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Nevadan at Work: Lawyer with multiple degrees also uses her psychology degree in everyday life



Attorney Melissa Waite sits in the reception area at Jolley Urga Woodbury & Little law firm, located at 3800 Howard Hughes Pkwy., 16th floor, Monday, Feb. 3, 2014, in Las Vegas. Waite, who went to high school and college in Las Vegas, was named partner at the firm Jan. 1. (Ronda Churchill/Las Vegas Review-Journal)

By **CHRIS SIEROTY**
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As a senior at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Melissa Waite never planned on being a partner at a prestigious local law firm. At the time, Waite was studying and finishing her requirements toward earning a degree in psychology and a minor in economics.

Waite, who didn't know what she wanted to do, briefly considered a medical career before switching to business and law. She earned her master's of business administration at UNLV's Lee School of Business and her law degree from the Boyd School of Law.

She earned her MBA and law degrees at the same time.

"I thought it would give me a good foundation, so that I could go work for a variety of businesses in a variety of different executive capacities," Waite said. "My second year at law school, I started working at Jolley Urga Woodbury & Little and it changed my whole perspective."

Waite's been with one of the few Las Vegas-born law firms since 2006. In January, the 32-year-old lawyer was named partner at the firm.

Waite continues to practice in real estate law, gaming law and privilege licensing. She also handles medical marijuana establishment licensing cases for the firm. Waite said marijuana licenses are challenging because regulations remain in flux.

Waite expects final regulations by April. She said it will take some of the local jurisdictions "a little longer to get on board" with having medical marijuana businesses in their communities.

"I'm optimistic and hopeful that once they take the time to really examine it, the revenue it can produce, the additional business filling up vacant locations in their jurisdictions ... they'll start inviting these businesses in and be a little more accommodating," Waite said.

Waite said Clark County is acting aggressively to make itself attractive as a site for medical marijuana dispensaries to set up shop.

"It is possible all these licenses will end up in Clark County," Waite said. "Here in Southern Nevada, we are going to have 40 licenses, so it would be helpful to patients if we could spread them throughout the entire jurisdiction."

Question: Is your specialty real estate law?

Answer: I would say real estate is my main focus. Another major portion of my practice is privilege licensing. I do quite a bit of liquor, gaming and business licensing and now we are also beginning to do transportation licensing and marijuana establishment licensing.

Question: Where are we in terms of licensing marijuana dispensaries in Southern Nevada? And is business good?

Answer: Right now we are talking with potential licensees regarding the content of their application, the location of their premises, what their business is going to look like and what the requirements under the statute will be. It is a challenge because right now our regulations have not been finalized. We are looking forward to having that done on or before April 4. It seems like despite reports to the contrary we are on track to meet that deadline. So once we get those in place we will really be (busy) finalizing contracts and these applications.

Question: How long does it take to complete a report?

Answer: Clients that are coming to me today are feeling a little behind the eight ball. These applications are very detailed and anywhere from 500 to 800 pages. That includes a lot of documentation from their qualifications, payments to the state, financial terms and financial history. It really depends on the number investors. The more investors you have, the more information that is required and the more complex the application becomes.

Question: Do you find this an effective way to license marijuana businesses?

Answer: I'll be honest, when we initially heard that the legislation was passing last year in June we were all a little bit skeptical. ... But as soon as we saw what the ultimate product from our Legislature was, the

way they wanted to regulate it and once we saw the first draft of the regulations ... it became clear that they are really going to treat this as a privilege license with standards very similar to what our current gaming licensees are held to. They are going to really attempt to do a good job in having the state regulate it, almost like a pharmacy. ... It is going to be very highly regulated.

Question: What is your role in representing business or individuals seeking a gaming license in Nevada?

Answer: We represent gaming licensees from start until finish in the entire process. One of the partners here, Bill Urga, is a former commissioner with the Nevada Gaming Commission for six years. So training under him and learning his expertise in dealing applicants has just been fantastic for me.

Question: Is gaming licensing a growing business again?

Answer: We've seen a big swing up in the online gaming, everything from credit card processors to the companies that are now going forward and actually offering the online game. So we actually saw a nice swing in that market although the firm has always had a strong regulatory practice.

Question: What is the state of the legal industry in Las Vegas? Has it fully recovered from the recession?

Answer: I think we are recovering. I wouldn't say we are anywhere near recovered, but I've definitely noticed an uptick in business and the change in the type of matters we are getting and the complexity of the matters we are getting, so I think that's a good thing. It's very different from when I started. I've only been licensed for six years I've been with the firm for eight years and I've been able to see a change in how things have gone. It was kind of at a high when I started then we dipped and now we are on our way back up again.

Question: Can you describe those changes?

Answer: Absolutely, it's the type of matters we are seeing and the complexity of the matters we are seeing. For a long time, the daily lawsuits that were filed were majority slip and falls, foreclosures, lender litigation, (homeowners association) litigation. We are starting to see some more complex business litigation, because for a while I think people were hesitant to spend the time and the money to invest in those types of matters. From a real estate perspective, we are definitely seeing more transactions, larger transactions and I think the real estate market is changing as well.

Question: You have a degree in psychology and a minor in economics. What attracted you to a legal career?

Answer: I left undergraduate (studies) and I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do with my career. I thought about medicine. I decided it wasn't for me. I thought about law, but I wasn't quite sure. So I hedged my bets coming out of undergrad — I decided to do my MBA at the same time I went to law school. I thought it would give me a good foundation so that I could go work for a variety of businesses in a variety of different executive capacities. My second year at law school I started at Jolley Urga and it changed my whole perspective.

Question: As a second-year law student working at Jolley Urga, what were your responsibilities?

Answer: I started out as a summer clerk. I was hired for three months to participate in a little bit of everything at the firm ... research, memo writing and sitting in on depositions or court hearings just to get

me exposed to the law. My first three months went very well so I decided to stay when they asked me to and work part time during the next few years of school. I just really found a good fit.

Question: You are a lawyer with an MBA and a degree in psychology and economics. How important is a psychology degree to successful lawyering?

Answer: The psychology degree works in every aspect of my life. It works with my children, works with my husband. It works with my employees and works with my employer and my clients. So I feel have a little bit of a unique perspective. I'm definitely able to use that to my advantage to create a positive functional working relationships across the board.

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