

# When it isn't FUN anymore

**SOME LAWYERS TURN** to their dream careers

**CHELSEA COOK** | Special to the Daily Report

IT'S A TUESDAY morning at Atlanta's West Egg Café and the breakfast rush has just ended. With just an hour's lull before the lunch rush arrives, Jennifer Johnson is buzzing.

"We just left an espresso tasting at Batdorf & Bronson, so I hope I don't come off as jittery or talking too fast," she says in disclaimer.

But five years ago, something like an espresso tasting wasn't on Johnson's radar. She was an attorney at King & Spalding for almost six years, where coffee was primarily just a good reason to take a break.

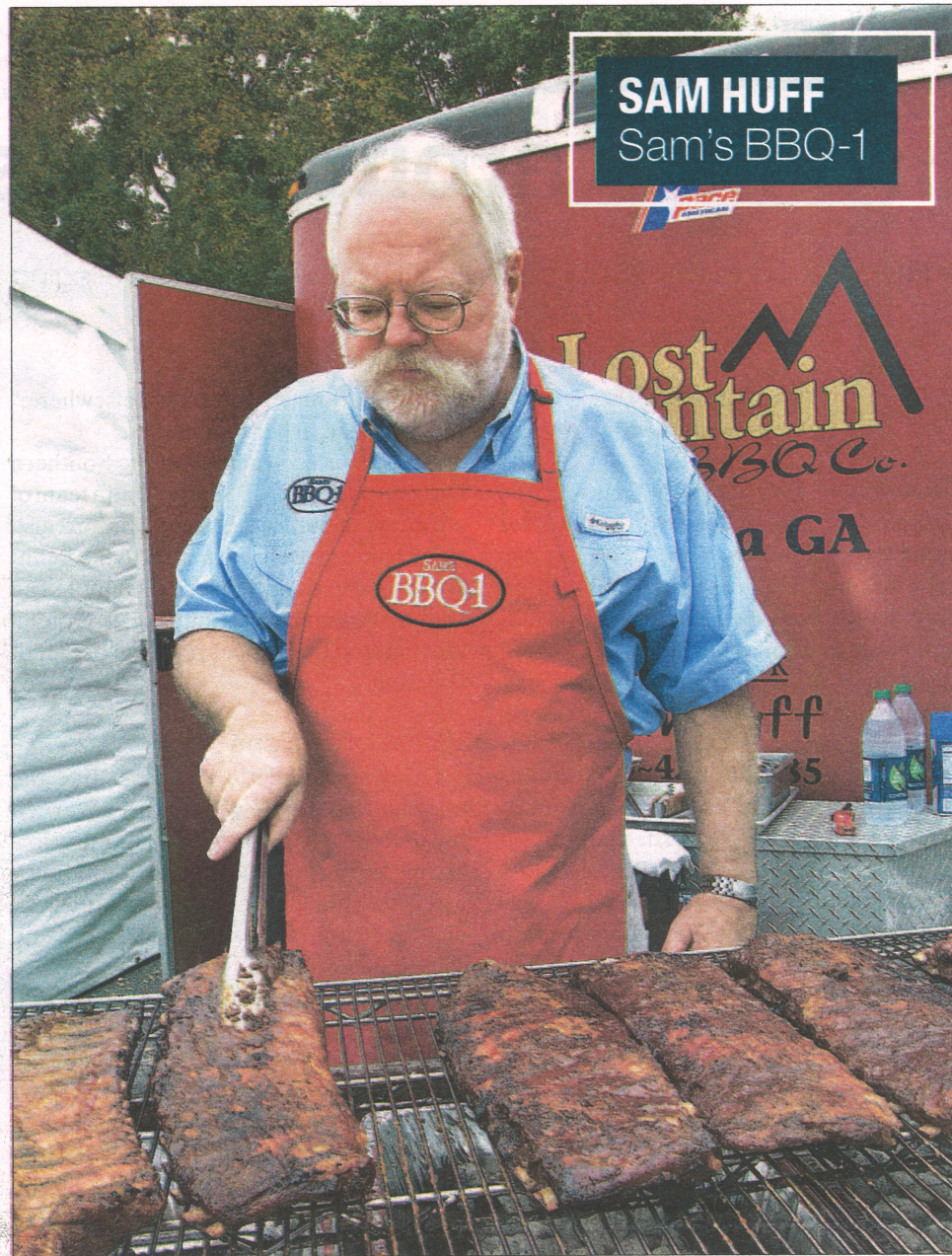
Jennifer Johnson's buzz is not just from caffeine. She's excited to discuss an entrepreneurial endeavor that has proven suc-

cessful for her and husband Ben, who also is what they both affectionately refer to as "a recovering attorney."

Ben Johnson, whose legacy includes a family of prominent Atlanta attorneys, practiced 10 years at Hunton & Williams before joining his bride at their family business.

Ben and Jennifer are lucky—not all small start-ups turn out this way, especially not restaurants. But for this group of attorneys-turned-entrepreneurs, it was their law school training and professional practice that has prepared them to navigate the complexities of starting and running their own businesses.

Together, they sport five inactive bar memberships, and five different reasons why they say—with confidence—that they've left the law.



Sam Huff started by cooking barbecue for friends. He now runs Sam's BBQ-1 restaurant in Marietta.



Ben and Jennifer Johnson were both practicing attorneys who went from taking coffee breaks to serving it to others at their own restaurant.



## 'I felt like it was an epiphany'

Rarely do these ideas and career changes happen with a single "Aha!" moment.

"After college, I went through that sense of, 'I don't know what I'm gonna do, so I'm gonna take the LSATs,' and then you go to law school and get a job and all of the sudden you think: 'Wait, what about that thing that was in the back of my head?' And it just takes awhile for that to push its way forward," Johnson says. That thing Johnson describes is a restaurant where people feel comfortable enough to eat alone, and where they can get coffee in the morning or a beer after work. It's a place to eat well and feel well. That thing is now their occupation.

And for many, it was a gradual transition, in which a hobby, passion or dream simply became more prominent, important or meaningful in their lives.

For Sam Huff, a family lawyer for more than 35 years, it was barbecue.

He started out cooking for family and friends, then for groups of 50 for charitable events, and once served 415 people for a State Bar of Georgia meeting.

"I started competing professionally, and that's when it really started getting good," Huff says. "We would travel the country on these barbecue-cooking competition circuits. And so that's when we started perfecting the techniques and developing my rubs and sauces and the quality really, really started improving quite a bit."

Huff won't reveal just how many competitions he has won. He now owns and operates one of the most successful barbecue restaurants in Marietta, Sam's BBQ-1.

As would be expected, maternity leave and mothering often play roles in leaving attorneydom. But after Aleta Mills-Stubin resigned as a patent attorney at Kilpatrick Townsend to take care of her children, she could not subdue her brainstorming for business ventures. Mills-Stubin had always been an avid runner and often would volunteer in her spare time at Atlanta area charities. When her youngest son, Henry, was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, Mills-Stubin's brainstorming turned into action. She is now the founder and director of Running MATES, a nonprofit running group for children with social and/or autism spectrum disorders.

"When I had the idea, I felt like it was an epiphany. Like I had finally thought of it, what I really wanted to do with my life—something really meaningful," Mills-Stubin says. "I really feel like this is my contribution to society and the world."

Leah Aldridge also left her job as a health care attorney for parental reasons.

"I didn't think I could continue to practice at the level that I had been practicing and have multiple children. Many women do. I spoke to several successful women partners who also had families about how they managed their practice and there's definitely method to doing that," Aldridge says. "But I was somebody who prided herself on having her hand on the deals and on all of the nuances and so I was very concerned that I wasn't going to be able to practice on the same level and also parent."

Aldridge experienced a transition that was much more fluid. As a young lawyer for Morris Manning & Martin, she often worked with CEOs of big health care businesses, which fostered her already deep-seated interests in women's health.

After leaving the law, Aldridge began working with Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies, an advocacy group for health care and programs for women, children and families. From there, Aldridge was motivated to start a consulting firm for a women's health issue that she felt was underexposed and lacked information and resources: breastfeeding. After being heavily involved in lobbying for legislation and initiatives on prenatal health and breastfeeding her own children, she started Atlanta Breastfeeding Consultants with partner Claire Eden.

"I loved the law and still love the law and found my niche," Aldridge says. "The disenchantment with the hours and the prac-

wasn't that way."

Mills-Stubin says the real struggle was leaving her law degree behind.

"I really liked the substance of what I did. But, of course, working at a big firm is such a grind. I just found that I didn't feel like I loved it enough to work that much," she says. "In that sense, it was easy to let it go. The harder thing was, 'Wow, I went to law school, and I thought I wanted to do this, but now what am I going to do?'"

## Legal education good for anything

The development of Running MATES required a massive amount of research. Because the nonprofit was an entirely new therapy theory for children with behavioral

"That's important groundwork for anything you're going to do," Ben says. "And it sort of helps you stand out in some ways, differentiate yourself in some ways."

Differentiate themselves they have. West Egg has been voted "Best Breakfast in Atlanta" by *Creative Loafing* multiple years and at the end of this year, the duo plans to open a traditional Jewish-style deli, The General Muir.

"The General Muir is named after a refugee transport ship that brought my mom and her parents to this country," Jennifer says. "My mother was born in a displaced persons camp in Germany after the war. Long story, when my mom was 3, they came over to New York. We actually have a great



REBECCA BREYER

**Aleta Mills-Stubin** quit her job as a patent attorney and now directs a nonprofit running group for children with social and/or autism spectrum disorders.

tice—I didn't hate those things."

It would be disingenuous to say all "recovering attorneys" would agree with Aldridge. While passion played a major role in each individual business, many cited disenchantment as a reason for leaving.

"It's a big commitment to be an attorney and go do that every single day if you don't feel that strongly about it. It's not fair to yourself, it's not fair to your clients," Jennifer Johnson says. So when the idea of West Egg emerged, "there was that sense of, 'I have to do this.' And Ben was wonderful to say, 'OK, I can stay and [practice] while you go and try this.'"

Huff echoes Johnson's reasoning.

"Law practice just wasn't fun anymore," Huff says. "I think if you do 35-40 years of anything it's time to do something new. And when you don't enjoy something you can't give it your all, and you owe that to a client. If you can't do that then it's time to go."

Huff also says he felt the profession had changed a lot since he began his law career.

"I'm speaking mostly of domestic practice, and in my opinion, too many lawyers have taken on the hostile persona of their clients. You don't hear many lawyers referred to as counselors anymore. If the client wants an attack bulldog, that's what they give 'em," Huff says. "And in the old days, it

disorders, Mills-Stubin inundated herself in reading, research and medical discoveries about children with Asperger's and ADHD. So, to her pleasing, her law degree has proven extremely worthwhile.

"I feel like legal education is very good for anything you choose to do. It's very practical, and it really helps you learn to do research and how to apply what you learn," Mills-Stubin says. "And I also think having gone to law school and having practiced, that I have more of an idea of this as a business and how can I make it succeed as a business, instead of this sweet little running group. Because I could have just reached out to some people and said, 'Hey let's get our kids together to run.' But I wanted it to be more than that."

Ben Johnson agrees with Mills-Stubin. Leaving the "professional camaraderie" was a downside of leaving his practice, but he says it has bequeathed much of the success of their restaurant.

"One of the greatest things about lessons from the practice of law is attention to detail. Having to present things to partners, judges and clients, you learn to pay attention to how things are presented and making sure everything is just right," Ben says.

"Yeah, that's a really good point," Jennifer adds.

photograph of her leaning out of a porthole of the ship, holding her doll, from *The New York Daily News*."

She adds she and Ben "just thought it felt right. Combining that concept and that food, that was the last wave of the folks who came that created that deli culture."

## Business card withdrawal

Just because one chapter of their lives has closed doesn't mean the lives of these former attorneys has necessarily gotten easier or better. And they all admit they have not become any more financially prosperous. There are aspects of the profession's culture that "recovering attorneys" miss.

"Well gosh, there's nothing like getting the verdict you want," Huff says. "I was a prosecutor for years and a defense lawyer for years after that, and when you get the verdict you want, that's the second best feeling in the world."

"Everybody knows what the first best feeling is," he adds.

Jennifer Johnson describes "business card withdrawal":

"It's a big deal to go from, you meet someone and you pull out your King & Spalding or Humphrey Williams business card

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## Lawyers break free of practice to see if their dream grass is greener

**Dreams**, from page 9

with your name on it, it's embossed, it says, 'Look at me and what I've accomplished.' To, now we don't have them," she says. "I mean, we could get some printed up, but we don't have them."

"I miss having the support staff," Ben adds. "IT department? We're the IT department. Or whoever we can convince to come in and trade a sandwich for fixing our modem. Office services staff-mailing, typing things, you do all of that when you own your own business."

"I'm a jack of all trades now," Leah Aldridge says. "I worked for a fairly large firm so I had a lot of assistants and help and so I was a jack of one trade then."

"My life is just very, very different. Doing the type of care that I do when I do consults is a very intimate and personal thing, so I appreciate working in that arena too. I've enjoyed that aspect of my work although I feel like my talents are really on the business side of things. It's added a whole 'nother dimension to how I work with people."

### You only have one life, but...

All of these former attorneys say that they are grateful and lucky for the support they received from spouses, family, friends and their communities that allowed them to fulfill their second callings.

"Have the worst-case-scenario questions: Where would you live? What would be on the line? Could you go back to work?" Ben Johnson suggests.

"Don't burden yourself with a lot of financial obligations, then you retain flexibility to do what you want to do," Mills-Stubin offers. "You can really get locked in financially. And I think that alone makes people unhappy when they feel like they don't have any choices."

And if you're not thinking of making a career change, Huff says, your happiness as an attorney is contingent upon your life outside of work.

"I think the advice that I wish I had had someone give me 30 years ago would be to keep your life in balance," Huff says.

"You've got to get away, you've got to do something. Lawyers are a talented bunch of people. They are an intelligent, bright bunch of people, but I see so many of them who are just so obsessed with the practice that they become unhealthy. We've lost so many of our friends through heart attack and other problems, and I'm convinced it's all the stress and the pressure that they're under."

It's almost noon and the lunch crowd is starting to fill in at West Egg. Jennifer and Ben are talking a bit louder to be sure they are heard over the many people ordering food, talking and laughing.

"You only have one life, but I also recognized that it was a luxury to be able to take that risk," Jennifer says. "Oh, and talk to a lot of people who have been there in some form or another." **DR**



**LEAH ALDRIDGE**  
Atlanta  
Breastfeeding  
Consultants

JOHN DISNEY/DAILY REPORT

"I ... found my niche," says Leah Aldridge, who started a consulting firm on breastfeeding issues.

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