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News for Associates and Young Lawyers

Big-Firm 'Refugees'

Wallets May Not Be

Greener in Public

Interest Law,

But Some

Attorneys Say

The Pasture Surely Is



Law Department attorneys, from left, Erious Johnson, Kathleen Comfrey, Drake Colley and Scott Shorr have worked for large law firms.

BY THOMAS ADCOCK

FOR THOSE WHO think of big-firm law as life in a gilded cage, it is only natural to ponder flight.

When such ponderers are ready to write new chapters in the story of their professional lives, there are many places to go—the offices of the state attorney general, the district attorneys, and the U.S. attorneys, as well as any number of non-governmental agencies. Lately, they have arrived in significant force at the New York City Law Department.

A baker's dozen of former big-firm lawyers now roost at the Law Department—12 staff attorneys plus the boss himself, Corporation Counsel Michael A. Cardozo, a longtime partner at Proskauer Rose.

Back in the world of leather and mahogany, Mr. Cardozo and his fellow leave-takers are known by some as "refugees," a moniker tinged with equal measures of mockery and envy. And curiosity. Wallets may not be greener

on the other side of private law, but what of the pasture itself?

"I wanted more responsibility, less oversight and less micro-management," said Erious Johnson, who now works in the Law Department's Bronx tort division. "Then there's the quality of life issue. I want to leave work sometimes when it's still light out, and I don't want to give up my weekends."

On the matter of giving up the brisk salary he once earned as a Sullivan & Cromwell associate until last year, Mr. Johnson added, "My priority in going to law school wasn't to make money. Besides, there are many other things I could do besides being a lawyer if I only wanted to get rich."

Sentiments like that are not frequently articulated by associates in the private bar, but they do give rise to another kind of water-cooler talk.

"I'd heard some negative attitudes expressed about government lawyers," said Scott Shorr, a four-year veteran of the Law Department's appeals bureau and also an alumnus of Proskauer, where he was a senior associate some-

times assigned to litigation teams headed by Mr. Cardozo. "It would have been easy to come here thinking that my future colleagues were somehow inferior to those I was leaving. But I quickly realized the legal talent here, and remain consistently impressed."

Mr. Cardozo is not the only "refugee" from the partnership ranks. In January, Peter v.Z. Cobb left Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson as co-managing partner to become president of the Legal Aid Society. And Kathleen Comfrey, who began her career as an associate at Shearman & Sterling in 1977 and became the firm's first woman litigation partner, now works in the Law Department's labor and employment division.

Different Worlds

Mr. Cobb spoke of a fundamental difference between the worlds of private and public sector law.

"When you're a private lawyer, your professional pride comes from your ability to do hard things really well. But you often do this in service of people and

ends that aren't necessarily ends or people with whom you feel a tremendous amount of personal sympathy," he said. "In the public interest sector, people really believe in the ends they're serving. That creates a very different feeling."

The switch from partnership at Shearman to advocacy for a single client, New York City, has enabled Ms. Comfrey to slip out of certain aspects of private practice she looked upon as drudgery.

"When I started out, all that stuff I didn't really enjoy—marketing, chasing clients, billings and collections—was a small part of a partner's or associate's life," said Ms. Comfrey, who joined the Law Department last year. "But given how the practice has changed, it's now a significant part."

Ms. Comfrey had considered entering public service much earlier than she did, but shelved those plans when her husband was diagnosed with cancer and later died. Instead, she stayed on at Shearman to secure a sound financial future for herself and her two

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sons, one of whom has graduated from college.

After eight years with the Law Department, Drake Colley, a Harvard Law School graduate who began his career at Carter, Ledyard & Milburn, is still jazzed by the "public" in public law.

"Every day, you pick up the newspaper and you'll read about a matter where you'll see the name of somebody you know handling the case," said Mr. Colley, who is, incidentally, the jazz saxophonist of his own professional quintet. "It's just personally exciting to be involved in matters that are high-profile."

Complementary Experiences

Mr. Colley said he is "happy" to have worked in both the private and public sectors.

"The experiences are complementary," he said. "And ever since 9/11, law students and associates seem more interested in working for the city and so they ask me questions all the time."

Although she said she never planned to work at a large private firm, Susan Welber wound up at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison with two goals: a "very good practical legal education" and retiring her tuition debt.

Today, she is a staff attorney at the Bronx civil office of Legal Aid, the agency she joined between undergraduate studies at Columbia University and Fordham University School of Law.

"I'd had the Legal Aid experience, and I was impressed with the lawyers there," said Ms. Welber. "That good impression was strengthened in law school, where some of my professors had worked in the civil division of Legal Aid."

Ms. Welber said she joined Paul Weiss after law school for its pro bono opportunities.

"At a big firm, you learn to become a good lawyer under the best of circumstances," she said. "What's different for me now is that we don't have the luxury of time and resources I had at Paul Weiss. But there's the same dedication to meeting our clients' goals."

Mr. Cobb said of his own move as the head of Legal Aid, "This is the job I've been training for my whole life. I know a lot of people in the private sector who envy me for having done this."

But he offered fair warning to lawyers accustomed to bustling secretaries and skyscraper salaries who would consider pitching it all for public interest.

"It's a harder practice life here," said Mr. Cobb. "You're not paid as well and you don't have anywhere near the resources to support your work. I do my own Xeroxing here; I didn't do that at Fried Frank."

"This isn't something you undertake lightly. You have to be really ready," he said. "For me, age 61 is about right."

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