

In-house to Private Practice: Q&A with Sonja McGill

By Brooks Igo – (Feb. 19, 2015) – In an unconventional move, Sonja McGill recently returned to private practice after spending the last four years in corporate legal departments.

McGill joined Plano-based J.C. Penney in 2010 and served as its nationwide first-chair trial defense of labor and employment claims. Most recently, she was associate general counsel at Irving-based H.M.S Holdings.



Sonja McGill

But at the end of last year, she decided to join Dallas-based Bell Nunnally as senior counsel.

In a Q&A with *The Texas Lawbook*, she talks about why she felt Bell Nunnally

was the right fit, what she learned about client development from being on the client-side and a couple of U.S. Supreme Court cases she is keeping a close eye on in 2015.

TLB: Why did you make the move to return to private practice after being inside a corporate legal department?

SM: I belong in the courtroom. I didn't accept the notion of being an actual trial lawyer earlier in my career, but I came into full acceptance of it before moving to J.C. Penney. Having a national practice while I was at J.C. Penney really helped me hone my courtroom style and persona. I thought I would be able to do some of the same going to H.M.S., which I did to expand my expertise beyond labor and employment litigation. It didn't happen, so moving back into private practice was just common sense to me, although I realize most people move in the opposite direction.

Coming back into private practice has also given me the chance to test my "10 Quick Tips" from the other side of the table. I've honestly already

had to remind myself of two or three of my tips in a really short time.

TLB: How did you end up at Bell Nunnally?

SM: I don't have my own book of business yet, but I do have a wide network due to my expansive civic and philanthropic pursuits. I wanted to land at a firm that was willing to make an investment in me and teach me how to build a robust clientele. After a few false starts, Bell Nunnally ended up being that place.

TLB: How has your experience working in-house affected the way you think about your practice?

SM: I hired outside and local counsel with the same general philosophy and style for practicing law as I have: being proactive and resolute when the situation calls for it, but also handling clients with grace, dignity, understanding and empathy. I'm approaching current and prospective clients with the same philosophy. So far, it's working out well.

TLB: What are the major trends or developments in your labor and employment practice that you expect to be addressing with your clients in 2015?

SM: There are at least two issues that will have a significant impact for 2015 and 2016. One is the Supreme Court's decision in *Young v. UPS*, which looks at whether employees who are pregnant will have access to light duty as if they were injured on the job, though they are not considered disabled under the ADA unless they have a pregnancy-induced medical condition. If the Court rules for the plaintiff, that decision will transform light duty policies in a major way.

Second, the Court's decision on recognizing gay marriage nationwide will also have a substantial impact, especially for those businesses which have yet to adopt policies that provide for same-sex benefits in marriages, civil unions, or domestic partnerships.

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