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Lawyer Sails Away From the Corporate Life

Grand Voyage to South Pacific Seas Marks Opening Of Another Door

By Claude Walbert
Daily Journal Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO — From her office on the 19th floor of a high-rise, Dana Schwartz occasionally broke from her legal work and watched the boats glide in and out of San Diego Harbor.

She tracked the vessels as they rounded North Island Naval Station, slipped south past Shelter Island and Ballast Point, and headed out into the Pacific.

Earlier this month, she boarded one of those boats, and she doesn't plan to come back any time soon.

In her wake, she left a plum associate position with Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton.

In hoisting anchor and tacking away from the law, Schwartz is hardly alone. An estimated one-fifth of attorneys abandon the practice — at least for a while — sometime during their careers.

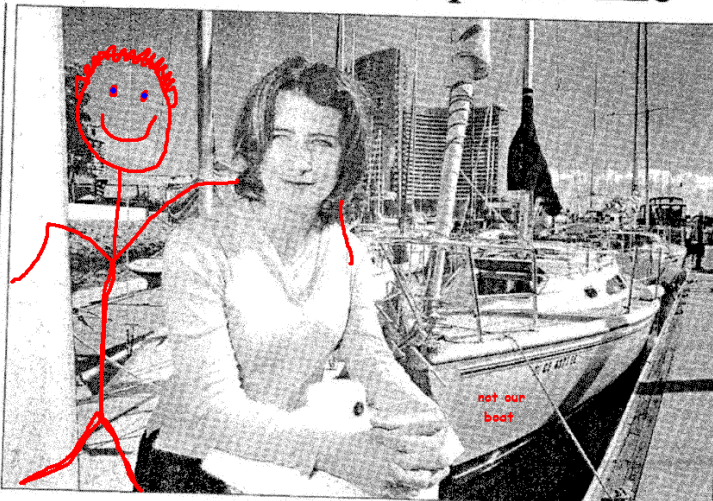
"The lifestyle of a typical law partner is not what I'm looking for," Schwartz said. "So I don't mind taking myself off the partnership track to explore things that will bring more to my life than just sitting in an office 30 more years."

"I really liked what I was doing, but I saw that it could really take over your life."

"I wanted to be spending less time in the office, and I'm sitting up there with this beautiful view of the bay, and the boats and the airplanes and the trains and the cars, and just wishing I could be out there exploring."

Schwartz, 32, joined Sheppard Mullin four years ago and helped negotiate deals for shopping-center developers, office-building owners and other clients.

"She was a star associate here, so we were sorry to see her go," said John D.



Dana Schwartz, above, a former associate at Sheppard Mullin in San Diego, recently set sail with her boyfriend on a trip to the South Pacific. "I really liked what I was doing, but I saw that it could really take over your life," she said.

Collins, administrative partner of Sheppard Mullin's San Diego office before becoming chair of the firm's labor and employment practice group. "But she's doing something that's fun, perhaps more fun than being a lawyer."

Schwartz said she has no regrets and figures other lawyers may feel the same way.

"I'm amazed at how many people would like to do something adventurous," Schwartz said in an interview before sailing away. "This reminds them

that they do have options."

Accompanied by her boyfriend, Schwartz set off down the coast of Mexico in a 35-foot wooden sailboat. The two plan to hug the Central American coast, then head into the Pacific, perhaps going as far as New Zealand.

She'll use an oil lamp to light her way at night, grind her coffee by hand and do without refrigeration. If all goes well, the adventure will last at least a year.

Schwartz's restlessness is not unusual; she's a consultant for attorneys look-

ing for a career change.

The reasons range from rebellion against tedium to dislike of the pressure to bill more hours, Hindi Greenberg said. "Some feel like they're on a treadmill. They're needing to have some time off," said Greenberg, who quit practicing 18 years ago to form a national career advice company. "Lots of people have that desire."

Greenberg, who operates Lawyers in Transition from the Northern California town of Nevada City, said the number of

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Lawyer Embarks on Voyage to the South Pacific

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attorneys who want out could be reflected in sales of her book "The Lawyer's Career Change Handbook," which she said has gone through three printings.

She said that of a sampling of the 14,000 lawyers who have contacted her for advice, 20 percent had left the law altogether, a percentage that has remained "fairly constant" over the years.

Forty percent moved within the legal field, and the remaining 40 percent redefined themselves to their practice, Greenberg said.

Schwartz's trip will take her far away from the pressures of the law but will impose plenty of stress, the likes of which only the high seas can offer.

Is she ready?

She and boatmate Chris Besseneker, an executive with an international health organization before he and Schwartz quit their jobs to prepare for their voyage, think so.

So does La Jolla lawyer David W. Brennan, a friend and seasoned sailor who inspected their vessel and quizzed them about logistics, mental toughness and backup systems.

Schwartz, Brennan said, could fix the boat's engine if it goes down. "I was just astounded," he said.

Schwartz's interest in sailing began when she was a child. Her family lived in Westwood and liked sailing on Santa Monica Bay (with my family).

"I grew up around boats," she said. "I never sailed farther than Catalina, but I made a lot of trips back and forth."

But she was also a serious student and ped put herself through college. She graduated from the University of California, Irvine, with honors. While taking classes, she car-hopped at a drive-in burger joint, hosted in a seafood restaurant and worked as a bank teller.

She went to Hastings College of the Law, where she was associate editor of the Hastings Communications and Entertainment Law Journal. After graduating in 1995, she was admitted to the

California State Bar and became a law clerk for U.S. Magistrate Judge Louisa S. Porter in San Diego.

She then joined Sheppard Mullin, where she met Besseneker.

The encounter happened two years ago at a charity dinner to raise money for groups such as San Diego-based Project Concern International, where Besseneker was an executive. Two Sheppard Mullin partners served on Project Concern's board, and they persuaded Schwartz to attend. She had previously done pro bono work for the group.

Friends introduced Schwartz to Besseneker before the meal began.

"All through dinner I wanted to see him again," she said. After the meal, guests began leaving. Dancing began beneath a giant tent, and Schwartz noticed Besseneker going in. Schwartz said she was hesitant to follow, so she left in her car, but drove only a few feet before stopping.

"I just couldn't drive out that driveway," she said. She left her car and went back to the tent. She peeked through a seam and could see Besseneker, but she couldn't bring herself to go inside alone.

Then fate stepped in. A stranger appeared, asked if she wanted to dance and escorted her inside. But soon she was dancing with Besseneker, who sat with her and talked for hours after the dance ended.

"And that's all she wrote," Schwartz said.

Besseneker had bought a ketch, a two-masted sailboat, two years before they met, Schwartz said. He had begun repairing the 35-year-old vessel and taking Coast Guard classes to learn about sailing. He had no definite plans to put out to sea. But two months after he met Schwartz, things changed.

Besseneker asked if she wanted to sail to the tropics. (briefly)

She hesitated. Then she said to herself, "There's no reason why I can't."

That was a year ago. Despite frowns from her family and friends, she and Besseneker began preparing the boat and themselves. "If I decide to do something, it generally happens," Schwartz said.

"We both quit our jobs in July so we could focus solely on learning about the boat and preparing for this trip," she said. "I had originally considered staying on at Sheppard Mullin on a contract so I could work less but keep working throughout the rest of the year."

"But once we started preparing and I saw how much there was to do and how much there was to learn, I decided I just had to quit cold turkey and really focus on this."

As they prepared for the voyage, the two learned every inch of the boat. They installed modern electronic equipment for emergencies but plan to use centuries-old navigational gear and techniques most of the time. (not quite accurate, but close)

On the Pacific leg of the journey, the two will alternate shifts at the rudder. Whoever's on duty will be lashed to the boat by a harness to prevent being washed overboard.

They plan to stop often to meet the locals and enjoy old friends Besseneker made through his job. Schwartz said she will document their voyage photographically, while Besseneker plans to write a book about his experiences running a Tutsi refugee camp in Tanzania.

They also plan to do some singing with Schwartz on a harmonica she has had since childhood and Besseneker on guitar.

"We don't rule out a remote tropical wedding," Schwartz said.

Skeptics of the adventure eventually became supporters, she said.

Family and friends who thought the couple might scuttle their dream trip dropped those thoughts after the two sold their cars and most of their possessions.

Earlier this month, their backers drove down to Ensenada, where the two ended a test run that went well. The group was on hand to celebrate as the couple set off on the rest of their voyage.

When they return, will Schwartz go back to the practice of law?

"This isn't closing the legal career door," she said. "It's just adding more to my life."

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not really frowns, just concerns

not the same as a plan, people! (there was more to my response)

and Project Concern board member - thanks John

thanks David!

(that was in high school)

not our boat