courtney participated in crafting a way for multi-use buildings to be able to build up rather than out, and they've just kept getting taller and more expensive. The growth of Nashville – aided in part by Courtney's work – has put me in my office on the 21st floor in Midtown. Not too long ago, you'd have to get halfway down Broadway before lining up with the first skyscraper.

As we neared the end of our meal, I asked Courtney to tell me about some of her best days practicing law.

"I have been known to literally skip down the hall because someone trusted me to do the work for them," she responded.

Her answer really struck me. Courtney's best days are not necessarily marked by the closing of significant deals or completing major projects. And while I am sure she can reflect on those moments fondly as well, the joy and excitement Courtney feels as she skips down the hall comes from the initial stages of engaging a new

client or project. Her best days are not necessarily marked by the end of something, but by the beginning. "It is the biggest privilege, honor, and responsibility to be trusted by a client," she explained.

Throughout her career, Courtney noted that she had many good friends from multiple industries that wanted to help her build something. In her early years on her own, there was a time when a lawyer who was on the other side of a deal called her after closing and offered to provide her with guidance and advice. It came from a genuine place of wanting to help her grow and be in the best position to expand her practice. All around her, Courtney was able to lean on other members of her community. Fortunately, for myself and others just starting their careers, this still rings true today.

Just like Nashville itself, much has changed in the time between Courtney's first year as an attorney and my own. However, there is one thing that continues to withstand the test of time: community. From my first day as a summer associate, I felt welcomed to the Baker Donelson community. Courtney was encouraged and embraced by the other attorneys across Nashville when she took the leap of faith to go out on her own. Attorneys in her field wanted to mentor and support her.

When starting something new, anyone might be afraid, but it is important to remember to not let fear get in your way. Instead, new opportunities and new challenges can be approached with the joy and excitement of starting something and seeing what could come of it. We could all benefit from a skip down the hall from time to time.