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Embracing New Legal Trends: Taking Risks, Diversifying Skills, Increasing Rewards

When written in Chinese, the word “crisis” is composed of two characters; one represents danger, and the other represents opportunity.

— John F. Kennedy

In a time of economic recession and tightening purse strings, many law firms turned to hiring freezes, salary splintering and department cuts – a typical knee jerk and cost effective strategic reaction during a financial crisis. Let’s be honest. It’s scary. When you are in the midst of any sort of crisis, it is often difficult to see the forest from the trees. It’s only natural to cling to familiar practices and what is believed to be the most stable. Taking a risk to try out something new is not even a thought.

But like any cycle, valleys turn to peaks over time. Law firms with a long-term, visionary approach, more often than not, embrace these dangerous down times as opportunity. They take risks and make investments to diversify their skills in order to meet the needs of the times. It’s risky business, but an overall smart choice.

I joined Lewis Johs Avallone Aviles, LLP, a full service law firm in New York in the spring of 2010 as a newly admitted attorney. Like many new law graduates, I too was impacted by the economic downturn and was looking for a job. Prior to joining Lewis Johs, I studied and worked within a very specialized area as a full time law clerk and a former special education teacher. As I submitted my resume and perused the various legal departments on the firm’s website, I thought to myself, “Why would this well

established defense firm want to take a risk on a newly minted civil rights oriented attorney like me?” I had no training in civil defense work. They did not have a special education department. I had worked with children and parents at administrative impartial hearings and federal appeals. They did not have a family law division. I truly believed my resume would be tossed to the bottom of the pile.

A few weeks later, much to my surprise, I got a phone call from one of the head partners, Fred Johs, asking to set up an interview. A week later, I met with many other partners including Eileen Libutti. Knowing special education law was an unfamiliar area to the firm, it was important for me to describe the procedural and substantive legal significance

of its existence as a civil rights practice. But more importantly, I wanted to impart on the partners how helping families opens the door to developing very close and intimate relationships with them as your clients – something I know Lewis Johs values. In other words, forming a new practice to serve a new kind of clientele allows the firm to cross-market its other services. For example, I assist the Smith family in obtaining educational and therapeutic services for their learning disabled child during the school year. A year later, the Smiths call Lewis Johs to draft their special needs trust or close on their new home or help with a new business venture. It's a matter of taking a risk to embrace an opportunity and watching the entire practice overlap and expand.

Special education law is a new trend in the legal field. It is ever growing and ever evolving. There are not many firms that practice in this area, but the need is ever present.

Children are born each day with different developmental and learning disabilities. In fact, it is becoming a national epidemic. Most families in need come to us during their times of crisis. These children and their families are protected under the federal laws and deserve quality representation at their due process hearings. Our special education practice group assists parents whose children are entitled to services under Section 504 of the American with Disabilities Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). We counsel our clients through the initial evaluation stages and the education system, mediation with their school districts, and, if necessary, due process proceedings and federal appeals in order to secure effective interventions and therapies for their children to make meaningful progress in school and in life.

Lewis Johs understands the need for effective advocacy for parents and children. They believe a sound and dignified

education allows children opportunities to reach their potentials and become productive and creative members of our world. Needless to say, this practice is an investment on many levels. By embracing this new area of law, the firm diversifies its already well established practice by taking care of families in various legal aspects.

Since its inception in June 2010, Eileen and I have assisted well over 30 families – and the list continues to grow. It has become clear that our clients appreciate our individual approach and firm commitment to the welfare of their children. Because of this, they feel more than comfortable allowing us to handle their other legal matters. Not only has this practice proven to be rewarding on many levels, it has allowed the firm to expand its other practices. In essence, the return on investment is not only well worth the risk, it is also personally and professionally rewarding. **P**

