

# PUBLICATION

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## How To Build a Legacy by Asking, "What's Next?"

Issue 1, 2025

*By Desi Franklin*

**When I was asked to write about my legacy, my first reaction was, am I old enough for that? But then I thought about the hip replacement I had last year. I've been going through old files and boxes lately, finding things causing me to ponder – who was I when I was young? What drove me to become who I am? What motivated me to make various life decisions? So clearly, I've been thinking about my legacy. I just hadn't put a label on it.**

Google tells us that a legacy is the story of your values, accomplishments, and actions; how you made a difference in the world, and the most important roles you played in life. After a lot of noodling, and conditioned upon and subject to amendment upon further review, I hope to leave a legacy of: (a) striving to live with integrity and courage; (b) being a lifelong learner; (c) working hard and being a leader in trying to achieve the best results for whatever I'm involved with; (d) investing my time and energy to improve any community I'm a part of; and, last but not least, (e) being the best mother and friend I can be.

I hope my story demonstrates that, even if you're not a strategic planner from birth, with luck and work and some guiding principles, you can build a legacy you're proud of. I was never a person with a five-year plan. I was more like a blind pig searching for acorns. Because I worked through college and took a few fruitless detours along the way, it took me six years to graduate. I worried that I would be 28 when I graduated from law school; so old!

My law school cohort was the second wave of women lawyers in Memphis, Tennessee following the first few pioneers who infiltrated law firms in the 1970s and became partners in the 1980s. I began practicing law in 1985 at one of Memphis's best firms that, unfortunately, no longer exists. I'd always dreamed of being a civil rights lawyer, but they offered me a job in the corporate area. Which, it turns out, was a great fit. It was the first of many lessons in, "you never know," so be open to an unexpected opportunity.

After a couple of years of 12-hour days and all-nighters, I thought, with all due credit to Peggy Lee, is that all there is? I wondered why you couldn't be a great lawyer and also have a fulfilling life outside of work.

I recently found a yellowed clipping in a file, a chart from the Wall Street Journal from 1988 titled "Menu of Child-Care Benefits," listing data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics about the prevalence of employer-provided childcare benefits and "work-schedule assistance." I had sent this to several male partners I worked with. One responded, "Hell, no. I want you here when I want you here!" My mentor's reaction was, "Desi, if you want to have a baby, you can have a baby." As you might imagine, this infuriated me. I called Hillary Rodham (aka Hillary Clinton) around that time. She worked at the Rose Law Firm in Little Rock, Arkansas, and was chair of the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession, and she actually answered her phone. She pointed me to several good resources addressing alternative work arrangements. Sadly, nothing came of my efforts to challenge the status quo.

In 1990, I wanted to broaden my skillset, so I left to go to work at a second great law firm in Memphis. I remember thinking that it was scary to trade the known for the unknown but that, if I didn't, I would always wonder, "What if?"

The next year, I got married to my second husband and had my son in 1992. Without a doubt, raising him was the best, most fulfilling thing I ever did. He is 33 now, doing great at work, with a bright future, is married to a smart, fabulous woman, has an adorable little genius of a daughter, and I'm super proud of him. Lucky for him, he's always been surrounded by strong women.

I soon learned that it was not in my best interest to request any work/life accommodations. So, in December 1992, I didn't hesitate when I was given the opportunity to work at Baker Donelson as a part-time non-partnership track corporate associate, with 80 percent of the salary of a full-time associate, full benefits, Mondays off generally, and time off to compensate for times when I had to work overtime on transactions. The job I left had turned out to be a disappointment, but I had learned a lot, and it was a doorway to this great opportunity so, it was not wasted time.

**This was a Big [bleeping] Deal!** Not only for me but for the community of Memphis women attorneys. I had the opportunity to work on large complex transactions for the Firm's biggest clients, and I felt valued. Yet, I had time for more than work in my life. I was a unicorn, a very grateful one. This morphed over time into my becoming the first part-time attorney to make nonequity partner at the Firm and later to be an equity partner. I am pleased to learn that others have followed this path in the years since, building on and improving the alternative work arrangement that allowed me to launch my career in earnest.

In 2010, feeling called to do "soul-filling work" in my 50s, I left the Firm to work for the Mayor of Memphis, running a workforce development agency that was, to put it mildly, in the tank. I spent three years there righting the ship and building innovative practices, managing 55 employees, and making sure we complied with the many Tennessee and U.S. Department of Labor requirements. This was a hugely challenging job, like nothing I'd ever done. It was another great lesson in being open to new challenges. I loved it because it was life-changing for many people in Memphis who needed skills to get good jobs.

Then, in 2013 when my former law partner and friend, Charlie Tuggle, asked me to come work in-house at First Horizon Bank, I took on another job very different from anything I'd done before. It has been rewarding and fulfilling managing the bank's litigation (since I was never a litigator, I'm thankful for great outside counsel) and supporting our bankers in serving our customers. And one of the best perks of the job was – no timesheets.

I've always believed that employers should support and encourage women with work-life balance, but also by assuring we're included in and have opportunities to handle important matters, so that we can build our experience and expertise and develop our brand. I've been very fortunate to do important work, for clients, for the community, and for the bank and its customers, in my professional life. I've also been able to build a full life outside of work.

Looking back, there does seem to be a consistent theme here – willingness to try the unknown and continue learning, openness to new challenges, and working to improve communities I'm a part of. At 68, I'm not ready to close the book on building my legacy. So, more to come – as President Bartlet on The West Wing was fond of saying, "What's next?"

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