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Don't let being a lawyer define who you are, be active and get involved in your community

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My advice to young lawyers is not to expect your legal practice to fulfill all of your needs—it usually won't, and you may be unhappy. Volunteer in your community and for your profession, you will find it rewarding, a way to balance your life and a source of support. I have been very fortunate to have many mentors who encouraged me to volunteer for non-profit organizations and who recognized that a balance between work, community and family life is important. I have also had the support of peers—many of whom I met through New England Women in Real Estate—who shared similar experiences.

I did not go to law school with a plan to become a real estate lawyer. I wanted to save the world, as did many of my contemporaries. I had worked summers during college for the New York City Board of Education in the South Bronx and part-time during law school for the Senate Select Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity. I decided that using my legal skills to improve public education was the path I wished to pursue. Unfortunately, it is not always so easy to find the path.

I moved to Boston after my first year of law school to get married and needed a job. I found one as a paralegal at the law firm of Csaplar & Bok because, at the age of 23, I knew what a sale and leaseback financing was (my husband-to-be was studying for his finance exam and I overheard the definition). That was the beginning of my career in real estate.

I completed my law degree at Boston College Law School and was hired as a lawyer by Csaplar & Bok. I was fortunate to have many mentors at that firm (which merged into another firm many years ago), among them Dick Csaplar and John Bok, both now retired. John encouraged me to get involved with various non-profit organizations and recommended me for committees and boards. I was barely 30 years old at the time. I look back now and realize how fortunate I was to have John as a mentor. As a result of his suggestions and encouragement, I served on the board of the Boston Children's Museum for many years (my involvement began on the corporate membership committee long before I had children) and served two terms on the board of Historic New England (then, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities). In both cases, I learned a great deal, made many new friends and felt like I was able to give back to my community. While I love my work as a real estate lawyer, have had great clients and have never been bored, the ability to contribute to non-profit organizations in the community was important for my well-being.

Likewise, the encouragement I received from the firm to be one of the founding members of New England Women In Real Estate has been key to my professional and personal growth. NEWIRE members have helped me find jobs and household help, get transactions accomplished, referred business and hired me, and provided childcare advice. Being involved with NEWIRE in those early years took time and energy away from billable hours but has proven to be an important source of support, both professionally and personally.

I left Csaplar & Bok after 15 years to follow my husband to Hartford. Two of my NEWIRE colleagues helped me get a job at Shawmut Bank (also the subject of a merger), where I spent the last major real estate recession. After Shawmut merged with Fleet, I joined Palmer & Dodge at the encouragement of a former Csaplar & Bok colleague and mentor.

Palmer & Dodge, like Csaplar & Bok, encouraged its lawyers to participate in community activities and perform pro bono legal services. The firm participated in the Power Lunch program sponsored by Boston Partners in Education. A group of us read to elementary school students at a school in East Boston and then in Jamaica Plain once a week at lunch time. We stayed with the same student over a number of years - kindergarten to third grade. It was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my career. Among other favorites, I read Harry Potter to a second grader in East Boston and Charlotte's Web to a third grade girl in Jamaica Plain---drafting a loan agreement does not compare. Palmer & Dodge, like many firms, also had a pro bono program which encouraged lawyers to provide legal services to homeless shelters, food banks and other deserving organizations. Non-profit board service was encouraged, as was participation in bar and other professional activities. While there, I became an active fellow of the American College of Real Estate Lawyers and a panelist on two American Law Institute/American Bar Association continuing legal education programs. These activities introduced me to new friends who in turn, became new mentors and supporters, and in some cases, sources of referrals.

For the past three years, I have been a partner at Krokidas & Bluestein. In many ways, it is the best of all worlds for a real estate lawyer. Maria Krokidas and Dick Bluestein, the name partners and wonderful mentors, have focused on providing legal services to non-profit and quasi-public organizations and governmental agencies, as well as for-profit lenders, developers and owners. The firm is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. It is a woman-owned firm with 22 lawyers ---13 women and 9 men. We have a group of nine transactional lawyers who provide legal services to real estate lenders, owners, including many non-profit institutions and governmental owners, and developers, particularly in the realm of affordable housing, community development projects, and transactions involving New Markets Tax Credits, Historic Tax Credits and Low Income Housing Tax Credits, plus four healthcare lawyers and nine litigators. So, many of the clients are mission driven but the legal work is also complex and intellectually satisfying. The firm encourages community involvement on the part of its lawyers so my service on the boards of the YWCA Boston and the Emerald Necklace Conservancy is supported and encouraged as is my continuing participation in the American College of Real Estate Lawyers and as a panelist for ALI/ABA.

As much as I love my work as a commercial real estate lawyer, it is only part of my life. While I may not be saving the world, I have been fortunate to have been able to give back to my community and my profession with the support of my employers and colleagues. I encourage all young lawyers to consider this path.

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