

Excerpts from...

THE GETAWAY

Steve McQueen and Ali MacGraw they're not. Still, hundreds of lawyers have fled from the prospect of a lifetime practicing law, turning instead to teaching, counseling and investment banking.

By Leslie A. Gordon

California Law Business

August 16, 1999

For several years, Andy Coblentz floated among various jobs in the law, never quite convinced he was in the right profession. A 1985 graduate of Hastings College of the law, he had basic legal skills but lacked passion for the law. The profession, he says, was downright unfulfilling. Coblentz spent several unhappy years working for Weil, Gotshal & Manges in New York, the Nature Conservancy in San Francisco and a firm where a family member is a name partner, Coblentz Patch Duffy & Bass, in San Francisco before deciding to leave the profession altogether. Because he enjoyed volunteering at Mission High School in San Francisco while he was practicing law, Coblentz went back to school in 1967 to earn his teaching credential. He now teaches sixth grade in Daly City. "In hindsight, my interests, attitude and values were more suited to teaching than to law," he says. The day-to-day satisfaction he gets as a teacher far outweighs anything he lost by leaving practice, he says.

"At least once a day I make a positive impact on at least one student," says Coblentz, who has received hugs of thanks

from kids on the playground. "You don't get that kind of feedback from a law firm."

Coblentz doesn't miss the law – and teaching science, social studies and English excites him more than practicing ever did. "I still get California Lawyer [magazine], and when I read it, I realize I really made the right decision, he says.

In his new job, Coblentz can flex his creative muscles and work with people in a way he couldn't as a lawyer. "I'm dealing with 30 kids with different personalities," he explains.

Although he took a massive pay cut to become a teacher, Coblentz and his wife, who works at an engineering firm and supported his career change, still make ends meet. "We've made adjustments," he says.

And while some might say Coblentz is overqualified to be a teacher, he's proud of that. "There's an unfair criticism of teachers, that they're inexperienced," he says.

...

Leaving the law doesn't always mean a drop in income. David Higley, vice president of Volpe Brown Whelan & Co., an investment bank in San Francisco, is making "significantly more" money as a banker than he did as a lawyer. A 1994 law school

graduate from the University of Virginia, Higley worked for three years in the corporate securities group at Thelen Marrin Johnson & Bridges (now Thelen Reid & Priest) in San Francisco.

While he's "having a ball" in his new job, Higley admits that leaving law-firm life was one of the hardest decisions he's made. Higley liked Thelen, he says, especially the partner he worked for.

"If I decided to practice law again, that'd be the first call I'd make," he says. "But two to three years out of law school, some people experience diminishing returns."

Specifically, Higley wanted to combine his undergraduate finance degree with his legal skills, and he wanted to work with emerging-growth companies.

"I'd seen transactions from the processing side," he says. "I wanted to be part of the actual deal side."

...

Many attorneys turn to legal recruiting as an alternative occupation. For example, **Delia Swan**, of **Swan Legal Search** in Los Angeles, is a former lawyer, as are the three recruiters who work for her. Her company places attorneys with law firms and corporations.

"I wouldn't hire anyone without a J.D.," **Swan** says about her headhunting staff. "And they have to have practiced for more than two years. They need to have a flavor of law firms. That's the bulk of our business."

A 1990 graduate of the University of Southern California Law School, **Swan** started her legal search firm in 1997 after running her own small transactional law practice in Malibu for six years.

"For me, it has been the perfect, most beautiful situation," **Swan** says. "I'm having a ball."

As a legal recruiter, **Swan** combines her people skills with her legal background. She understands, for example, the complexities of corporations and the goals of attorneys.

"The mom in me comes out," she adds. "I give my candidates a lot of advice. I make money. I'm helping people. It's very positive."

Legal recruiting is perfect for someone with an "entrepreneurial spirit," according to **Swan**. And the flexible schedule allows her to spend time with her children.

"Yesterday morning I went to the Tar Pits with my kids," she says. "But I'll meet with clients at 7 p.m. I work like a dog, including weekends. But I choose to."

Lawyers seeking alternative careers should volunteer or take classes in areas they're interested in, says Alena Hutchinson, a lawyer turned marriage and family counselor. "Then it's easier to leave [the law] – when something's pulling you away, rather than some vague dissatisfaction," says Hutchinson, who works in her practice with lawyers unhappy in their jobs.

A 1981 law school graduate of the University of Texas, Hutchinson had been a business lawyer in Texas for 10 years. She started taking psychology classes at night as a way to meet people when she first moved to the Bay Area. "Before I knew it, I was enrolled in the master's program," she says.

Hutchinson, who specializes in counseling clients in relationship transitions, says she's thrilled with her career change. "I refer to the law as 'when I used to work,'" implying that being a therapist and the benefits of being in business for herself. And Hutchinson's lawyer-clients appreciate that she understands the corporate culture they're in.

Another therapist, Rachelle J. Cantor, specializes in guiding lawyers through career changes. Based in San Francisco, Cantor, who holds a doctorate in psychology, emphasizes that she helps lawyers find not just new jobs, but the *right* jobs.

For example, Cantor helps attorneys maximize job-search strategies, including responding to want ads. She also specializes in self-assessment, asking lawyers what kinds of results are most meaningful to them, what skills they most enjoy using, what kinds of roles (leader, independent contributor) they enjoy most and what rewards motivate their best performance.

"So often I hear from lawyers, 'I gotta get out of law,'" Cantor says. "The notion is, 'Anywhere but here.'"

Cantor points out that the nonlegal grass isn't always greener. Lawyers should first consider related jobs in government, nonprofit and academia, she suggests.

Some of Cantor's clients choose to go completely outside the profession, however. One client became an actor and another started a nonlegal business.

"Opportunities are out there," Cantor explains. "People can be happier."