

PUBLICATION

Common Ground: Holidays and Saying Goodbye to 2020

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As a second-year associate in Baker Donelson's New Litigator Group (in the middle of a pandemic), I don't often get the opportunity to have conversations with shareholders in different offices that don't center around a current assignment or case. With Baker Donelson's diversity sponsorship program, however, that has thankfully changed. Rusty Gray, an advocacy shareholder and the office managing shareholder of the Chattanooga office, is my sponsor, and our monthly calls to discuss career development have already evolved into in-depth discussions about things we have in common (like a love for music festivals). Recently, I asked him several questions about his holidays and putting a final bow on 2020.

Xeris: How did preparing for the holidays change this past holiday season?

Rusty: Our traditions were pretty much turned on their heads. We worked to come up with alternatives to our typical indoor gatherings for both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Our plan involved changing where we usually gather to places with large porches, decks or patios. Also, some gatherings were virtual. Nevertheless, we remained in good spirits and enjoyed our time together.

Xeris: Luckily for me, my family is small, so things didn't change too much. I drove home to Houston so my dog, Alfie, could spend Christmas with my family too. I did finally buy some Christmas decorations of my own this year though. I finally caved after years of hating them and bought a fake Christmas tree. Alfie only knocked it over twice!

Xeris: What is your favorite Christmas tradition?

Rusty: I absolutely love our extended family breakfast on Christmas morning. It starts with mimosas and screwdrivers while getting a wide variety of breakfast foods ready. Breakfast is my favorite meal anyway, and this one is on another level. We eat, drink, laugh and enjoy each other's company. The afternoon following that is a little painful, but worth it.

Xeris: My family has a tradition of re-watching one of our favorite movie series when I am home. It's usually a fight between the *Bourne* movies, *Lord of the Rings*, or *The Godfather*. I made them an offer they couldn't refuse last month, and we watched *The Godfather*.

Xeris: What was the number one thing on your Christmas list?

Rusty: I just want to go somewhere. I could go for a beach (even if cold) or some mountains. I want to be outside and relax in the great outdoors.

Xeris: I have been wanting a record player for a while now, and I finally got one. My family gave me a few classic albums too!

Xeris: What is something you were grateful for last year?

Rusty: For years, my wife wanted a swimming pool. I resisted it. Somehow, she talked me into it during 2019. Thank God that she did. Our pool area has been our family gathering area during the entire pandemic. It has fostered some great family time. Our hot tub, which is part of the pool area, has also become a go-to spot to decompress. I typically get home from work each evening now and sit in the hot tub for about 30 minutes while enjoying a glass of wine and catching up with my wife. It is great quality time and a great way to relieve the pressures of the day.

Xeris: I am grateful that my friends were already accustomed to long distance friendships. I have lived in three states in the past ten years, so most of my close friends are scattered in various places and visiting is nearly impossible. We keep up mainly through text messages at all hours and calls at odd times while running errands.

Xeris: If you could go back in time and tell your December 2019 self something, what would you say? Alternatively, what would your December 2019 self find most surprising about this past year?

Rusty: I have been amazed that so many businesses, including our Firm, have been able to continue providing customers and clients with great service with an almost entirely virtual workforce. The resilience and adaptability have been incredible. If you had told me that going into 2020, I would not have believed it. Of course, some sectors, such as the in-person hospitality sector, have experienced greater challenges to overcome. Even with restaurants, however, I have been amazed by the quick pivot to and success of take-out services.

Xeris: It's amazing to see the innovation and progress that was made in the past year with many people working from home. If I told my 2019 self that I would be trying my first case by myself by videoconference while at home within a few short months, I would never have believed it. I would find it impossible to believe if I were to also tell her that I'd be wearing my Texans sweatpants (out of sight of the webcam, of course) for good luck because I was trying a case for my Houston-based client.

Xeris: Finally, any final words for 2020?

Rusty: As the old saying goes, "Let no crisis go to waste." We do not need to waste this one, and I don't think we will. Last year will reshape how we work and live for the rest of our lives. It sped up the process of eliminating things that needed to be eliminated and adding things that needed to be added. Let's carefully consider the best of what we have learned from 2020 and use it to improve the quality of lives going forward. Let's cash in on things such as spending less time commuting and sitting in traffic, spending less time engaging in lengthy and expensive travel for brief meetings that can be held virtually, spending more time outdoors, using remote work and schooling at least in part and at times to increase efficiencies, and traveling more for pleasure even if working remotely for part of the time. Let's use the lessons from 2020 to live better.

Xeris: I think you summed this up perfectly. As happy as I am to be saying goodbye to 2020, we need to learn from last year both personally and together as a society. You had a great quote for me for our first virtual meeting: Be careful what you get good at. I am taking that quote into 2021 as a reminder to focus on the things that matter.

My conversations with Rusty highlight some of our similarities and some of our differences. But I am encouraged that despite our differences, we can find and have found common ground that will undoubtedly strengthen our relationship and Rusty's ability, as my sponsor, to help me identify and take action to reach my career goals. I encourage others to do the same.