



BE A CLOWN

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I often surprise people. When I present my seminar “Winding Down Your Practice,” people are often surprised that I emphasize how important it is to do something meaningful in your retirement, something that you enjoy and that makes you feel good about yourself, because you feel what you do provides value in some way. When people call me on the hotline to discuss retirement planning, they are surprised that the first question I ask is what thought they have given to their post-retirement activity. I mention the need for enjoyment, fulfillment and feeling what you do is worthwhile.

Some people already have goals in mind. I’ve talked to aspiring authors, mentors, artists, entrepreneurs, and more. I know they will be ok. It’s those who say they will play golf, travel, read, spend time with the grandchildren, and so forth that I worry about. These are activities that are pleasurable. However, they are rarely significant enough to provide a sufficient sense of identity and self-worth. Lawyers have particularly strong identities while working. Without suitable replacement, post-retirement quickly becomes a depressing state of mind.

Not to lead you to a false assumption, I want to clarify that I am not talking about replacing hour for hour. In retirement you deserve to slow down if you want or need to do so. In fact, I encourage it. Rather, I am talking about engaging in meaningful activity. It’s not about quantity, it’s about quality.

A majority of attorneys have not given this much thought. Some have vaguely thought about needing to find such an activity, but don’t know how to go about it. They assume something will “come up” when the time arrives.

So, last week I was in the hospital cardiac care unit for a scheduled visit. Knowing hospital stays can be very boring – assuming everything goes as planned -- I went with laptop and a briefcase full of work. I was in far better shape and more lively than any other patient on the floor. As a result, I greatly amused the staff and was given latitude to work my regular schedule far into the wee hours each night. On day two, I was both surprised and amused when a woman sporting a white doctor’s coat, with a stethoscope dangling around her neck, entered the room. In

addition to her medical apparel she was wearing a rubber nose, clown makeup and lots of funny stickers. Her ID tag revealed that her name was Dr. Bess Wishes.

I couldn't help but think that she would have a tough time doing her clown act for me. I'm not the easiest audience, after all. Surprisingly, it took only minutes for her to find common ground. And it turned into a wonderful visit. She was a retired lawyer. What are the odds?

She became a lawyer late in life. Her original career out of college was processing claims for an insurance company. Although the pay and benefits were quite good, the work was less than stimulating. She realized that all the people she seemed to work with were lawyers. And so, seven years after graduating college, she decided to go to law school, and start a family. Really? She cracked me up when she told me that she read her law books to entertain the baby during the day and then loved being relieved by her husband so she could go to school for "adult activity."

When she passed the bar, she immediately landed a position with a solo lawyer doing insurance defense work. That was followed by insurance fraud defense work at a midsize firm. When she tried to balance raising three children with practicing litigation, she found out, like so many women attorneys have, that law firms were not friendly for a then-single parent. Part-time tracks weren't offered for litigators, nor were flexible work schedules. Reluctantly, she sacrificed her legal career and returned to a large insurer to do claims work. Although she sacrificed some compensation and the challenging work, the wealth of benefits coupled with flexible hours made it worthwhile.

The rich benefit package and generous 401(k) plan enabled her to save for an early retirement. Spending so many years in a job which was insufficiently challenging encouraged her to think well in advance of what she would do following retirement. She knew it would have to be something she loved and something that enabled her to know she was making a positive impact in the world.

She Googled "volunteer activities Montgomery County." This resulted in hundreds of opportunities she never knew of or thought about. One in particular caught her attention – a non-profit organization known as Bumper "T" Caring Clowns, a volunteer organization dedicated to making a positive difference in the lives of hospitalized patients and their caregivers through humor.

Now you would think that being a funny person is the key ingredient to qualify as a suitable volunteer. But that's not required. They want people who are comfortable speaking to strangers in a hospital setting. Volunteers must be able to

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read the room and know when they are welcome. They must be a good listener. They must be kind.

Dr Bess Wishes, aka Margo Petersen, told me “The magic is offering a distraction from the boredom in the hospital. I also try to entertain and help make staff smile. Smiling is the only contagious thing we want,” she playfully states. “Little tiny gestures make a big difference. Little things can make a person’s day quite a bit better.”

Margo wants you to know that they are always looking for volunteers. To find out more about the organization, check out their Facebook page “Bumper T Caring Clowns” and feel free to email Margo through Facebook messenger. If clowning around isn’t your thing, remember to think about other options in advance of your retirement. It’s best to do that before your spouse begs you to go back to work.

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