

Philadelphia Lawyer C



Image by Angeles Balaguer from Pixabay

*This essay was written in 2010. All references to time are relevant to that year.

Commuting to New York City from Philadelphia is a trek—190 miles round trip and a total of four hours travel time. It was this four-hour daily commute which occasioned a life-altering career change for Philadelphia attorney Eileen Kennedy.

Thirteen years ago, while Kennedy was an attorney with Bell Atlantic’s legal department specializing in international tax law, the company moved its headquarters from Philadelphia to New York City. Other multi-national corporations were also leaving Philadelphia at that time, and Kennedy did not find many meaningful opportunities to apply her experience in international tax law anywhere else in Philadelphia. Over several months,

during many hours spent on the train commuting to and from New York City, Kennedy began to question whether she wanted to continue to practice law or maybe do something else. She began to wonder whether hers was the life she wanted to live.

In the fall of 1998, Kennedy informed Bell Atlantic that she was departing. After leaving the company, Kennedy lived in what she described as a “neutral zone.” Client demands and organizational

goals no longer defined her days. After spending time reflecting, it came to her that she alone was responsible for creating a rich and fulfilling life. Expanding on this realization, her existing interest in photography gradually developed into something much more.

Kennedy earned her bachelor’s degree at Georgetown University where she studied French and Linguistics. Unlike many lawyers, she did not go straight from college to law school. Instead, she

Changes Her “Focus”*

By Mary-Kate Martin

spent two years in the Peace Corps from 1974-1976. She was stationed in Burkina Faso in French West Africa where her interest in international issues and foreign cultures blossomed. While in the Peace Corps, Kennedy submitted her law school applications, and upon her return stateside, she enrolled at The University of Chicago Law School.

Kennedy began taking photographs after law school. She took a few isolated photography classes, which helped to further develop her interest. Otherwise, during the early years of her growing hobby-turned-career, she was largely self-taught. As her passion for photography progressed, she attended Maine Media workshops in Rockport, Maine, as well as classes at the International Center for Photography in the New York City.

Looking back, Kennedy wishes she had been taking photographs during her time in Burkina Faso. She would have liked to have those memories documented in film. But Kennedy does not look back, she looks forward. She does not spend time pondering “what ifs” and instead trusts the decisions she has made and focuses on her passions. Her passion, drive, and natural sense of forward movement, that advanced her through a successful legal career, has likewise ferried her through a booming career in photography.

Originally from Toledo, Ohio, Kennedy came to Philadelphia after she graduated from law school in 1979 and began working as an associate with the tax department of Dechert LLP. It was there that she met her husband of 25 years, Robert C. Heim. Heim is head of the Litigation Department at Dechert LLP in Philadelphia and is a former Chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association.

Heim has great admiration for his wife’s bold career transformation. While attending the Art of Photography Show in San Diego, an annual event that selects and exhibits only 100 photographers

out of more than 16,000 submissions from around the world, Heim asked the curator what makes Kennedy’s art so interesting. The curator explained to him that Kennedy’s photographs are “visual metaphors” because they “combine her analytical skills with her creative talent.” Her best images suggest a message to the viewer but not overtly. At the same time, they are “enjoyable to look at” and are “technically superb.”

While Kennedy takes photographs for family and friends to celebrate events or memorialize family get-togethers at their summer home in Maine, she limits that type of work to the people who are important in her life. Otherwise, she focuses her photography on projects that are meaningful to her. “I search for themes and ways to express themes,” she said.

Currently, she is exhibiting a series based on her husband both as an individual and a sort of “everyman” for the successful professional who, despite growing older, has maintained his prowess and influence but is nonetheless re-examining the role of work in his life. While she acknowledges a certain level of intimacy to this project, she also believes the theme is increasingly common, as baby boomers reach the age of traditional retirement and begin to wonder about “what to do next.”

Using photographs of her husband—“Bob as an individual and as an everyman”—Kennedy won first place in an international biannual competition that will culminate in a solo show next year at the Museum of Photography in Thessaloniki, Greece. Most recently, this series was exhibited at the Dublin Gallery of Photography in a group show called “Prime Years,” which features about seven other photographers worldwide.

Additionally, Kennedy has photographs in the permanent collection of the Center for Fine Art Photography in Colorado, which will be including her work in their upcoming installation

in the Denver airport. She recently returned from photographing one of Philadelphia’s sister cities in Torun, Poland, having been selected to do so by the Philadelphia International Visitor Center.

When asked whether there is anything that she misses about being a lawyer, Kennedy fondly remembers the individuals with whom she worked early in her career. “I still benefit from an exposure to law through my husband,” said Kennedy. She still enjoys discussing legal problems with him.

Kennedy gets pleasure from setting and achieving her own goals, and not having to answer to other people. Reflecting back on her life, she recognizes that for many years, particularly while she was in school, she became accustomed to using external validation as a way of measuring her success. Having to define her own accomplishments is a challenge to her, but with that challenge comes a welcome freedom. “When you are working for yourself and defining your vision, you have to determine success on your own.”

Looking back and reflecting on her transition, Kennedy mused, “I don’t presume to give advice to others, because everyone’s life is complex in different ways. My experience just confirms the truism that it’s important to take the time to reflect on the direction of your life because it does go by in a blur.”

[Readers are encouraged to view Kennedy’s photographs by visiting www.eileenkennedy.com]

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