



Mike Gilles: The grass is sometimes greener on the other side

[by Teresa Talerico]

With a Ph.D. in Literature and a J.D. under his belt, Mike Gilles is equally at home discussing Shakespeare or employment law. But it's the latter field that has inspired him as much as, if not more than, any sonnet.

After years of studying literature with the goal of becoming a university professor, Mr. Gilles realized that the academic world was more political and competitive than he anticipated and the chances of landing his dream job—teaching Renaissance literature to graduate students—were slim. Mr. Gilles had always toyed with the idea of law, and at 29, he enrolled in the University of Georgia Law School, from which he graduated in 1982. Mr. Gilles worked for almost 10 years at a North Carolina law firm, making his way to partner and employment law specialist. Since then, he has taught paralegal classes at a community college and worked as an employment director. Today, he is human resources director and General Counsel for Castleton, a professional employer organization based in Raleigh, NC.

Q: When you enrolled in law school, did you realize that's where you belonged?

A: Yes, very quickly. I didn't regret at all the time I spent in graduate school. The training in close reading of manuscripts to get the essential meaning out of them that I had gone through in graduate school was extremely helpful in law school.

Q: What's the best thing you did for yourself while in law school?

A: I tried to maintain a balance. That's the best thing I did. Anybody who wants to do well in law school is going to devote a lot of time to it. But I also tried to take time for my wife and kids and not make school the only important thing in my life. By doing that, I was able to keep it in perspective and ended up actually doing better academically than I

would have if I had devoted all of my time and energy to school.

Q: When did you decide being a partner wasn't for you?

A: About eight years into it. About a year before I made the move, I was feeling some burnout. I enjoyed the litigation part. I liked being in court. I liked depositions. I enjoyed the preparation. I didn't like going back to the office and dealing with writing a report to an insurance company, or organizing the files, tying up the loose ends, and then turning to all those other cases that I hadn't looked at for three weeks because I was devoting myself to this one thing.

What came up was an ad for a paralegal instructor at a community college. I'm sort of a habitual want ad shopper anyway, even when I'm very happy, just to see what's out there. I [taught] for about six years.

Six years into that, after some deterioration of the program I was part of, I saw an ad for director of employment practices at Oakwood Homes. I applied for that and ended up loving that.

What I like about working in-house in human resources is that there's really one client, and I am much closer to the action. What I like about being an attorney is resolving problems, resolving situations.

I was very happy at Oakwood Homes. If it hadn't experienced a buyout from a competitor, I expect I would still be there. But sometimes things that don't look so promis-

ing while they're happening turn out to be opportunities. I'm even happier at Castleton. My last two positions have been closer and closer to the ideal job for me. I hope this is the ideal job. Right now, it's ideal enough that I'm not looking at the want ads.

Q: As a self-described want ad shopper, how do you recommend avoiding "the grass is always greener" syndrome?

A: The way it's worked out for me is I've only made changes when I needed to or felt I needed to. Even though I may have been looking for a while, there were opportunities to interview and maybe even change before I did.

I'm willing to take a chance, but when I'm comfortable. I think you have to know yourself and know when it's time to move on.

My advice is don't be afraid to make a change. It's more and more acceptable, more and more common, that people are not going to pick a job or a career and stick with that for 35 or 40 years like they once did.