

## Work in Progress

### Chuck Bookman '95



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### Doris Roach '86



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### Career transitions, like life, are about the journey, not the destination

BY JERI ZEDER | Photographs by David Leeds

**CHUCK BOOKMAN '95** was a public defender, and he loved everything about it: the courtroom, the litigation, the trial preparation. He had even moved to Anchorage, Alaska, for a time to do this work. Granted, he was earning only \$32,000 a year and putting in an average of 60 to 70 hours a week. But for him, being a public defender was a dream come true.

Then, one day, Bookman's dream collided with another.

That was the day his wife gave birth to their first child. At the time, Bookman was preparing for a rape trial, clocking upwards of 90 hours a week. He didn't see his son, he didn't see his wife, and suddenly, his salary seemed inadequate.

And so Chuck Bookman stopped being a public defender.

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**STEPHEN ROSENFELD '92**, on the other hand, began where he wasn't happy — in litigation — and eventually wound up in work he loves. When his mentor, Deborah Marshall '82, suggested he try corporate law and offered him contract work at her then-firm, Cooley Godward in Palo Alto, California, it set him on a course that brought him to where he is today: happily engaged in corporate strategy, as well as law, as senior vice president of legal affairs, general counsel and secretary to the biopharmaceutical company Tercica, Inc.

The experiences of Bookman and Rosenfield, though different as night and day, raise questions many attorneys face: What if your work is dissatisfying — how do you find work that suits you better? Is it inevitable that youthful dreams yield to life's realities? Is it possible to do what you love while doing what you must? What if you must do what you love? Randi Friedman '85, assistant dean and director of career services at the School of Law, says she often hears lawyers at midlife and midcareer voice these issues, if not in so many words. "They're looking for their work to be meaningful in their lives," she says. "They're looking for work that's consistent with their values."

Often that means listening to that still, small voice of their young adulthood, expressing the core of who they are and, on some level, who they always will be. Through job and life changes, and despite the passage of years, lawyers searching for meaningful work often find that core can't be shaken. For them, meaningful work requires returning to that foundation.

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**THAT'S SOMETHING** Clare McGorrian '91 discovered. She wanted to be an advocate for the working class and poor. Right out of college, she worked on a federally funded longitudinal health survey, interviewing elderly people living in East

Boston, then served as a paralegal at Greater Boston Legal Services. McGorrian entered law school thinking she'd be a litigator, and then held a series of litigation jobs after earning her JD. But the kind of litigation she was doing pulled her too far from her inclinations: it attracted generalists; McGorrian yearned to specialize. It emphasized the contest; McGorrian wanted a cause. It rewarded technical competence; McGorrian sought more than skills — she wanted a body of knowledge. “I learned I didn't care for fighting,” she says. “I wanted work that was issues-driven and mission-driven.” McGorrian underwent serious soul searching, career counseling and a stint being unemployed before she put it all together and moved into work that made her happy.

Yet it isn't as simple as getting back to who you really are, either. Things change, even as they stay the same. Lawyers who are fortunate enough to land their dream jobs might one day have the misfortune of being promoted. McGorrian got herself back on track working at Health Law Advocates, a Boston nonprofit promoting health care access for the poor; she worked there for a glorious eight years. But then, she hit her limit. She had outgrown the job. McGorrian was stagnating professionally, and the logical next step was to become executive director, a change that would remove her from the substance she craved and force her to focus on fundraising. It was time to leave. She opened her own law firm last summer, specializing in health law counseling and consulting.

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**MASTERY AND ADVANCEMENT** also brought Christine Alibrandi O'Connor '95 to a crossroads. She worked in legal services in Atlanta, Georgia, for seven years and was promoted to managing attorney of her branch office. It was the right move — at the time. “I did my heart's desire for those seven years,” she says. “I made a living, enjoyed my colleagues, was in court as often as I wanted to be, and practiced in a lot of different areas. When I was ready to get into management, I got to do that.” But, as a manager in a legal services office, Alibrandi O'Connor was also required to maintain a caseload, and she found the combination untenable. It was time for a change.

How lawyers go about making changes depends on their temperaments and personal circumstances. McGorrian took it slowly and methodically (though she also took great risks when she spent time being unemployed). Alibrandi O'Connor, in contrast, set up a test for herself. “How much do I want to leave behind?” she asked when she gave up law practice last year, moved to New England and became executive director of AIDS Response-Seacoast in New Hampshire. The verdict: “I miss the intellectual challenge of law,” she says. “That surprised me. I know I haven't rested in the place that has total job satisfaction for me.”

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**IF MCGORRIAN IS AN INCREMENTALIST** and Alibrandi O'Connor likes to leap, then Doris Roach '86 is Evel Knievel launching across the Snake River Canyon. Faced with a promotion she didn't want at the Fortune 500 company where she was in-house counsel (“It felt like one more hurdle to jump; it didn't feel like a positive thing,” she says), Roach took a self-funded sabbatical exercising, she says, her “right brain.” She became an artist and a drummer, and traveled to far-flung places like Tibet and Peru. When she returned, she switched gears completely and founded Potential Horizons Realized, where she is a consultant, trainer and executive coach. And still, there are challenges. She isn't anywhere near as

financially secure as she was working for a corporation. “I’m working on the financial part of it now,” she says.

Financial considerations, of course, are always a major factor in any career transition. Now, as a sole practitioner, McGorrian says the one thing she would have done differently is saved more money. “The financial stuff is nerve-wracking,” she says. And yet, with all the experiences, skills and wisdom she’s accumulated over the course of her working life, it’s hard to imagine she’s ever been better positioned to take on the financial risk.

Career paths might veer off track, encounter obstacles or peter out altogether, but none are worthless. Even a short stint doing work that looks absurdly uncharacteristic — like public defender Chuck Bookman’s six-month stint at a desk job with John Hancock — can lead to surprising personal insights, honing of transferable skills, new networks of professional contacts and confidence born of experience. For all the shortcomings of litigation, McGorrian needed practice to become an effective health care advocate for the poor. Leaving law for a time helped Alibrandi O’Connor appreciate her need for intellectual challenge. Roach’s employment in the corporate world gave her the financial freedom to carve out a career niche that brought her inner peace.

If these lawyers seem remarkably self-actualized about career transitions, they may be fairly typical Northeastern law graduates, according to Steve Seckler ’88. Seckler is managing director of BCG Attorney Search’s Boston office, and many of his clients have followed predictable career paths: high school to college to law school to large law firm positions, without deviation or intervening breaks. When people like this want to make a change, Seckler says, they don’t even know where to start. “They can’t think of anything else they want to do. They feel stuck,” he says. Northeastern graduates, in contrast, often come to law school with a prior career under their belts. Corporate lawyer Stephen Rosenfield, for example, was a special education teacher after college, and then attended the University of Southern California to study film. When he enrolled at the law school, he was 39. People like Rosenfield — and there are many at Northeastern, though they’re usually younger — have some sense of the job market. The co-op program gives them further experience. “This is the Northeastern difference,” says Seckler. “If you go to law school without taking a break, you don’t have that perspective.” It probably also helps to be a lawyer with nontraditional leanings: you won’t lock yourself into cruise control when the road looks less like a full-speed-ahead superhighway and more like rocky, branching mountain trails.

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**SOMETIMES, ONE DREAM** replaces another. “It took me many, many, many years to stop thinking of myself as a public defender,” says Bookman, who gave up public defense work in search of a better work-life balance. “Eventually, I had to acknowledge that I wasn’t one anymore.” He held a series of positions, one lasting months (the John Hancock desk job), most lasting several years. For a while, Bookman did what he calls “litigation lite” at the Massachusetts Division of Professional Licensure, and found it to be an ideal compromise — a respectable salary and family-friendly hours. “But after a few years,” he says, “what it offered for a career was not sufficient. I wasn’t growing professionally, and the litigation wasn’t intense enough for me.” Bookman next joined the criminal law firm of Bratton & Springer, which has offices in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. It was great

work, and he liked the people. But he had to face the fact that his growth potential was limited there. That's when he decided, after thinking about it for seven years, to open his own firm, where he could build his own practice and control his own schedule.

Why take that risk now, with two children? "I had the realization that, if it didn't work out, I could just get a job," he says simply. "As time goes by, you get more confidence in yourself. The more you're in the business, the more lawyers you know, the more referrals you'll get.

"I turned 41 in April. I've been thinking about this for seven years. Why wait another seven years?" Bookman says. "This is what I really wanted to do after leaving the public defender. I didn't want to be 65 and look back and say, what would have happened if I had tried it?"

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