

# PUBLICATION

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## Tips for Building a Legacy, Ten Minutes at a Time

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*By Jackie Prester*

I have a confession to make. During my 28 years of practicing law, I never intentionally thought about "building a legacy." For me, the type of people who build legacies are trailblazers who endure great hardship and make ultimate sacrifices for our mutual benefit. People I admire, but who are not quite real. For example, just outside the front door of the Baker Donelson Memphis office is a historical marker for Marion Scudder Griffin, the first woman attorney in the State of Tennessee. Although qualified, she was refused a Tennessee law license for seven years solely because she was a woman, before finally being admitted. If I'm honest with myself, I'm pretty sure I'd have found something else to do before I spent seven years (7 years!) being denied the right to practice law. In hindsight, I suppose we all build a legacy, whether intentional or not, simply by showing up to work each day. The important point is that with some planning, we can pass on to future generations the benefit of our work, even for those of us who may not be quite as driven as Marion Scudder Griffin.

The historical marker for Ms. Griffin was placed just outside of the Baker Donelson Memphis office in 2001. At the dedication ceremony, Judge Julia Gibbons, the first female trial judge in the State of Tennessee who has built an incredible legacy herself, spent a minute or two honoring Ms. Griffin. She then spent the next several minutes talking to us about our obligation to the legal profession in the present day, urging us not to rest on the accomplishments of those who came before us, but rather to forge a new path where women could be successful without having to adapt to the rigidity of the traditional legal system. Her view was that women should change the profession, rather than the profession forcing women to change to fit into the system. I was an associate at the time I heard Judge Gibbons speak, and while she never used the phrase "building a legacy," it was clear that was exactly what she expected of us. Her words stuck with me throughout my career and helped motivate me during times when self-doubt and exhaustion otherwise threatened to overrule my day. It is never too early or too late to think about the legacy you are creating. Here are some tips to get started:

1. **Have a plan.** At least once a year, take ten minutes (set a timer if you'd like) and make a plan for your legacy. It is so easy to get caught up in the day-to-day noise of our lives that we forget to take a moment to think about the big picture. Remind yourself why you are pursuing this career, what you are willing to do to be your best self, and why it is important to set a good example for those around you. Put those thoughts in writing, including three actions you will commit to take, to execute your plan. As a corollary to this point, be realistic about what you are prepared to accomplish, and give yourself some grace. Just because someone else has figured out how to fit 48 hours of practicing law into a 24-hour day AND make homemade sweets for their children's class party doesn't mean you are a failure because you can't do the same. Bonus tip: most kids prefer store-bought sweets anyway.
2. **Show up.** This tip may sound simple, but can be tough to execute. There are days when simply getting to work and surviving the day is all you can manage. That's okay. Building a legacy isn't something that happens overnight. Rather, it is a long game, and sometimes the most important step is not to give up. Showing up also means being open to opportunities. I can point to a number of times in my professional career where I had a choice whether to take a risk or to take on another

responsibility. Simply saying "yes" (and ignoring the accompanying fear and self-doubt) opened doors that led to a much more successful and rewarding career.

3. **Share the news.** I've always found it ironic that while attorneys are experts on touting the merits of their clients' cases or transactions to others, we tend to be the worst at touting our own accomplishments (and we sometimes mock those who are experts at self-promotion). Building a legacy is not about bragging. Rather, it is making sure those around you understand how you get through both the highs and lows of your career. Have you ever looked at someone else and wondered how they just seem to have figured out how to juggle their personal and professional lives effortlessly and managed to meet their billable hour requirements without working very hard? The truth is that no one has a free ride. We each have our own struggles and successes. Building a legacy means both celebrating successes and being honest about challenges to inspire others, and that only happens if we are willing to communicate.
4. **Pass the torch.** The word "legacy" is defined as a gift. The only way to effectively build a legacy is for our actions to have an impact on others. Building a legacy may start with a plan for our own careers, but the magic happens when others receive the gift of our experience that they then use to create their own legacies. A key to passing along the gift is to trust those future generations with the privilege and responsibility to begin building their own legacies, by serving as mentors, coaches, and cheerleaders for those who look up to us.

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