Why do you practice the kind of law you do?

During this week's Solosez Mixer, participants introduced themselves, mentioning the areas of law each practiced. It seemed that estate planning and elder law were disproportionately represented. And that made me think....

I practiced family law, because, even though it was labor intensive, it had cash flow. I didn't see family law as a loss leader to more lucrative practice areas, which was probably good, because by the time you finished with a family law case, both lawyer and client were sort of worn out from one another. I didn't want long-standing relationships with clients, writing a will for practically free in hopes that I'd probate the estate years down the road. I didn't have to wait years to get paid. I like soap operas, never mind that there are probably only five different story lines. There was an opportunity to try cases, but none of the trials were ever very long. Really, the longest one ever was three days. Were I to pick a practice area all over again, I'd probably pick family law again.

Why do you practice the kind of law that you do, and what drove you to opt for those practice areas?

I think the short answer for me is, I enjoy it and it is what is needed by the folks in my community. To recap, I predominantly do estate planning, probate, some guardianship, small business formation and residential real estate.

Like I said at the mixer, I used to practice in NJ and used to work in a general practice that did a lot of PI (and other) litigation. I personally do not like conflict. It must be the Libra in me, that likes everyone harmonious and in balance. Don't get me wrong, I was good at it, but I used to literally have a bottle of Mylanta in my briefcase and would down it from the bottle when I was in court. Plus, I really didn't like the fact that it was mostly male (no offense guys) and being the young and relatively new attorney and female, it was not fun. Not at all.

When I was in law school at Seton Hall I was in the family law clinic and enjoyed doing that, and did family law in NJ at the firm I was with, but when I moved here, I realized that I had the ability to do what I enjoyed and it's been good so far. I tend to go to my clients which they like and I listen, probably more than I should sometimes and empathize.

It satisfies a need in the area and I enjoy it.

The private joke is I must have something written on my forehead because at the farmer's market or pretty much anywhere, folks seem like they can unload and talk to me. (perhaps the new career should be therapy - haha)

If I had it to do again, I would have liked to do IP law but then again, not being strong in science background, per one of our other members, that might not have worked too well. __

Happy Saturday folks - it's still snowing here BTW.

Tammy A. Heffernan, Vermont

I'll chime in here. I practice IP - patents and trademarks. I got into it purely by chance. When i graduated law school in 1982, jobs were hard to come by. Since i had a computer science degree (luckily through an engineering school rather than a math department), i decided to apply to the patent office. Had my degree been through a math department, i would not have had the requisite courses to work at the PTO. But, I got offered a job on the day that i was scheduled to pick up 100 resumes, mail them out, and go sign up for a secretarial temp job. I figured moving across the country (i was in St. Louis) was better than being a secretary at that point, so i did. Stayed there 2 years then went into private practice.

Happy Saturday.

Ronni S. Jillions, District of Columbia

It's what they taught me to do at the firm where I first worked. Luckily, they kept switching what I was doing as they ran through a bunch of young lawyers who didn't stay long, so I got a fairly well-rounded legal education. Now that I am in a two-man firm in a small town, people who walk in the door expect me to do most anything, and I can usually help them.

Timothy A. Gutknecht, Illinois

When I got out of law school, I worked for a couple of years at a litigation boutique. I did a lot of research and writing on the cases they had me working on, and I enjoyed it. After I left the firm, I worked for Lexis for a year. Then i got an opportunity to draft an appellate brief for another attorney, and I enjoyed that. I find my nationwide legal research and writing practice to be very intellectually stimulating.

Lisa Solomon< New York

I did a dual JD/MPH program to work in health law and did, in fact, work in-house for a hospital. My practice was very heavily regulatory based and I wrote a lot of contracts. There were also all of the random legal questions that arise when running a business. I enjoyed researching them and the variety of work.

Seven years later, when circumstances forced me onto the mommy track I wanted to work on an ad-hoc basis so I started working for my dad's CPA firm clients. They were all small business owners and my skills transferred rather easily into that. In the past few years I have been working part time whilst my kids are in school (when we are not virtual).

I still work with many nonprofits and healthcare clients, in addition to other small for-profit businesses.

My two least favorite classes in law schools were family law and criminal law. I am just not cut out for that and for court work. I am much happier working virtually with my clients, researching, and writing. The only 'court' work I did was administrative law judge hearings for Medicaid appeals and we always lost because the judge (paid for by the state) always agreed with the state's physician that our medical services were not 'medically necessary' no matter how much evidence and testimony we provided. Instead of following the ICD-9-CM, CPT, and HCPCS manuals, the state would cite an unpublished, internal 'policy' about why they didn't following the industry-standards. That turned me off of courtroom work.

Christine J. Kuntz, Pennsylvania

I'm in Estate Planning now, but it wasn't what I expected to practice when I went back to law school as a second career. My JD is specialized in intellectual property (copyright and trademark) and business law. My undergrad is a BA in marketing and advertising.

After I graduated and moved back home to the Seattle area I found I was not on the list of hot hires in IP since I don't have a science degree. (That and my age meant I wasn't in line with new associate hires)

I tread water for a year applying to EVERY law firm in the greater metro area that had IP work. After that year, I started applying for *any* lawyer position and I finally landed an associate position at an auto accident firm. (This firm had major problems!) At 2 years, I quit. I feared my license would be in jeopardy if I didn't. Turns out I was right about that.

Then I got hired as a contract attorney at another auto accident firm. After working for them for two years, they let me know they were not going to continue with my service as they had just hired a WA/CA licensed attorney (I'm not licensed in CA).

So then I worked at yet another auto accident firm in the south end. And....COVID-19 caused a significant drop in new cases, so last in - first laid off.

Fortunately for me, as I was leaving the 2nd firm I took a hard look at what would work for me long term. I didn't want to stay in auto accident cases, and I knew that if I continued in that track there would come a time when I'd have to choose between helping my parents (I live with them) and my job. I contemplated what kind of law I could do as a solo where I could make my own schedule and earn a decent living. I did well in my Wills & Trusts class in law school. I found a training program for Estate Planning - and I bought it the same day I accepted the job at the 3rd firm. I worked for the firm by day & did the training by night / weekend.

Although I had planned to go solo eventually, I had hoped to work at the firm for another year or so to pay off debts, pay for solo equipment , and save for at least 6 months of living expenses.

COVID-19 gave me a kick in the pants, and I'm grateful I'm in a career field where I get to call the shots.

I'll also be handling business Succession Planning for small businesses owners who need Estate Plans. I'm also learning Probate by volunteering to handle the probate for my brother-in-law: his parents both died last year - one in June & the other on New Year's Eve.

AnnMichelle G Hart, Washington

I was an intellectual property lawyer, including two years in Japan, and stayed here after I retired. I went into patent law because I likes working with intelligent clients and I enjoyed staying involved in science.

Before becoming a patent attorney, I was a chemical engineer (BS and MS in chemical engineering) and most of my career was in-house.

Ernest Schaal, Japan

Sorry I missed the mixer. I had a truly general practice for the first 35 years of my career. I was fortunate to have great mentors along the way. Since about the mid teens my practice has concentrated on civil litigation and probate litigation. I just started turning away cases I didn't want, and it has pared down my practice areas. I'm actually just as busy or busier than I have ever been.

Thanks to all my friends and colleagues on this list. It's made a great difference in my professional career.

Marc Matheny, Indiana

I started my working life as a plumber, cleaning drains for my old man, a mechanical contractor. He did Air Conditioning DuctWork and big pipe complexes for the area Oil Refineries and other Industrial projects in the SF Bay Area. So, I learned, at an early age, to weld big pipes and bang tin.

My career was set, as was my education, when college came into my life I went into Mechanical Engineering/Mechanical Systems and Air Conditioning Engineering @ Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. Worked my way through college as a Mechanical/Plumbing Contractor in the Central California Coast. Back in those days, sons of Licensed Contractors (with experience) could obtain a license from the CSLB, on application and the payment of some cash.

School was another matter, I am terrible at math and I liked working more than scholastics. So, I quit after my First year ("flunked," is a better word.)" and went to work as a mechanical works inspector for an engineering outfit with contracts and projects all over the world. I found I liked the travel, ((first jets were beginning to fly all around the world)) the analysis and strategic thinking required of the post. I learned a lot about what it took to build major projects and the labor and effort required to govern the work so I started to think about my scholastic choices -- and new skills, I transferred to the School of Business, with a major in Industrial Relations. Hot Damn!, I was going to be a "Boss!," and not just a lowly union Plumber and part time contractor. So, off to IR I went and found it fascinating.

To my luck, a famed professor, Overmeyer, took a liking to the "brash young plumber" who was just a bit as brassy as the pipes he screwed together or welded. He hired me as his "class assistant" and forced me to learn to type and use the earliest computers in the engineering industry. Score one.

Second score came when I became his clerk in the Arbitrations he was assigned to hear, regarding the construction disputes at the then building Vandenberg Air Base, located just south of San Luis Obispo and Santa Maria in Central California. I worked for him for my remaining years at Cal Poly. He did one other thing that arranged my future. He urged me to go to Law School because I liked working Arbs as much as I did. So off to Hasting Law I went, after my term of service to Dean Overmeyer, with the help of the administrative academics at UC, Berkely, especially one, Dr. Clark Kerr, the then President of UC. He and Overmeyer had served together as the west coast managers for the United States War Labor Board. Clark helped me in so many ways. He and Dr. Overmeyer, helped me get a clerk’s job to take notes in the ILWU negotiations regarding a longshore contract with the Harbor Owners on the West Coast of the United States. Now I was convinced that Law was in my future. So, off to Hastings I went. I passed the California Bar in 1965.

Upon becoming an ((unemployed)) young lawyer I found the law firms thought I was "too senior" in my college years positions and a job was hard to find. Sooo, off to Engineering I went again. This time as a construction project manager for IBM. I was back in construction management for three years. Then I was advised I was being "promoted." To the East Coast. Ahh, no, and I left the company. I was lucky, a bunch of the contractors who did work with IBM, sought me out and hired me for matters dealing with projects, other than IBM, that set me on my way as a working "construction" lawyer. What I am today.

Pardon the length of my story, but it is unusual and I thought at my age, with 5 decades in the Law Biz, I should tell it for posterity.

Thanks for listening to my rantings.

Joseph C. Melino, California

Coming out of law school, I knew that I wanted to do transactional work, and that I wanted climate that was not as hot and humid as Houston, so I went to work in the Business department of a 100 (+/-) lawyer firm in Denver.

A little more than four years later, I was called by a headhunter who was trying to place someone with the Pizza Hut division of PepsiCo, in Wichita, Kansas. Wichita was not terribly appealing, but I liked the idea of working for PepsiCo, especially since PepsiCo was said to move its lawyers around to various divisions every 3 to 6 years—including internationally. I figured I could put up with Wichita for 6 years.

At that time, Pizza Hut's general counsel believed in having "well-rounded" lawyers, so he would change assignments every 3 to 9 months. I started out supporting the Operations, Excess Properties, and Logistics Departments. Three months later, I started supporting Risk Management (including insured litigation), and dropped Operations and Logistics. Within a year after I had started, my focus had shifted to supporting the Real Estate Development department (especially all of the delivery units that Pizza Hut was trying to open at that time). A short time later, PepsiCo "rotated out" one general counsel and brought in someone new—who thought it was crazy to reassign lawyers so often, so I continued doing real estate. About 18 months after that, the guy who had been handling franchise issues was transferred to London, and I became the principal franchise lawyer.

Around this same time, the PepsiCo Law Department got in trouble for transferring so many lawyers so often, so word came down that there would be many fewer transfers—so there I was in Wichita, doing franchise work. I enjoyed the work, but not the locale.

A few years after that, I was interviewing for a job as Franchise Counsel at another company, when Pizza Hut announced it was moving its corporate headquarters to the Dallas area. The general counsel called my wife that night (while I was on a plane) and told her that he knew we wanted to leave Wichita, and he hoped we would stay with the company and move to Dallas with them. I stayed, and made the move to Dallas. Four years later, PepsiCo spun off its restaurant subsidiaries as a separate company. I left Pizza Hut a few years after that, for an opportunity to move to California (where my wife grew up), working for a law firm that was trying to expand its franchise law practice.

I enjoy franchise law. There are not many of us in the country (a few thousand), and it is a pretty collegial group. With a bit of effort, one can become reasonably proficient in the area, and feel like you know what you are doing.

Brian H. Cole, California

I do PI work because I was an insurance adjuster before law school. It made sense.

And, quite frankly, we all know I can't work at a firm - no one would put up with me!

Jonathan Stein, California

Insurance coverage litigation 36 years

Inverse condemnation [suing government entities for damage to property, landslides, floods, etc.] 26 years

Real property litigation 26 years

Intellectual property litigation 10 years

Probate and Trust Litigation 10 years

California and federal courts

Initially, the firms I worked for assigned me business litigation and insurance coverage litigation. Later, I went on my own for a while, taking what I could and working for other lawyers on a case-by-case basis. Then, I joined with my current 2 partners and added inverse condemnation and real property litigation to my repertoire because our small firm had that work.

Later, some business litigation cases had copyright infringement claims.

Ten years ago, a lawyer I had worked with in my early years had an estate planning and trust administration practice. He did not want to do probate and trust litigation and asked me if I could handle a case for him. That led to more and more such work. I have tried to stay away from personal injury law, but I have done some, family law [none], landlord-tenant [some]. If an existing client has a case that falls outside of my practice areas, I might take it on.

Roger M. Rosen, California

I graduated Cumberland School of Law in Birmingham and was hired by a Cumberland grad in Dallas. The firm was planning to use me in real estate and oil and gas right at the wrong time. So, my time with that firm ended. I had a variety of jobs over the next few years, including a stint doing FSLIC receivership work. The last time I was looking for work, I realized I was getting more inquiries from potential clients and eventually turned my attention to going solo. Not something I had ever even considered. Was never mentioned as an option at law school. So, like many new solos, for a while, I practiced "door law", anything that walked in the door. Over time, was getting more and more cases from consumers so I eventually ended up specializing in consumer litigation. I really like it because you can solve a problem for a client. There are also not many attorneys who do what I do and I can't imagine a slow in my area. Consumer litigation is a broad area but I have narrowed it down somewhat so that what I mostly do is sue used car dealers, some FCRA work, credit card defense, and residential landlord tenant cases, tenants only. Never a shortage in any of those cases no matter the economy. Litigation can be stressful but it can be managed and I just really enjoy what I do. I also can't imagine working for a firm.

Might be peculiar to consumer litigation. There are very few consumer litigation firms on the plaintiff side. Most are solos or maybe small firms.

Sharon K. Campbell, Texas

I practice commercial real estate law, in the following areas - transactional (buy, sell, lease), zoning and land development, and condominium and planned community law, mostly formation but also representing associations.

This arose out of no practical monetary decision, but simply personal interest. My dad, from the time I was born, had a side business of buying rental properties and rehabbing them and then keeping them to rent. Our family dinner table conversations were often about properties and tenant issues. So, it was interesting to me. I was a history major in college, and in a lot of ways real estate law scratches the same itch to research, understand details, analyze and come to conclusions (as would most areas of the law, I suppose).

While I was in law school, I attended a lot of zoning hearings about the development of a family property. Also, in law school, I got a summer job with a firm that represented zoning boards and attended a lot of those meetings. I liked the confluence of property rights and regulation. I was very lucky that in my final year of law school the firm I ended up joining was looking for associates, and its sole focus was commercial real estate law, which I already knew I wanted to do, if possible. I was there for nine years and learned a lot. The partners weren't particularly interested in doing condominium documents, so I took that on.

30+ years later, it is still an interesting area of practice to me, so I guess it was the right decision.

Caroline Achey Edwards, Pennsylvania

I graduated law school in 2017 without a job due to a variety of circumstances. I think it was because I was moving back home to a legal community that was fairly tight-knit. Having gone to school out of state, it made it difficult for firms to consider me as an applicant.

While in law school, I had taken all variety of tax classes: federal income, corporate tax, tax policy, etc. As a self-professed political science nerd, I found that tax served as a unique cross-road between the law and politics/policy. So once I moved home I began looking for firms that practiced exclusively in tax. Now the tax community is relatively small, I think. So there weren't many tax jobs to go around. Eventually though, I found a job in public accounting, which is a strange place for a lawyer. I ended up spending ~2 years in the public accounting firms, found that much of the tax work was really more like tax accounting and sprung for a law firm.

At the law firm, I came in green as they come and began learning estate planning. Although my partners were smart, I just never really saw myself in their shoes. For better or for worse, the pandemic came around, the firm furloughed and then laid off a handful of us "newer" attorneys and the rest as they say is history.

For me, I saw the pandemic as an opportunity to pursue a dream of mine, specifically to build a practice in Tax litigations/Resolution, i.e. helping taxpayers resolved their IRS tax problems. This was an area of my tax classes I truly loved back in law school, but never really could find the niche in the firms. The transaction tax practice and estate planning supplement the Tax litigation practice as I continually work to build something.

I apologize for the length, I guess it's all just to say, I am in my practice areas because I am pursuing my dreams and practice areas I am passionate about.

Josh Lowenthal, Indiana

I like numbers, and I like helping people. I thought I would end up doing tax or estate planning, but as 2L year finals rolled around I didn't have a summer job yet. I saw an ad for a paid bankruptcy summer clerk position at a firm, parking included, no previous experience required. I got the job, and I've been doing bankruptcy law ever since. It's a great mix of paperwork, law & motion hearings, and helping people.

After a number of my post-discharge clients were having difficulty finding financial planners to help them, I took a capstone class through UC Irvine's extension on financial planning and added that to my practice. I leave the stocks and bonds picking to the experts, but I like helping out with the more general retirement, college, etc. planning.

Corrine Bielejeski, California

I predominantly practice in real estate, business and estate planning. This is my second career (of 38 years) after running banks as a living. My joke is that I can do anything an ex-banker can do. So long as I stay out of criminal law, I can handle the rest. I am not opposed in any way to criminal law, but my background and training don't apply to that vocation.

I switched to law, not because I disliked being a banker, or running a bank, but because at the time (in the 90s) my reputation as a troubleshooter or fixer had me changing location a lot. In my first five years of marriage we lived in 8 houses. When my wife and I had a son, we were burned out over moving. I also realized that my son's stability in schooling would probably require a boarding school. My wife is a teacher, and would typically lag behind to finish a school term, as my moves were never in the summer.

I went to law school after being president of one local bank, an executive in another and in the holding company. I went to law school here in San Antonio because there was an accredited ABA law school here (St. Mary's University) and I did not have to move. I established a law practice here because I did not have to move. Establishing a law practice would have been easier in Austin as I had better contacts there from being president of a bank there (at 26). Obviously that is no longer true after all these years, but the startup would have been smoother.

Over the years I have migrated from mostly litigation (30+ trials a year) to more of an office practice. When things are humming, I do a lot of transactions in the 5-20 million dollar range and a few in the 100+ million range. The estate planning portion of my practice includes complex estate plans. I have a lot of business people with multiple businesses, whether doctors or hoteliers or entrepreneurs. Many have been with me more than 20 years and I am fortunate in that regard.

While I used to do a lot of family law, including 2 week custody trials, as other opportunities arose this was the first area that I started referring out. Bankruptcy litigation was probably the second. It is not so much that I dislike them (actually I do dislike custody battles due to long term effects on families) but more that I prefer the large transactions. I maintain current information on a broad scope of topics in part because of intellectual curiosity and in part because a broad skill base makes me more effective (to my view).

At my core, I try to make a difference. I spend a lot of time helping other attorneys and have had an active volunteer presence in local special events and fundraising. To some extent, it has limited my economic life, meaning I don't make as much money as I could, but it keeps me happier. Like many, I get more philosophical as I age. To some extent, I have mellowed but opponents in litigation may disagree.

Darrell G. Stewart, Texas

For me, getting to a field of practice that I love was a process of experimentation and adjustment. Before my legal career, I worked at galleries and museums and got a Master's degree in Arts Administration. So, when I entered law school, I already knew I was interested in IP. I worked in commercial litigation at a boutique firm and then at the USPTO on the trademarks side. I loved the subject matter at the USPTO but really missed the counseling piece of my earlier work. As an Examining Attorney at the USPTO, you ethically cannot provide legal advice to trademark applicants or their attorneys. But one of the things I enjoy most is explaining the ins and outs of the law, how we can overcome problems, and setting people at ease. So, I left to found my own firm, and now I have the best of all worlds.

I think trademark law is particularly interesting because, unlike other IP law, it exists to protect both (a) consumers and (b) rights holders. That makes it behave a bit differently. It's also something that evolves parallel to changes in the real-world marketplace, so it's a dynamic field.

The rules are not intuitive, but if you understand them very well there's room for making creative arguments. That said, this is not a field where everything is gray. Sometimes, there are very clear answers. Even on the occasions when you find yourself in gray zones, you can still help your client to understand the risks involved. And you have the satisfaction of helping your clients to protect what for many of them is among their most valuable assets.

I very much have the personality of a specialist. So, I think if I was doing trademark law as an add-on, I would probably find it very frustrating. But since I'm able to focus on the same field of law, day in, day out, I find it really rewarding. That's my 2 cents.

Dana Dickson

Litigation = combat, judo, and verbal finesse (negotiating, etc.), plus trial -- all wrapped up into one fulfilling package. Works for me.

Clayton T. Robertson, California

Late to this party, but a fun thread.

I got into tax essentially by accident. My school (undergrad) was advertising a job at a payroll firm doing tax credits. I had no clue what any of that meant, but the interview went well enough that I got an offer well above what I was making at the time. At that job, it was very heavy on the compliance side of things, but I got my first taste of tax controversy work and fell in love with it. I would also eventually meet my mentor there, a tax attorney who was very well known and respected in our small little niche, and I would model much of my early career after her.

During law school (at night at the same company), I thought I would go into patent law, focused heavily on it with classes, and papers, but the stars never aligned for me to make the jump from tax. Instead, I moved companies a few times becoming increasingly focused on the tax controversy work. Only recently have I branched out onto my own. My expertise is in this field so it makes sense to leverage that, plus, I do enjoy it.

And really, what's not to love? The tax code provides so many opportunities for differing legal arguments, and you get paid to argue with one of the most hated government agencies. Sure, the IRS/Treasury may not agree with you, but they have to at least pretend to listen to you.

Holland King, Georgia

I did undergrad in environmental engineering and worked for a variety of chemical manufacturing plants and environmental consults in internships/coops/part-time positions through college. I ultimately did not find the work matched what I actually wanted to do - have a positive impact on the environment and began to realize since most companies were working around laws, maybe I should be a lawyer. Went to law school with a great environmental program and found a place a firm doing environmental law and litigation - mostly toxic tort defense. Hated it.

A few years in, I get a call from a cousin of mine who is having an issue with her long-term disability insurance company and social security denying her claim. I was (and still am) the only lawyer in the family so as she said, "you were the only one I could ask for help." She had been diagnosed with brain cancer, but her insurance company and SS denied her saying she could do some types of work. Now, this is someone I had known my whole life and she could not remember my name throughout a conversation. So, I dug in. The work I was doing invigorated me and what I found disgusted me. So, I thought to myself...I should do this...to help others...how many others are just like your cousin...with nowhere to turn and their financial life on the line. So, over the year, I started working more cases and building up a business plan. In 2010, I struck out on my own focused on helping the disabled and injured fight. Ten years later, we still here, still fighting for the disabled and injured, have expanded our firms and practice areas.

It started with one call!

Loyd J. Bourgeois, Jr., Louisiana

My dad was a lineman in Alaska, so I grew up in construction and around contractors. A summer job in high school working in the yard at my dad's company convinced both of us that a life in the trades was not my destiny. After I finished undergrad, I worked in radio, worked on some political campaigns and did do some low-level construction and maintenance work, until a guy I'd met in my political work convinced me to take the LSAT and apply to law school. I did, I got accepted, went to school, went back to Alaska afterwards and clerked for an Alaska Court of Appeals judge. While I was doing my clerkship a guy from my law school's career services office was in Anchorage and he introduced me to a fellow alum, and we hit it off. It turned out that he and his partner were looking for an associate and he invited me to come in and interview.

When I showed up for my interview in a suit and tie they told me I'd never fit in there, which of course told me that I'd definitely fit in... It turns out that they were one of only two local firms doing construction law in Anchorage, so we had plenty of work, and I found that I loved it, partly because I enjoyed being around contractors again, and partly because it was an area that not many people practice or even know exists. It's amazing that it's been 25 years since then. And even through a move to the Pacific Northwest and changes from a very small firm to a very large firm and back again, I've continued to enjoy doing construction work and have been really fortunate to have several 20+ year clients stick with me through all the changes.

Jeremy Vermilyea, Washington

I'm one of those estate planning/elder law/business law folks.

When I made my first steps into that area, I thought to myself that I probably would see most of these folks once or twice and then never again. Boy was I wrong! I love this area, because we are truly most client's family lawyer. They come to us with every big event in their lives even with matters that aren't strictly in our wheelhouse. But that's fine with us, as we try to steer them to someone who is better able to assist them and who promises to then direct the client back to us. A few years ago, I started telling estate planning clients that I wanted to see them once every year or two, that I would charge them a $75 check up fee to take a look at their "books" (which they are required to bring with them each visit) and to go through what is going on in their lives, letting them know about any new changes in the laws that might impact them.

So now, I've been practicing in this area for a bit over 20 of my 30 years of practice. I've expanded into trust administration and love that, too. We think of our clients as special people and most of them tell us how special they think we are, because we genuinely care about them - we take time to ask them about themselves and really listen. We're willing to explain their plans to children if they ask us to do so, and we are willing to broach sensitive subjects with them like children with drug alcohol, bi-polar issues, or poor relationship issues to help them determine how to best navigate care and bequest for these family members.

When people visit us to handle a probate matter, they often comment that the estate is a mess (this is NEVER for an estate we've planned, LOL!) and that they don't want to put their own family members through what they are going through. And so many of them become new estate planning clients.

And now, with the onset of all the long-term health issues we are seeing, families are SO happy that we can help with Medicaid planning and VA benefit issues, saving the families sometimes literally hundreds of thousands of dollars! So, we hear from our clients when they acquire a new family member and when they lose a beloved family member. Our clients love us and we love them. True that some days are happier than others here. I am truly not at all fond of adversarial issues, but sometimes we become involved in them. But all in all, I truly love this area of law.

Of course, I also loved both sides of criminal law for the ten years I practiced in that area. And every now and then, we help a family member of a client to resolve a criminal or traffic issue.

But in the area we are now involved, we help with adoptions, name changes, succession planning, prenuptial agreements, uncontested divorces - particularly where the couple wants to remain friends, estate planning for couples who choose not to marry, advise on what and how much insurance to purchase for various aspects of life or business, guardianships, guardian advocacy, special needs planning, living on a fixed income through the remainder of one's life, obtaining caregivers in and out of the home, and so many other little things that are related to one's estate. Most days, I really feel good about having helped others. It seems like at least once a day, someone is thanking me for helping them through a difficult time. I feel like I've made a difference in people's lives. And I love when they tell me that I've helped them to understand so much that they didn't understand before they came in or after seeing another lawyer. And then, the best compliment of all, a client's friend calls to tell us how highly their friend spoke of us and that they were told that I don't "act" like a lawyer, that I "act" more like a good friend explaining things. It is rare that anyone complains about a fee because we do everything we can to keep things reasonable and if they explain difficult circumstances to us, we try to work with them.

So, all in all, I do what I do because I love it. I can't believe how the years have flown by.

Vicki Levy Eskin, Florida

I fell into collections sort of by accident. Sort of, but not really.

I went to law school part time while working at night doing credit card collection management for AT&T Universal Card Services. After the bar exam but before the results were published, I started interviewing. I had 2 or 3 interviews and happened to chat with a friend of mine at UCS who ran the team that handled farming our stuff out to attorneys. I mentioned things were going slow and 20 minutes later the owner of the local firm that did UCS' collections in Jacksonville called me and invited me for an interview. I took the job because I needed money (AT&T let me go rather than let me take time off to take the bar exam). Of course, I couldn't practice law yet, because the results weren't out.

I ended up staying there for a couple of years before I switched to insurance defense for a year. Hated reviewing medical records all day.

After I went out on my own, I started doing wills and trusts and family law. But it was just me, things were slow, so I started covering hearings for the cash. Eventually I started taking a collection case here and there. After a few years of doing family law with no assistant and terrible advertising choices, I knew that it wasn’t for me. By that time, I was firmly ensconced in the collections biz.

I recall telling my con law professor that I had no interest in being a collection attorney. I had designs then on the labor and employment law biz, or maritime law.

Barry Kaufman, Florida