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INSIGHT INTO THE FAST LANE

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Full Steam Ahead

L. Content McLaughlin, McLaughlin Law Group

BY STACEY.A. REBBERT

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Content McLaughlin

For some people, life is a well-planned journey of fulfilling dreams and meeting expectations. For others, it happens fast and furiously. Content McLaughlin falls in the latter group.

She introduces herself and explains that her unusual name, "Content as in happy," was handed down through her family and traces back to her Scottish genealogy. She certainly embodies the spirit of her name with a quick smile, fast exuberant talking, and a brisk pace to her step as she leads the way to her home office for this interview.

McLaughlin is a Maryland native, growing up on the Eastern Shore where she graduated from St. Michael's High School. "I never planned on going to college. Although I did very well in high school – getting the right grades, playing all the right sports – college was never a consideration. School never excited me," she confesses.

After graduation, she worked as a legal secretary, taking a few paralegal courses here and there after some encouragement. "Then I got really bored," she admits. "So I walked into the local armed forces recruiting office and joined the Navy." She was 20 years old.

With family members in the services, the military was not foreign to McLaughlin and she was aware of the required commitment. The recruiting office she entered had representatives from the Navy, Air Force, Army and Marines. Although the visit to the office was on a whim, McLaughlin already had formulated an idea as to which branch she would join. "I wasn't interested in being a Marine, and the Army rep looked really shabby and uninterested," she says embarrassingly. "That left the Air Force and the Navy. These guys presented themselves really well, but it was the Navy that would allow me to choose my assignment after training, so that's where I went."

After finishing boot camp at the Naval Training Center in Orlando, Fla., McLaughlin passed the aggressive testing first in her class and chose cryptology as her Naval assignment. She finished a year at the Naval Technical Training Center, Cory Station, in Pensacola, Fla., and then transferred to the Naval Security Group Activity in Anchorage, Alaska, where she served out the remainder of her commitment.

"I was stationed in Alaska for four years. I was working shift work for the Navy, so I had a lot of extra time on my hands. I took sporadic college courses and worked a part-time job as a paralegal for a sole practitioner in Anchorage."

After completing her obligation, McLaughlin stayed in Alaska another year after meeting and marrying her husband and fellow Naval cryptologist in 1994. She survived a diagnosis of cervical cancer in 1995 and returned to Maryland in 1996 after her husband was stationed at Fort George G. Meade.

"When we got back home, I decided it was time to get my act together about school," she explains. "I enrolled in Anne Arundel Community College and earned my associate's degree in 1998." She continued to work full time as she pursued her bachelor's at the University of Baltimore. "I attended evening classes, working full time as a paralegal. When I received my bachelor's degree, I thought I might as well take the next step and get my law degree."

While working in Alaska, McLaughlin assisted in handling the complex estate of a client who had passed away from lung cancer. The widow "was terrified after her husband died because she had no idea what her financial picture looked like – he had been the provider and took care of managing their money," McLaughlin says, retelling the story. "She was completely in the dark. I walked her through the process, explaining everything through each step and working with her to understand the complex planning that her husband had put into place to make sure she would be financially comfortable for the rest of her life. Months later, she came by to show me the new convertible she bought herself – something she had always wanted but never thought she could ever afford, especially after the loss of her husband. It was inspiring to watch her progress from the devastating loss of her soul mate, the man who had taken care of her and sheltered her from the finances and business issues, as was so typical of her generation, into a confident woman who understood the complex situation surrounding their wealth, how the planning her husband put into place worked, and that she had control, confidence, and the ability to make her own decisions."

- Sailor of the Year, U.S. Navy Naval Security Group, Anchorage, Alaska (1993)
- Naval Security Group Junior Sailor of the Year, U.S. Navy (Worldwide) (1992)
- Junior Sailor of the Year, U.S. Navy Naval Security Group, Anchorage, Alaska (1992)
- Junior Sailor of the Year, U.S. Navy Naval Security Group, Anchorage, Alaska (1991)
- Basic Training Honor Recruit, U.S. Navy, Orlando, Fla. (1990)
- Three Navy Achievement Medals

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Although she had worked in the areas of estate planning, tax and general corporate since she first started as a legal secretary, the experience with that client helped narrow the focus for McLaughlin and provided confirmation that this was the area of law she would continue to focus on. She graduated from the University of Baltimore School of Law and passed the bar, adding her Master of Laws in Taxation from the University of Baltimore Merrick School of Business the following year.

When she graduated with her law degree, McLaughlin became an associate at Tydings & Rosenberg LLP. "I had finished eight years of school, worked full time the entire time and had to figure out what the next goal would be," she says chuckling. "So I decided it was to make partner. I didn't start law school until I was 30 years old, so I felt like I was behind the eight ball when it came to my peers. People my age were senior associates or on their way to making partner, and I was just starting out as a baby associate technically."

Like everything else thus far in McLaughlin's life, she was unconventional in her execution. The typical track to make partner at a law firm is anywhere from eight to 10 years. McLaughlin made it in four.

Tydings & Rosenberg is a mid-sized Baltimore firm and McLaughlin's book of business flourished. After making partner in January 2008, she stayed until Whiteford, Taylor and Preston came calling. She says, "Over the years I had been approached by many firms, but I was with a great firm and wasn't really looking to move my practice; however, when a firm like Whiteford knocks on your door, you have to at least consider it."

McLaughlin left Tydings for Whiteford but within a short time realized that the big firm structure was not the best fit for her or her clients. "There is definitely prestige and security at a big firm," she admits. "There's also a depth of resources that can be of real value to your clients. But there are different pressures, higher overhead, and deciding what's right for you and your customers."

The decision to leave Whiteford became even clearer after McLaughlin gave birth to her son last year. Having discussed and recognized that they waited too long to have children and realizing that they may not be able to have children after her fight with cervical cancer, McLaughlin and her husband were shocked to learn that she was pregnant – at 40.

"My passion is being a lawyer and helping my clients, but your priorities really change with a child. Work-life balance, which had never really been an issue for me, became much more important. I had an amazing son, and I wanted to be an integral part of his life. I'm thankful for a diverse group of female friends and colleagues who had given me insight and perspective over the years. It helped me prepare for going from a D.I.N.K. [Dual Income No Kids] to a new mom over 40," she says with a laugh.

The work-life balance struggle is nothing new for working women who become mothers and is documented as a contributing factor for the stagnate and sometime declining rate of women in the law profession. James Leopold, executive director for NALP – The Association for Legal Career Professionals – explains that a recent study they conducted reveals that many large firms are not viewed as supportive of their female partners and associates after they have children. He speculates that when the emphasis is on billable hours and daily timesheets, everything else becomes secondary.

Accomplishments and Community Involvement

- Named one of 2011 "50 Women of Power & Influence" by MEA Magazine for the Minority Enterprise Executive Council
- Named Maryland's Top 100 Women in 2009 and 2011
- Named a Rising Star by Maryland SuperLawyers in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012
- Named Best Attorney for Minority Owned Businesses by Maryland Washington Minority Contractors Association in 2011
- Named a Business Woman of the Year by Fabulous Moms Women's Small Business Conference in 2011
- Named to SmartCEO's Legal Elite in 2009, 2010 and 2011
- Recipient of the 2009 ATHENA Award by the SBDC at Harford Community College
- Recipient of the H. Mebane Turner Service Award from the University of Baltimore in 2007 and 2008
- Immediate Past Chair of the Women's Committee for the Associated Builders & Contractors, Maryland Chapter; Committee member from 2008 to present
- Immediate Past-President of the Baltimore Regional Chapter of NAWBO (the National Association of Women Business Owners); Board member from 2006 to present
- Advisory board member for the CEO Accelerator Program at Towson University
- Advisory board member for the ACTIVATE program at UMBC
- Member of the Center Club and active in the Government Contracting and Women in Business intra-clubs and member of the Membership Committee
- Immediate Past Chair of the Executive Committee of the Lawyers' Campaign against Hunger
- Board member for Army Alliance
- Board member for Franklin Square Hospital Foundation
- Board member for Giving Spirits Foundation
- Board member for Harford Business Innovation Center
- Board member for Maggie's Light Foundation
- Board member for Spirit of Hope Children's Foundation
- Board member for SARC
- Board member for University of Baltimore Foundation
- Member of Network 2000
- Member of Maryland Golf and Country Club
- Nominating Committee member, Girl Scouts of Central Maryland
- Member of the Planned Giving Committee for the Maryland School for the Blind
- Member of the Planned Giving Committee for Kennedy Krieger, SARC, University of Baltimore, Maggie's Light Foundation

"It's hard to live your life in 6-minute increments (the customary billing method used by professional law firms) when you're juggling family and personal pressures. I know many women who have left large firms after having children to join small firms, become in-house counsel, or become sole practitioners like me," McLaughlin shares. "The reality

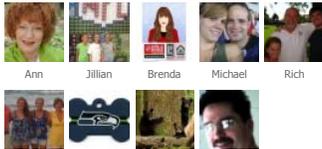
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that I had become a cliché was a little startling as my friends can attest to, particularly since my path has always been a little unusual."

Leaving Whiteford did not come as much as a surprise to the majority of McLaughlin's clients. "I've been very lucky to have amazing clients, most of whom have stayed with me through both moves. When you're dealing with estate planning, estate and trust administration, and small businesses, you develop a relationship and trust with each other. I'm humbled that they've followed me and have been so supportive."

McLaughlin's clients come from an array of industries, including health care, construction, technology, biotechnology, sports, transportation, government and non-profit sectors.

"Many said they expected me to strike out on my own sooner, saying they thought I exhibited the entrepreneurial spirit and were surprised how long I had stayed with bigger firms. My clients recognized that I could provide the same depth of resources through my network of businesses, providers and other sole practitioners. Interestingly, I've also been able to win over new clients who had shied away from me because I was with a big firm. Now that I'm an entrepreneur, they feel that I will be more effective for them as a fellow business owner. I'm now their peer because I'm experiencing the same challenges they are. It was a real game changer for me."

McLaughlin continues, "Starting my own business will allow me to meet the needs of my clients in a different fashion. My typical clients are individuals and small to mid-size business owners, so for most of them the larger firm structure can be a challenge. I can be more creative with things like value billing or flat fee arrangements to make legal services more affordable. I can charge a lower fee with little overhead and still provide solid legal work at a good value."

Not one for looking ahead but always succeeding at and taking the next step, McLaughlin shared that she never hung any of her diplomas. "I graduated with summa cum laude honors with my associate's degree. Not wanting the comparison if I didn't graduate with honors as I continued my education, I waited. Then came my bachelor's, my doctorate, my master's, and although I did graduate from each program with honors I never got around to hanging any and now it doesn't seem that urgent. Although I did finally get them all framed," she admits with a grin. The road less traveled may not come with a map, but for Content McLaughlin it seems to always have a happy ending. I95

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