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Amy McFarland, blending family law with family time

When Amy McFarland was 10 years old, her grandfather told her she'd make a fantastic attorney. From that moment on, she thought of nothing else. Graduating from high school early, she attended Illinois State University by the age of 17 and entered University of Denver Law School at age 20.



Years later, she noticed her eight-year-old daughter was sassy, smart and loved to argue – qualities of an attorney in the making. "I called my mother and asked, 'When grandpa said I'd make a great attorney, did he really just mean I was bossy?'" she laughed. "I couldn't believe that my biggest influence on my profession had been a statement made by my grandpa - all in good fun."

Good fun or not, Amy found her calling by specializing in family law. "I wanted to change the tone of what people considered 'family law,'" she explained. "It's not just divorce and custody cases. It's estate planning, minor criminal cases, lawsuits, and real estate. It's addressing the legal needs of families in general."

Keeping it real

Amy started her first practice in 2004. "I gave birth to my daughter on January 7 and started the firm on March 1. Back then, I didn't really have a choice – I was building my career." She built her presence and reputation in the law community by volunteering, shaking a lot of hands and networking, but never lost her sense of self along the way. "It was tough to put myself out there like that but I had to remember that it was necessary but at the same time I had to maintain my authentic self."

Amy ensures that her clients are comfortable, and that they feel they have a steady hand navigating the legal process. "I want my clients to have faith in me, not only because of my knowledge, but because they trust me and that they realize I'm the real deal. To this day, I can honestly say that I'm as myself when I walk into the office as I am when I am at home."

She started Bloomington Legal Services in 2008 in the basement of her home. Colleagues gave her conference room space and assisted her in building the resources she needed. Within six months, she opened the doors of the current office space at 716 E. Empire Street, Suite C. Amanda Willette joined her practice in 2011 serving as her associate and Amy's husband occupies the other half of the building conducting business affairs and property management.

The atmosphere of her law office is as comfortable as she makes her clients feel, with Amy being committed to a small firm philosophy that supplies personalized attention to establish relationships. "Amanda and I work on cases together so if I'm not available she is here to step in. It's important that our clients know that we understand where they are and that we're here to help them." She continued, "People are walking in the door sometimes in the worst emotional shape of their lives. You can't intellectualize everything. You have to meet them where they're at and educate them to make sound decisions in emotional times."

The best part about having her own practice, Amy admits, is the flexibility. "I make my own schedule and can still be a mom and be at my daughter's school parties or be home to care for her if she's sick." The challenges are that she's sometimes a one woman show. "When you have your own practice, you are your human resources department. You are the bookkeeper," she laughs. "You're also the janitor!"





Up and coming

In Amy's experience, she sees female attorneys as a force to be reckoned with. "The number of women in law school is quickly surpassing men – they make up more than 50% of the attendance." The big difference, she says, is that when she started practicing law, women were not mentoring each other like they do now. "The philosophy back then was, 'I have to act like a man and make my way up the ranks and you have to pay your dues, too.' But that's changed and more and more female attorneys are mentoring each other and realizing that with our compassion and organization and skill sets that we bring a lot to the table."

One of those skill sets is being in the know, both intellectually and emotionally. "You have to know who you're working with and who's working against you – from the other attorney to the judge to the laws. But you also have to be able to communicate with your client and have them be able to trust you and be confident in you, because at the end of the day, it's their life and livelihood in your hands."

Her advice to young women embarking on a career path? "Whether it's law or some other career, be yourself. You have to be genuine no matter what path you choose." She says she often has interns come and work with her and she makes sure she instills in them the importance of a good work ethic. "Understand that especially in this day and age, there is no 'get rich quick' scheme. It's a lot of hard work, a lot of time and a lot of learning about not only the laws, but about people as well."

Looking ahead

In the future, Amy hopes to focus more on alternative dispute resolution. She is currently the chair of the 11th Judicial Circuit Mediator's Association and is proud of the developments of the county with regards to putting many legal differences such as small claims, foreclosure, and divorce mediation under the umbrella of alternative dispute resolution. "My goal is to help keep the children out of the process. Historically, the courts were designed to sentence criminals and to settle land disputes. They weren't created to handle the psychological issues that families present in court. Alternative dispute resolution is a way to empower the parents to make decisions that are the best for the children while keeping them out of the system."

In the end, Amy says it all goes back to the theory of balance. "We're all striving for it all the time in our everyday lives. If your job hits a busy time, you have to spend more hours there. Sometimes family has to take precedence as well. That's the glory of what we do in our lives – try not to be too hard on ourselves, give ourselves a little credit for what we do and most of all, maintain that balance that keeps going."

Amy L. McFarland is the senior partner at *Bloomington Legal Services*, located at 716 E. Empire St., Suite C in Bloomington. Services include adoption, divorce, estate planning, family law, mediation and real estate. For more information, visit their website at www.bloomingtonlegal.com or call 309.827.8900.