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GEORGIA

TRAILBLAZERS

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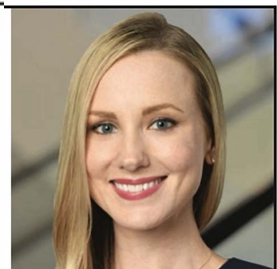


PIONEER SPIRIT In the somber world of tax law, David Aughtry likes to put on a show. He uses poetry and literary allusions, as well as graphics and other visual elements — and, once, a bucket of flaming soil — to defend clients in tax cases. “You’ve got to figure out how to make it exciting, when a tax dispute is not exciting; how to make it meaningful, when it can be boring; and you need to figure out how to make your case appeal to the most senses possible” — sight and sound, smell and taste. The key is to make the judge or hearing officer deciding the case “remember your client in the most favorable way.”

TRAILS BLAZED Aughtry often crafts his arguments with dramatic flourishes. When he represented a family accused of grossly undervaluing property at an interstate junction, he showed up for an appeal with a 20-pound bucket of dirt from the site. He told the Internal Revenue Service hearing officer that the case was one of LUST — leaking underground storage tanks — that devalued the property. Aughtry scooped out a handful of soil, lit a match and watched the dirt burn. He won the appeal.

FUTURE EXPLORATIONS As courts shift to virtual trials, Aughtry is looking at new ways for creative representation. Normally, “it is very, very important for the trial lawyer to be moving around and ... keeping everybody involved.” That won’t work when the participants appear remotely. So Aughtry decided to make the most of a new medium. “We’re all programmed to watching a TV screen. We’re generally programmed to 15-minute increments of a storyline.” Aughtry plans to present cases as episodes of a television show, hoping to “exploit our addiction to emotion on a TV screen.” After all, “we don’t have buckets of flammable dirt in every case.”

MEREDITH W. CAIAFA
MORRIS MANNING & MARTIN



PIONEER SPIRIT Employment lawyer Meredith Caiafa began fielding calls about COVID-19 almost as soon as the virus was declared a global pandemic. “The first questions companies started asking really had to do with their employees.” What if a worker took ill? What information should be shared with employees? What new policies might be needed? Soon, the questions took on broader concerns, from potential liability to real estate leases. “I quickly realized that COVID-19 was going to impact our clients well beyond employment concerns.” So Caiafa led the creation of a firmwide COVID-19 task force, which brought together lawyers from diverse practice groups to guide clients through an extended crisis.

TRAILS BLAZED The task force puts out alerts on new pandemic-related legislation and regulations and produces webinars that allow lawyers across the firm to answer clients’ questions. Caiafa’s task force completed an analysis of one major bill just 48 hours after it passed and, just as important, focused on what might be coming next. “When COVID-19 first hit, we started worrying about how do we shift from an office culture to remote working. Then it was how we safely reopen. And now everybody is thinking about what the new school year will bring. And each of those issues has accompanying legal concerns.”

FUTURE EXPLORATIONS The clients' concerns weren't that different from the firm's. Caiafa treasured Morris Manning & Martin's collegiality and collaboration, and the challenge is to continue that even if lawyers can't all be in the office at the same time. "The practice of law can be very individualized, if you let it, with more attorneys becoming increasingly specialized in very nuanced areas of practice." Although remote working may be required indefinitely, "the task force allows us not only to serve our clients well, but also to stay connected to each other."