



Work Hard and Have a Good Temperament: Advice to Younger Lawyers from Magistrate Judge Karoline Mehalchick

I had the enjoyable opportunity recently to have a conversation with newly appointed Magistrate Judge Karoline Mehalchick of the Middle District of Pennsylvania. After graduating from Tulane University School of Law, Judge Mehalchick began her legal career as a law clerk for the Hon. Trish Corbett of the Court of Common Pleas of Lackawanna County. From there, Judge Mehalchick joined the law firm of Oliver, Price & Rhodes, where she was made a partner in 2008. Judge Mehalchick was appointed to the federal bench on July 15, 2013, to replace Judge Malachy Mannion, who was appointed to the district court.

Judge Mehalchick has been active in bar associations since the beginning of her career. Currently, she is a member of the Federal Bar Association, where she serves as a vice president for the Third Circuit, and is the immediate past president of the Middle District of Pennsylvania Chapter. She is also a member of the Lackawanna Bar Association and the Pennsylvania Bar Association. She co-chairs the Lackawanna Bar Association's Continuing Education Committee and is a secretary for the Pennsylvania Bar Association's Commission on Women in the Profession. From our conversation, it was obvious that Judge Mehalchick believes that her participation in these organizations contributed to her professional success.

Judge Mehalchick had some very good advice for younger lawyers who want to build a lasting, successful practice. She stressed on multiple occasions that the key to building such a career was hard work and having a good, mature temperament. Don't fall into the trap of compensating for lack of experience by being overly aggressive. On a personal level, being a commercial litigation associate with three small children, I found Judge Mehalchick's advice on how to build a successful practice while also prioritizing life outside the job especially applicable. The idea that as a woman, you can do everything, but just not all at the same time, lifted a big, self-imposed weight from my shoulders.

You started out your legal career as a law clerk to Hon. Trish Corbett. How did that experience impact your subsequent legal career?

Judge Corbett is a trial judge in state court. She gave me the opportunity to witness firsthand everything that goes through the trial court. Although my practice at Oliver, Prices & Rhodes was more federal, as a litigator it was invaluable to see what worked and what didn't. Being a clerk gave me the opportunity to see everything that happened in a case: oral arguments on motions to dismiss, the value of settlement conferences, and how to evaluate a case. Probably the biggest advantage of clerking was acquiring the ability to look at a case and see why settlement would be a good outcome in certain cases but not in others. Additionally, Judge Corbett saw many different types of cases, including civil, criminal, and family law cases. I was able to see all aspects of litigation and decide what I wanted to do and what I didn't want to do. I learned early on that I didn't want to do family law, but that I liked being in a courtroom. I went to law school because I knew this was a way to help people solve their problems. The courtroom is great for that.

Would you recommend a clerkship to current law students, even those interested in the transactional side of the law?

Yes. Absolutely. I did a lot of commercial litigation that came to me at the firm, because our transactional attorneys' clients had a problem with a deal going south, or a breach of contract, or I had one or two securities issues. Even if you are interested in transactional work, it is a great opportunity to see a variety of issues, including some issues you may see in a purely transactional career. Also, there are a large number of lawyers who practice in big cities and have niche practices. Attorneys in large firms in Philadelphia or New York who do only land use cases. But if you are in a medium or smaller area, you are going to have a very general practice. I graduated from law school thinking I wanted to practice environmental law. Then I returned to Northeast Pennsylvania, and there are very few people who practice in only one particular area of the law. So a clerkship is a great way to get to know people in the local legal community, get to know a court's practice, and make connections in all areas of the law. It is a great networking opportunity.

Melissa Manning currently serves as treasurer for the FBA Younger Lawyers Division. She assists the YLD with the Membership Committee and the Younger Federal Lawyer Awards. Manning is an associate attorney specializing in commercial litigation at Quarles & Brady LLP in Chicago, where she also is a member of the Chicago Chapter of the FBA. She can be reached at Melissa.Manning@quarles.com.

You are one of the younger judges to be appointed to the federal bench. What steps did you take in your career to position yourself to become a magistrate judge?

I didn't, really. I didn't go to law school thinking this was my end game. It didn't really cross my mind. When I clerked for Judge Corbett, she was a state court judge. State court judges are elected in Pennsylvania, and I never wanted to run for office. The federal bench was an elusive position that I didn't really think of. It was only a year ago when Judge Mannion was elevated to the position of district judge, and I was looking for some sort of change. But if someone is thinking of becoming a judge, the best thing to do is to try to be involved in cases that get you in front of the court to which you want to be appointed. I was very fortunate to have had a lot of trial experience in my private practice. I also got involved in the Federal Bar Association, which gave me the opportunity to meet some of the judges whom I had not had the opportunity to practice before. I think working hard and having a diverse practice helps. I had a number of different cases in many different areas of the law because my firm was a general practice firm. I didn't do any one thing in particular to become a Judge. It is working hard and working well. Earning the respect of the court. You want to be prepared and present well. That doesn't mean winning every case, because no one is going to win every case. But it means doing the best job you possibly can for your client. And performing well. And one of the things that helped me is not to take things personally in front of the court. If you get a ruling against you or opposing counsel is not nice to you, realize it is part of the business and maintain a good temperament.

My next question feeds off what you have already said, and that is, what advice do you have for new lawyers aspiring to become federal judges?

Do a good job for your clients. Work hard. Get involved in bar associations and make yourself known to judges, even if you aren't necessarily in front of them. The one other piece of advice I have is to not burn any bridges. Temperament is very important. Handling things maturely. I see younger lawyers who occasionally take the adversarial aspect of the job to a whole other level. You can still be a great lawyer without going too far.

You were appointed magistrate judge in July 2013. How are you adjusting to your new position?

I'm adjusting well. It is a great job. I have had a grin on my face since the moment I got the phone call. Not that some days aren't hard. The criminal side is new to me, but I'm enjoying it. I still think of my day in tenths of an hour, and it is wonderful not to have to do that. It's very busy, and you have to balance the immediate work with the outstanding motions list. In that way it is not that differ-

ent from private practice. But I'm getting used to it. I have a great staff, and I am also extremely fortunate to have great colleagues on the bench who are always willing to answer any questions, large or small, that I might have.

Have you encountered any challenges in your new position that have surprised you or any parts of your job that were unexpected?

I did not have much experience in criminal law when I came to the bench. Detention is a challenging issue because you are putting someone in jail, and that is a very weighty decision. You are taking someone's liberty away. It is very easy for attorneys and the public to think, "if the person is a bad guy, you put him in jail." But when you are on the bench and you are trying to decide what you should do, it is challenging. It is someone's life and liberty. I knew detention decisions would be a part of this job, but not having been involved in that aspect of the law prior to this, it is very thought provoking.



It was noted in the press release that your former law firm, Oliver Price & Rhodes, published that you are the first woman to serve on the federal bench in Northeastern Pennsylvania. What advice do you have for women lawyers just starting out in their career who are aspiring to become partners at law

firms or judges?

Similar advice as before. Work hard and do your work well. For women in particular, it is important to find a couple of different key people in your life. It is important to have mentors. You don't go solicit them. They fall naturally into your life. It might be a person you are working with on a case or opposing counsel. It is also important to have a sponsor at the firm that will push for you when you can't necessarily push for yourself. This is a relationship that develops organically. A partner you work with a lot or you get along with who knows your work, who will support you to other partners.

Balance is also important. Women can do it all, they just can't do it all at once. Recognize when your kids need to eat McDonald's for a night because you are on trial. Also recognize the times you need to shut your phone off and just be with them. Business success doesn't mean you ignore your personal life. You can do it all. You just need to know when to give 110 percent at work and when to give 110 percent at home. It is also important to have someone you can talk to about these issues. It could be a female colleague, therapist, parent, or another attorney. Having a support system is very important. Many bar associations have women's committees. The Pennsylvania Bar Association has a women's group. This served as a way for me to meet women who became my very close friends. They have been there. Had the same issues.

YLD continued on page 29

District Court Judge,” says Judge Bass. “From our standpoint, since Tulalip has built a court that meets the needs of its people and is nationally recognized, we both want to continue that when we are not here to have that continue, to have a good court system.”

It is Chief Judge Pouley’s conviction that all children should be given the same opportunities as her children were so fortunate to have. She is a long-time advocate for the Indian Child Welfare Act and has been hearing cases about abused and neglected children for more than 10 years. She is a part of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) tribal working group, which advocates for the education and enforcement of the Indian Child Welfare Act. “I feel a responsibility to every child that is a ward of our court to ensure they are safe, healthy, happy, and have every opportunity to succeed. But I am acutely aware that many children, Indian and non-Indian,

age out of the foster care system to become homeless, incarcerated, or sometimes worse.”

Working with the Washington State Supreme Court, Chief Judge Pouley is planning the development of a Tribal-State Consortium to help tribal and county judges work together on problems facing their communities. The consortium had its first meeting at the State Judicial Conference in September 2013. “We are planning for a better future for all our kids, piloting VAWA, planning for juvenile justice, and working with our state courts to give the best services to all our children,” says Chief Judge Pouley. These achievements, she notes with pride, “are our next big steps.” ☉

Endnotes

¹*U.S. v. Washington*, 384 F. Supp. 312 (W.D. Wash. 1974).

YLD continued from page 14

I also noted in an article in *The Times-Tribune* regarding your appointment as magistrate judge, that you have two children. Do you have any advice for women lawyers who are new parents, who are deciding whether they can juggle a legal profession and raising children?

Take a deep breath. You can do it. But there will be some days you will wonder how it will all work. My son is now six and a half. When he was 5 months old, I was heading into court for a trial. The baby hadn’t slept. I felt like crap, and I thought that I just couldn’t do it. The partner second-chairing the case was a good friend of mine, and she assured me that I could. I did—and the trial went well. It just goes to show how important it is to have a good support system—someone to reassure you that you can make it work.

If I had to bullet point my advice, I would say:

- Breathe.
- Have a good support system.
- Have a child care plan, a back-up child care plan, and a second back-up plan. There will be days when it all falls through, and your kids are on a two-hour delay. Those two-hour delays are the bane of a working parent’s existence.
- Know when to stay home. If you worked hard at the beginning, your supervisors will trust that you will get it done after you have kids. If you have to stay home on account of a two-hour delay, they know you will get the work done and it won’t be a regular thing.
- Plan and organize.
- Good luck. It is not easy!
- And lastly, keep a spare suit at the office. I was at a deposition once and opposing counsel said, “You have kids.” I asked how he knew. It was because I had spit-up on the back of my jacket.

You are active in many bar associations, including the Federal Bar Association. Do you feel that being a member of the FBA has aided you in your legal career?

Absolutely. Being a member of the Federal Bar Association gave me the opportunity to meet federal practitioners and judges outside my geographic area. For example, I was at a Federal Bar Association meeting in Arlington last April. I sat next to Magistrate Judge Michael J. Newman at lunch. At that time, I was one of five people being considered for my current position, and my interview was coming up. Magistrate Judge Newman talked to me and told me what his process was like. Now that lunch didn’t get me the job, but it certainly boosted my confidence and helped me get through the interview.

Additionally, you are active in the Lackawanna Bar Association and the Pennsylvania Bar Association. Specifically, you were a past president of the Young Lawyers Division of the Lackawanna Bar Association. Why do you think younger lawyers should get involved in bar associations?

Because they are the best way to meet other young lawyers. You get to know co-counsel or opposing counsel. Networking. There might not be a lot of business passed off at the bar associations, especially if you are in a smaller community where everyone is a general practitioner. But bar associations develop collegiality and civility amongst the bar. And also—lawyers tend to lose sight of this—bar associations encourage public service. The Lackawanna younger lawyers do a lot of public service and outreach. They give back to the community. They host Operation Dear Santa, where Boys and Girls Clubs come and get presents during the holidays. They organize teams for local 5k races. They volunteer to make meals for people at Thanksgiving. Being a lawyer is not all about money and business and networking. It is also about helping and serving your community. ☉