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## LEAP OF FAITH

BY BILL GLOSE

*Meet six young lawyers who took a deep breath and plunged into solo practice*

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Opening up your own law firm is no simple feat. There are phones to set up, business cards to order, clients to wrangle. It's stressful. Yet all of these lawyers, who have each hung a shingle in recent years, agree that it was the best move they ever made.

### Michael D. LiPuma

Michael LiPuma planned his move for about four months, making sure he had his existing firm's blessing to take certain clients with him. He saved money and figured out where his business would come from, but still got a surprise. "The people I thought would refer me business haven't and people I never thought would have did," LiPuma says. "Almost all of my referrals come from other lawyers [with cases that are] a conflict of interest or a big firm that has a smaller matter they can't handle efficiently."

Perhaps the thing LiPuma enjoys most about running his own office is his morning commute. "When it's 100 degrees out and my friends are going to work in suits," he says, "if I don't have a client meeting or a court date, I can ride my bike to work with my flip flops and shorts on. That's when I really love being out on my own."

"Now, unless I have something in the late afternoon, I tend to get in really early, like 5:30 or 6 in the morning, and work until 4 or 4:30," he says. "If I was in a different office I'd have to stay past 5. Technology helps a lot. I have a laptop computer and a BlackBerry, so my clients can still reach me and I can still reach them after 4:30, but I can do it from home."

So what advice does he offer to others considering the leap? "You have to look at your own personality and decide if it's for you. How do you answer the question of control versus the support that you have in a firm? The excitement of making your own dollar versus the stability of getting a paycheck every week? Also, think where you're going to get business. Really give some thought to that."

### Christy Adams

When Christy Adams started her personal injury firm in 2002, she had just one employee: a secretary. Since then she has added a paralegal, a full-time receptionist and a file clerk and is currently in the process of hiring an associate.

"When you work for yourself, you have to worry about the office element, such as paying employees, bookkeeping, etc.," Adams says. "You have to continually bring in business to make sure your employees are taken care of. There's definitely more stress involved because it's not just practicing law."

Her motivation to go solo came from a desire for more control. "You can decide what cases you take, what you don't take. Instead of just being an employee of a firm where you have

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less say in the outcome or less say in how to handle certain matters, you're running the show."

She points to one client, an injured woman whose recommended surgery was refused by insurance. "She cannot afford to stay out of work, but the insurance company is refusing to pay her claim. Because she's not technically out of work, she's not going to receive workers' comp benefits. ... I took her case, litigated it to fruition, and probably spent about \$5,000 on it. I would not have been able to do that, I think, working for somebody else because [of] the bottom line."

And it worked out well for her client: her medical benefits were reinstated, her surgery was paid for, and while she was out of work during surgery and recovery, workers' comp kicked in.

"Helping her was the right thing to do," she says.

**Joseph Silverstein**

Joseph Silverstein had been doing commercial litigation for 10 years when he was struck with an epiphany: firms require a certain number of billable hours; why not generate that revenue for himself? So he left the large firm he had been with and opened his own shop.

"I left with a pretty nice book of business, which enabled me to get up and running pretty much immediately," he says.

Like Adams, Silverstein loves being able to choose his own clients.

"I represent a fair amount of individuals who, for whatever reason, can't afford a large retainer or the larger-firm billable rates," he says. "I have people who pay me monthly, and when you're at a bigger practice, you're going to have opposition to providing those services. There's a lot of overhead and salaries and so forth.

"Being a solo practitioner, everything is on you," he continues. "Even making copies for large cases, for large briefs, can be a challenge. When I was with my former firm, I would just walk down the hallway and give it to our mailroom. I'd say, 'Put it in the copier, get it all done.' When I moved into my own practice, I had to do all of that myself."

Silverstein offers the following advice to those considering striking out on their own: "Be as organized as possible. Put together a checklist of things you're going to need, and realize that you're not going to be able to cover everything."

**Harper J. Dimmerman**

Harper Dimmerman had been practicing insurance defense for less than a year when he decided to start his own real estate firm. "It was pretty sudden," he says. "I didn't have a ton of experience and I didn't have any real client base, so I knew I had challenges. It was a difficult decision, but it's been working out pretty well."

He signed a short-term lease for office space on Walnut Street in Center City. "At first, I'm sure I looked absurd and ridiculous. I was probably in hyper-speed, analogous to someone like Michael J. Fox in Secret of My Success, trying to do everything. It wasn't effective. But on a daily basis for the first month or two, that was my life."

A series of law clerks and associates helped clear up his schedule, allowing Dimmerman to give cases his full attention. But office management wasn't his only challenge. He had to decide if he wanted to take cases on contingency. He tried it for a while before deciding to go another route.

"Litigation, especially on the plaintiff's side, is an extremely expensive proposition," he says. "I was naïve to think I could do it on a contingency basis. But even cases that are seemingly small can be a financial strain on a new business. [Not doing contingency work] doesn't mean I am any less of a lawyer; it just means that I am more of a pragmatist, more realistic."

**Garen Meguerian**

Garen Meguerian has worked with several firms in 11 years of litigation and trial work: big firms, medium-sized firms, small firms. He always had a soft spot for the smaller shops. So in 2005 he went as small as he could.

“The big difference is you don’t rely on a paycheck,” he says. “Your paycheck is what you bring in, what you happen to find that day. When you’re trying to pay a mortgage and feed your kids, there can be enormous stress. Also, some of your opponents think they can just steamroll you and you won’t have the resources or ability to match their war machine.

“They’re sadly, sadly mistaken.”

When Meguerian can’t dig up something on his own, he calls in lawyers at big firms for help with research or to request part of a brief relevant to his case. And when it’s not in his client’s best interest to staff a case alone, he collaborates with other solos.

“It’s sort of like forming a firm on an as-needed basis,” he says. “I call up one or two of my friends who have a depth of knowledge and experience in that area and say, ‘Hey, let’s team up on this good case I’ve got.’ It benefits everyone.”

Another way Meguerian battles the manpower of large firms is with 24/7 accessibility. “I sometimes get calls at 11 at night, which might bother my wife and kids, but it’s important to be accessible to my client,” he says. “When they realize, ‘Hey, I’ve got a lawyer on call 24 hours a day,’ they realize I take their business and their lives seriously.”

Meguerian also enjoys the freedom from the internal politics of a bigger firm. “That is the most liberating aspect of the job,” he says. “When you free yourself up from all the other nonsense, it’s like you get half your day back.”

**Michael Green**

When Michael Green opened his own practice, he got plenty of referrals from friends. But his breakthrough client, a company that purchases annuity payment streams, arrived through sheer happenstance. “My wife and I were at a birthday party and meaning to leave for an hour when somebody says, ‘Hey, you know this stuff, right? Would you be interested in this kind of work?’ And I said, ‘Sure.’ So I get one client, then I get a bunch of their competitors, and the next thing you know, it’s what keeps my lights on.”

But Green sees clients as more than dollar signs. “It’s more important for me to maintain client relationships and make sure that the client is satisfied than it is to churn the file,” says Green. “If I really build the heck out of a file, I might win the battle and lose the war with the client. They’ll say, ‘You know, Green wasn’t really smart about this. It wasn’t a good business decision and we’re paying him for his judgment.’ I appreciate that much more now.”

Additionally, Green says he’s now a better, smarter litigator. “I’m happier,” he says. “I don’t mind working as much as I did because now I know it’s for me.”

He highly recommends independence to other lawyers. “Give it a shot,” he says. “If it doesn’t work out, you’re still a lawyer; you’ll get another job.”

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**VIEW LAWYER PROFILES:**

- Christy Adams
- Harper J. Dimmerman
- Michael A. Green
- Michael D. LiPuma
- Garen Meguerian
- Joseph B. Silverstein

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