Striking a work/life balance

Leah Gissy, named Young Lawyer of the Year by the Roanoke Bar Association, talks about balancing billable hours with a busy volunteer schedule.

By Michelle Skeen | BRBJ

Southwest Virginia is home to many well-established law firms and experienced lawyers. But the region also has its share of young, eager attorneys who are contributing to the legal community.

Leah Gissy, 31, was this year's recipient of the Roanoke Bar Association's Young Lawyer of the Year award. A 2004 graduate of Washington and Lee's law school, she came to Roanoke immediately after graduation and started practicing at Johnson Ayers & Matthews. In 2006, Gissy moved to LeClair Ryan, where she now plays a role in all of the firm's community service projects.

Gissy talked recently about her involvement in the Roanoke legal community and the challenges of being a young lawyer.

You're heavily involved with the bar association, you have work to do at your firm and you're in charge of a lot of volunteer activities. How do you make time for everything?

There really is no good answer because you do things differently a little bit every day. It's a constant juggling act, but I think it's an important one. I think without a component of service and volunteering in your life, it's kind of empty. I guess I don't have any words of wisdom on that front, but you just have to make it a priority and make the time. Some days it is truly a tightrope balancing act, but you just make something a priority and make the time. It's no different than the ... struggle we all have to balance work life and home life. Work's a priority, home life's a priority, family is a priority -- and so if it's a priority you'll find the time.

How did you come to lead a lot of these volunteer activities?

Shortly after I came to Roanoke, I got involved with the Roanoke Bar Association. I was involved with the bar association before I came to LeClair. We're really blessed to have in the community the group of lawyers that we do. It's a privilege to practice law here and among these people.

When I moved to Roanoke, I didn't know anybody. I didn't have any family here; I kind of came here on my own. My first interface with many people in Roanoke was through my employment, through the practice of law and through the bar association. So literally it was this fantastic group of people that you get to know. They're a whole bunch of strangers, then all of a sudden they're colleagues and you practice with them, and then not long after that it's nice that you can call them friends. Just getting involved in the bar association, which was something that was natural to do, you find out all the great things that they do, and it's easy to want to volunteer for that.

Why do you think it's important for lawyers to get involved in the community?

I think it's important in any field, not just for attorneys, to make an investment in your community. Your community makes an investment in you; it's where you live and it's where you work. Being a lawyer is a service business. You work with people, you're providing services to people, you're helping people. It just seems natural that you would want to invest in the community that you're trying to help and work with and work for professionally.
Like I said, to me, personally, it's kind of empty if you don't.

Do you have a favorite volunteer activity?

I really love working with United Way. I had not previously been involved in the United Way until I came to LeClairRyan. I was asked to run our campaign the first year I arrived. To be perfectly honest, in communities I lived in the past, I didn't have the exposure or the opportunity to work with United Way, and so I got to learn a lot about the organization and what it does ... the added value that they provide not only as an organization but to and through other organizations with their assistance. I would have to say that's my favorite.

I learned so much being our campaign manager, and then in speaking with folks at the United Way, I became a community investment volunteer. It's members of the community that volunteer their time, and they all come together and they review the various programs and organizations that are applying for funding with United Way. That's one of the most fulfilling things I have ever done. It was so important because you know as well as I do there's a lot of organizations, and you try to support things financially, but this was an opportunity to kind of roll up your sleeves and get in there and have an intense experience trying to get to know about these programs and what they do -- how the United Way funding helps them and how the United Way helps them in other ways.

It was a great experience. You do it in groups of people, so I met some amazing people through this process. Not only was it educational and worthwhile, it was an awful lot of fun.

All organizations need financial funding and financial support to continue, but it really is more worthwhile to me to get involved at the ground level, hands-on, and try to help in other ways, too.

What are the hardest things about being one of the younger lawyers at a firm?

It is a challenge to be a young lawyer. You come out of law school and you certainly don't know how to practice law. They've taught you how to learn how to practice law. So it's a continuous evolution and it's a process, and that's the challenging part, is that every day is a little bit different. That's what makes it interesting, that every day is a little bit different. I feel like I learn something new every day.

Professional development is a constant process. I don't think it ever stops. I don't think you can ever stop learning. I don't know if that's a challenge, but it's just kind of the nature of how things are.

You come and you start practicing and in large part rely on your colleagues as a young lawyer, to help you and show you and shape you. They have a significant amount of influence on your professional development. I feel very lucky to be working in this community with the folks that are here, because I can't imagine a better group of role models both personally and professionally.

Any thoughts about the Young Lawyer of the Year award?

We have so many people that give themselves and their time in the bar association just as a group. I think anyone would be eligible for this award. It really is a phenomenal group of people that are constantly doing things in countless ways in the community. Anybody could be eligible for it. It was truly a surprise and truly an amazing honor to have my peers that I think so highly of honor me with this award.