

Laura Phillips

By: Diane Holland

If you had not noticed, Laura Phillips, a former President of the FCBA, has for many years now regularly interviewed FCBA members and profiled them in this newsletter. Laura estimates that she has interviewed over 106 FCBA members so far. Since this is the final newsletter of my FCBA Presidency, I wanted to turn the tables and feature Laura, who recently left a large law firm to start her own firm, Phillips Communications Law LLC.



Q: What attracted you to the field of communications?

A: My undergraduate degree was in economics, but I did not love my first job with a consulting firm doing economic analysis. When our contracts were terminated due to a change in presidential administrations and priorities, I became a paralegal at a small but significant communications law firm, Pierson, Ball & Dowd. I was fascinated by the combination of technology, law and policy and saw firsthand how lawyers could delve deeply into these areas while counseling clients and advocating at the FCC and NTIA to move important innovations forward. After a short time there working with Phil Verveer, Dean Burch and others I knew I wanted to be part of the lawyers' club. I focused on finding an evening law program in DC so that I could continue working and learning about communications law and policy during the day. I ended up attending Washington College of Law at American University; that was a long four years, but it was worthwhile. While still in law school I spent a summer at Satellite Business Systems, and I worked during my last year in the Chief Counsel's office at NTIA.

Q: Take us through your career as a communications lawyer, the various positions you've held.

A: My first position as a lawyer was at Dow Lohnes & Albertson, where I worked on a combination of telecom and cable matters, including

the first cellular lotteries, the first spectrum auctions, the introduction of Personal Communications Services, and the development of interconnection compensation frameworks for local competition, universal service and a range of regulatory parity issues. I became a Member of the firm in 1992, the same year I got married. It was a busy and productive time. We spent many late nights before and after the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 helping clients craft FCC policy recommendations and in turn make important business decisions about implementing local competition. I learned so much from working with legends like former FCC General Counsel Werner Hartenburger and the then head of Cox's Washington office, Alexander Netchvolodoff.

Like many other people, September 11, 2001 hit me hard. Then the DC sniper had us all unnerved. I had young children at home and what had seemed important was replaced by a different set of considerations. I re-evaluated what I was doing and why, and ultimately decided to transition my practice to Drinker Biddle & Reath, then a "fine Philadelphia firm" in growth mode. There were many wonderful people and amazing clients and projects I was delighted to be a part of over many years there, including being national counsel for 800 MHz rebanding for Nextel/Sprint and working with Intelsat to deliver Phase I of the C-band Transition to support the 5G spectrum auction. I also got involved in law firm management as the practice group leader for the Government and Regulatory Affairs Group.

Just when COVID hit, the firm merged with Faegre Baker Daniels to become Faegre Drinker. While still a great firm, it was no longer the same firm I gravitated to in 2002. It was time once again to consider what was important to me and I focused on what I enjoyed the most, which was spending time with a variety of clients, helping to solve their problems. I decided that launching my own telecommunications firm would provide me with the autonomy to do that, so that's how I ended up where I am today.

Q: So, you only recently decided to leave big law and "hang out your shingle" by launching Phillips Communications Law LLC at the beginning of 2024. How has that been, and what challenges have you faced that you didn't expect?

A: It has been a year of change as I navigate handling processes that others would normally handle in a larger firm setting. Some people eagerly seek and embrace change and others are slower to recognize the need for it. Quite honestly I skew towards membership in the second cohort. Even so, once I'd made the decision to do something different, it was amazing how it all came together, both the idea of what I wanted to do and how I wanted it to begin, as a solo law practice. I had the great benefit of many kind and generous former colleagues and others who have done similar things mentoring me on a wide range of "how-tos" and "never-ers" and recommending vendors they'd used and liked. There were pre-launch decisions that had to be made that were both exciting and a bit scary in that you are making financial commitments without knowing for certain you'll have future revenues to offset expenses. On the other hand, I had to have faith that I know a good bit about the areas of practice I've devoted my professional career to, and I've worked successfully with clients over a wide range of issues over many years. There are risks worth taking; this venture was me taking a risk on myself.

It's been almost entirely wonderful. I do not miss large law firm administrivia; and

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I still get to work with clients that I know and like and respect. I can spend the time needed on some projects or problems that I couldn't previously as I have more flexibility on rates and rate structures than before. Another plus is that I have more control over my schedule; no one is looking down their nose at me if I end up with a couple of free hours and I decide to go to a museum or to take a long walk in a park. No one second-guesses my business decisions, and there is a true sense of ownership that one simply doesn't have holding a fractional share of a very large partnership where you have no direct say in how the firm is run.

The main challenge with this business model is that you truly are on your own. You need to either learn it (if that's feasible) or buy it, whether it comes to addressing IT/network security issues, accounting, malpractice insurance, practice resource materials or marketing. And you have no in-house colleagues to turn to, so you must be intentional about outreach and networking. I had anticipated that, but on any given day when I just can't get a document to print correctly or my billing software seemingly inexplicably charges a client twice for the same work, I experience momentary frustration that the buck invariably stops with me, and I alone have to figure a path out of the present difficulty. But I am learning new things every day to make this venture stronger and more durable. Thank goodness I already had a great CPA! Lastly, it certainly helps to have a sense of humor to help maintain perspective.

Q: What do you like to read?

A: About 15 years ago when my kids were in grade school I was invited to join a book club and since then I have joined two more. Yes, I am in three book clubs, so I read whatever is on tap next. The joy of that is you discover books you would never in a million years pick up if left to your own devices. Some may

be trite, predictable, or forgettable but sometimes you are astonished by the revelations in non-fiction works (like "The Code Breaker: Jennifer Doudna, Gene Editing, and the Future of the Human Race" by Walter Isaacson) or drawn in by creative masterpieces you would otherwise totally miss.

Sometimes books seem to be in dialogue in my head. I recently read about the Sackler family and their role in the opioid crisis in "Empire of Pain; the Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty" by Patrick Radden Keefe. Reading in detail about the assumptions, arrogance and missteps of this pharmaceutical family was fascinating, as one of my other book clubs read "Demon Copperhead" by Barbara Kingsolver last year. A theme in that book was the devastation of Appalachia caused by opioid pill mills that pushed people into addictions they could not easily overcome. Understanding why and how the Sacklers and their sales team started down the road they did and being able to relate that history to Kingsolver's masterful modern retelling of Charles Dickens David Copperfield was amazing.

Q: What About Your Life outside of the Law would surprise people about you?

A: I have played acoustic guitar since grade school. My personal creative outlet since law school and up to the present – with a COVID break – is to play with the 5:30 Sunday Ensemble at Holy Trinity in Georgetown nearly every week. Some weeks we are better than others and that has nothing whatsoever to do with whether Joe Biden drops in for mass. The feeling that comes from being part of making music in that setting is something I can't explain, but it's real. When the music in the moment is solid, the feeling can be transcendent. I am also a long-term yogi; I got my teaching certificate studying Ashtanga Yoga during COVID, but despite putting myself through the paces on an almost daily basis, I have not taught much so far.

Q: How did you come to start writing "Get to Know an FCBA Member" and how long have you been writing it?

A: Back when I was FCBA President the Executive Committee had discussions periodically on what motivates people to join the FCBA or to renew their membership, both actions the association needs for its maintenance and growth. One day as I was looking at a recent FCBA newsletter it struck me that we had plenty of information about CLEs and other programming and great pictures recapping events, but otherwise not a lot of non-transactional content. I'd recently concluded my term as Board Chair of my college alma mater Trinity Washington University where I had been the subject of a Q&A interview for a Trinity publication, as had other Board members. It wasn't rocket science to conduct an interview. I decided halfway through my year as President in 2012-2013, that I would start interviewing FCBA members about their career experiences and FCBA involvement. Initially I got some tepid feedback from at least one FCBA senior statesman about the column, but now I think most members who take the time to read the profiles enjoy them and might learn something. I love the opportunity to engage both with people I know well and those I don't; it's been gratifying to see the content from these interviews displayed on the FCBA website and elsewhere to showcase the depth and breadth of our association memberships' skills and careers. That's exactly what I'd hoped would happen.

Q: I hear you are an avid traveler. What are your favorite types of vacations (relaxing, every second planned with activity) or favorite destinations (beach, mountains, national parks)?

A: I don't have a single favorite type of vacation; the difficulty is in narrowing down all the options as there are so many places to go and things to discover even if you've already visited a city or country. I tend to focus on an experience I or my husband might really

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enjoy and plan a trip around that but keep some space open for spontaneity. Some trips over the years that have been memorable have been walking parts of the French Camino to Santiago de Compostella in Spain and staying at a Chateau in Bordeaux while touring some outstanding vineyards and sampling that bounty.

We recently spent time in England using London as our base but taking short trips to Bath, Lewes and Canterbury. In Lewes we were able to see our football club – yes we own one share of the Lewes Rooks – play their last season games, both the men and the women’s teams, at their historic soccer stadium called the Dripping Pan. Think Welcome to Wrexham at about 1/24th the size of the crowd. It was fun and charming, and my husband was in heaven. We also managed to have pub grub at the pub in Richmond used to film Ted Lasso; it unfortunately did not have the dartboard still in place.

I’m now slightly obsessed with the idea of sailing on Marjorie Merriweather Post’s historic yacht, the Sea Cloud, around the Greek Islands but who knows what is next. We are renovating our nearly 100-year-old house in Chevy Chase DC and that has put a significant temporary dent in our vacation fund!

Q: How long have you been an FCBA member?

A: I joined the FCBA as soon as I started as a first-year associate at Dow Lohnes & Albertson. While I did a several month rotation in the corporate group, it was plain based on my skill set and interests that communications was going to be my home. Over the years I began working with others on FCBA committees and attended CLEs, and eventually ran for and was part of the Executive Committee, then Assistant Secretary, Secretary and FCBA President. I’ve continued to assist on ad hoc matters and work on several committees.

Q: You give so much to FCBA in the form of this monthly column. Talk about what the FCBA means to you.

A: Communications law and policy has been the core of my professional life and the FCBA has been foundational to me in many ways. Of course, over time it’s changed in terms of me mentoring more than being mentored but it has always been a hub of deep personal and professional connections. The FCBA is a convenor of events where you can learn and share ideas and have fun. For me now, the FCBA is an organization I can be a part of so that I don’t feel “alone” as a single member law firm. And the FCBA Foundation makes it easy for you to give back by supporting our scholarship programs and mentoring students and new attorneys. I could go on and on, but the FCBA is a remarkable organization of committed, talented volunteers and peerless professional staff. We are so fortunate to have Kerry and the team looking out for us!

Interested in learning more about another FCBA member? If there is a member you’d like to know better, contact Laura Phillips at laura@phillipscommlaw.com.