



A Shingle of One's Own: Six Solo Practitioners Share Their Experiences

Kathleen Guthrie Woods

Met six BASF members who have succeeded in hanging out shingles of their own. Some spent time working at big firms; others built up clientele from taking on contract work. They educated themselves with the help of books, mentors, professional groups, and online research. They made mistakes and learned from them. They embraced the solo lifestyle, one that allows them to pick and choose their clients and cases, pursue passions, and have lives outside of required billable hours.

Going solo is not uncharted territory. If it is something you have dreamed of doing, but have felt intimidated by all the unknowns or overwhelmed by the tasks needed to launch and succeed, you will find encouragement here. Read on as these attorneys reflect on their experiences, share insights gained from their own trials and tribulations, and offer candid and sage advice.

Jasmine Davaloo

The Law Offices of Jasmine Davaloo



PRIOR WORK AND EXPERIENCE

A couple of months after being sworn in, Jasmine Davaloo started picking up contract work.

SHE ALMOST DIDN'T DO IT

Opening a solo practice was not a part of Davaloo's original career plans. Intimidated by the perception that going solo "always seemed to be a really huge endeavor," she did not think she would be able to do it. But as contract work started to come in, she kept with it and has not looked back.

WHAT SHE LIKES BEST

Being her own boss definitely has its perks. Davaloo says she enjoys being able to set her own hours, approve her own vacation requests, and run the show. Furthermore, this same autonomy allows her to "be in control of the cases I take, the people I work for, and the causes I fight for."

REGARDING THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE

Davaloo cites business development as the biggest challenge she faced—and continues to face. "It's not only starting a practice of law," she says, "it's starting a business as well." As a young attorney right out of law school, she had none of her own clients and no network to get her up and running. But, "It's not a 'challenge,'" she clarifies. "It's just not accomplished overnight. It's ongoing."

NETWORKING HOW-TOS

Effective networking takes effort and the right attitude. Davaloo participates in several organizations and events. She sits on boards in Marin and Alameda counties, and she is chair of the Social Events and Networking Committee of the Barristers Club.

She is also part of a mentorship program for at-risk kids in which she interacts with a number of attorneys and judges. At each event, she meets new people and discovers new opportunities. The key, she says, is to not approach it as if you are looking for work. "You're there to build relationships—both professional and personal," she says. "I'm learning about people, not just out for myself." Her attitude and demeanor pay off. "This leads them to refer cases to me or invite me to visit another group, which leads to more introductions."

WENT SOLO

2011

PRACTICE AREAS

Family law and
employment law



It's not only starting a
practice of law, it's starting
a business as well."

STARTUP TIPS

Attorneys who are solo practitioners or in small practices gave her tips here and there, but Davaloo had no formal mentors. “I get an idea and I just research; I ask people,” she says. She encourages new solo practitioners to ask for help. Davaloo shares that when she was researching how to build her website, she knew she was beyond her scope of expertise. She needed a professional, so she called upon a friend who is in IT. Acknowledging your limitations can save you time, money, and aggravation.

SAGE ADVICE

“Make a long list of things to do before you open shop,” she says. However, “you don’t have to do it all; you can do it down the line.” Your to-do list might include creating and launching a website, opening financial accounts, setting up a virtual office or home office, and opening a post office box. “It’s an ongoing process over time to build a practice,” she says, and “you’ll discover new needs as you go.” For example, the first calendaring/client management system Davaloo implemented did not work for her. Learn from your trials and errors and embrace the idea that setting up and managing your business will be a work in progress.



Daniel A. Flores

Flores Law Firm

PRIOR WORK AND EXPERIENCE

Daniel Flores practiced civil litigation and casualty work in two state and nationwide law firms.

WHAT INSPIRED FLORES TO GO SOLO

As a native of San Francisco and the son of immigrants, Flores felt there was a need for Spanish-speaking lawyers in San Francisco. “I opened my own firm to represent individuals on a more personal basis,” he says, and a smaller practice setting allows him more direct access to clients. About 25 percent of his clientele is Spanish speaking.

FRESH STARTS

Flores was going to leave the large firm and hang out his own shingle in 2004, but a former partner had a better idea: “Don’t do it! Come work for us!” Flores accepted an offer to work for a smaller firm, and one corporate client came with him. One year later, he was ready to make his move. He met with that client again and told him his plans, and the client said, “As long as you can handle the work, we’ll go with

WENT SOLO

2005

PRACTICE AREA

Criminal defense

you.” Having that client in place meant he “didn’t have to go through the usual trials and tribulations of keeping the lights on,” he says.

But what happened next was the biggest surprise. After his first trial in 2006, he fell in love with criminal law. “It happened unexpectedly,” he says, and although he risked losing his salary, he decided to stop taking civil cases and focus only on criminal law. He volunteered at the public defender’s office, sought contract work, went to craigslist, even contacted a recruiter. Finally, he was accepted to the BASF/LRIS Criminal Panel, which allowed the San Francisco Superior Court to appoint him to represent indigent clients.



Choose an area of focus and make it your specialty.”

GETTING NOTICED

While at the Hall of Justice, Flores started asking questions and developing a reputation for providing good service. “I went the extra mile and gave full reports to attorneys who asked me to stand in,” he says. Other attorneys started to notice and give him referrals for DUI and other cases.

ON SHARING SPACE

Flores found it was sad and lonely working from home, so now he shares office space with four other criminal defense attorneys. “Invaluable!” he says. “Sharing office space is great.”

THE BIGGEST SURPRISE

“My inability to expand,” Flores replies when asked what surprised him most about going solo. When he opened his practice in 2005, he was certain he would have several other attorneys working for him within a few years, but that has not worked out as planned. “It’s because clients are referred to me. They’ve heard something about me,” he says, and this makes it difficult for him to hand off the work to someone else. “I provide personal service in court with the client. I provide my cell phone number, text, email—although I do set specific boundaries. If they need me, they can contact me directly. I am going to answer questions for my clients.”

SAGE ADVICE

“Choose an area of focus and make it your specialty.” When Flores was starting out, it hurt him to turn down civil litigation cases. The income would have helped, but he wanted to give himself the time to do good work in criminal defense, and he persevered. “I don’t feel comfortable with young attorneys who say they do everything,” he says, and his success is an indication that focus pays off.



Alicia **Gámez**

Law Office of Alicia M. Gámez

WENT SOLO

2010

PRACTICE AREAS

Business law,
trust and estates,
taxation

EXTRACURRICULAR

BASF Board of Directors



Gámez has shared more of her insights and advice in BASF’s Solo/Small Firm Toolkit. See page 25.

PRIOR WORK AND EXPERIENCE

Alicia Gámez worked in the tax group of a large downtown firm, where she focused on public finance. Prior to hanging out her own shingle, she was in the tax LL.M. program at Golden Gate University.

WHAT MOTIVATED HER TO GO SOLO

She decided to go solo because of the “economic forces of the time,” but it was not all about financial necessity. Gámez also wanted to do the kind of work she wanted to do and exercise some flexibility.

THE STRANGEST THING THAT HAPPENED

Looking back, Gámez says, “the strangest thing was that I got clients.” That is one of the biggest fears lawyers face when they consider going solo, but for Gámez, it happened organically. “Friends and neighbors were asking for advice and help because I was the attorney on the block,” she says, and all of her business since has come from referrals. Just recently she ran her first advertisement. “I lived in anxiety for a long time,” she says, “and I can’t say I’m free of it yet.” It is a challenge echoed by others profiled here, and Gámez says a remedy is to “rely on your network, seek the advice of senior colleagues, and your referrals will come from your network, too.”

WHAT SHE LOVES MOST ABOUT BEING A SOLO PRACTITIONER

“I have tremendous flexibility,” Gámez says. “As long as I can cover costs, I can take projects I find interesting, no matter how lucrative they are. I can do things for free because I want to or because they are interesting or compelling.” She enjoys the independence and autonomy of being solo. Being able to manage her own time has also made it possible for her to become involved in worthy projects and groups, such as BASF’s Taxation Section. Through that group, she organized last October’s CLE panel “Proposition 13: Facts and Future.”

SAGE ADVICE

“Keep costs as low as possible.” In law school, Gámez first learned about “golden handcuffs,” the temptation to be pulled into “the lifestyle” with fancy cars and expensive homes, which requires higher overhead. “Modest economic requirements allow for flexibility,” she says. This also makes it possible for her to make sure that her clients’ interests—not her fees—come first.

Jason Putnam Gordon

Putnam Gordon



PRIOR WORK AND EXPERIENCE

Jason Putnam Gordon clerked for two years in federal court then spent three and a half years in litigation with a large law firm.

WHY HE TOOK THE LEAP TO GO SOLO

After clerking and being in a large practice, Gordon could not fathom how running a small firm or being a solo practitioner would be possible. But he “wanted to work on creating something that worked for me, to live life the way I want, to practice the way I want.” He did some soul searching and thought about going back to school, maybe switching to medicine, maybe turning his passion for skydiving into a profession. For many practical reasons, he chose to stick with the law.

HOW HE GOT STARTED

Research! Gordon read a number of books and recommends *How to Start and Build a Law Practice* by Jay G. Foonberg. (“You have to get this book!”) He also interviewed solo practitioners and people who started out solo and now have firms. One family friend, thirty-five years after hanging out a solo shingle, now has twenty-five employees. “Just the fact that there’s living, breathing proof it can be done—before Yelp, before the Internet—was encouraging,” he says.

OVERCOMING THE FIRST BIG HURDLE

About eighteen months before his “hard” opening, Gordon had a “soft” opening. “It was very difficult for me to sell myself until I felt I had the back end up,” he says, so he spent time studying to change from litigation to a transactional practice. “Before getting my website up, I wanted to have a handle on what I was doing and selling.” Now when he looks at picking up new work, he asks himself, “Is it in my scope of expertise and is it what I want to do?”

GROWING THE BUSINESS

Gordon’s goal is to be busy enough to offer contract work to other attorneys. To that end, he strives to deliver high-quality work and to volunteer in the community so that he can build connections with people. One surprising avenue for creating opportunities for complementary work and picking up overflow is his shared office space. He leases a cube from a small firm in the city and considers himself very lucky to have it. “I love it. The people in the office are terrific, and it’s a beautiful space.”

SAGE ADVICE

“For me, it was a process,” Gordon says, and he relates preparing to open his own practice to preparing to jump out of a plane. It is not something you do on a whim.

WENT SOLO
2012

PRACTICE AREAS
Startup, business,
and corporate law



[I] wanted to work on creating something that worked for me, to live life the way I want, to practice the way I want.”

You complete training, develop your skills, work hard, and check and double-check your gear. Then you take a leap of faith. “No one would skydive if everyone died,” he says, but “if you do the ground and prep work, it’s almost certain that your parachute will open—and it’s going to be the best experience of your life.”



Josh Ridless

Ridless Law Office

WENT SOLO 2000

PRACTICE AREAS

Transactional
business law, intellectual
property, and litigation
working with emerging
growth companies

EXTRACURRICULAR

Barristers Club
Past President,
BASF Board of Directors

PRIOR WORK AND EXPERIENCE

Josh Ridless started out working at a law firm downtown.

WHAT MOTIVATED HIM TO GO SOLO

It was not long before Ridless recognized he was stretched too thin trying to meet the 2,200 hour/year minimum at his firm. He had no time for himself outside the office, and he barely made the minimum. “It wasn’t an environment I was going to succeed in,” he says. Something had to give.

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM A FRIEND

A partner at the firm, one of the people he especially took to, came to him one day and said, “Hey, I’m leaving. I can’t hire you full time, but I can give you accounts part time.” Ridless jumped at the chance and spent the next eight months building up a clientele until he was able to go out on his own.

RECALLING THE EARLY (LEAN) YEARS

Ridless was at his uncle’s birthday party and met an older man who had been successful in insurance. “He asked ‘What are you doing?’ and I told him I was out on my own, and nervous about whether or not this would work,” says Ridless. “I worried I didn’t have enough billable hours, and I had anxiety about where my future would be leading me.” “Careful what you wish for,” the man said. “It didn’t seem applicable at the time,” says Ridless, “but within a couple of years, I got it.”

WHAT’S MOST SATISFYING

Flexibility and autonomy are recurring themes with solo practitioners. “I’m more in control about everything,” Ridless says. “I get to choose my own clients. I take responsibility for my work from top to bottom. I get to focus on aspects of the work that are most interesting to me.”

MANAGING THE WORK

With practice areas ranging from mergers and acquisitions to arbitration and litigation to intellectual property transactions for small to midsize businesses, Ridless needs

to deliver a full menu of services to his clients. With more than a decade of experience under his belt, he now has some advantages: he has developed his strengths and has an understanding of his interests so that he can focus on what he does best, and he has built a Rolodex of competent and reliable contract attorneys. Being able to confidently hand off some of the “easy” work allows him to be more strategic with his clients.

SAGE ADVICE

“Ask yourself, ‘Why do I want to do this?’” Ridless emphasizes that going solo is not for the meek. “You’ve got to network. You can’t rely on a firm to do that for you.” And this means you must have the personality for it. “You must enjoy meeting people,” he says, “and it must come naturally.”

Sandro Tuzzo

Law Offices of Sandro Tuzzo



PRIOR WORK AND EXPERIENCE

Sandro Tuzzo started out as a solo practitioner. He was accepted to participate in the BASF/LRIS mentorship program, which at the time was designed to attract new lawyers to do dependency work. He was able to gain the skills and experience and ultimately joined the Dependency Panel for attorneys who are appointed by the superior court to represent indigent families and children in dependency court. “I worked on cases right out of law school.” After four years of running his own show, he wanted to broaden his skills and gain more experience in family law. He was invited to join a law firm and worked there for just under two years.

HIS MOTIVATION TO GO SOLO (AGAIN)

“I wanted more of a way over the type of work I took on,” he says. To put this in context, he explains, large law firms typically have higher overhead, which can place limits on the types of cases they can accept. Tuzzo did not want to face the same limitations; he wanted to be able to work with a range of clients, on a range of cases.

HOW HE FOUND HIS MENTORS

Everyone is busy, and finding someone who has the time and interest to be a mentor is challenging. “There is a general issue of lack of on-the-job training,” he says, and you must create your own opportunities by reaching out and connecting with people who will donate their time. Tuzzo’s first mentor was assigned to him at the firm where he worked between solo gigs. For family law practitioners, he recommends looking into organizations such as the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML; aaml.org), which will mentor attorneys.



You’ve got to network.
[...] You must enjoy meeting people and it must come naturally.”

WENT SOLO

2002,
then again in
2009

PRACTICE AREA

Family law



I can explore and develop new ways to deliver services to a wider range of clients.”

THE BEST PART OF HIS DAY

Tuzzo says the best part of the day is the start of the day. “I decide what I’m going to focus on,” he says. Being a solo practitioner also allows him to check in periodically to see where he is going with his practice and choose where he will invest his time and energy. For example, he’s been working on a legal startup model that will help make family law affordable to more people in need by using technology along with legal advice. “Since I am able to shape the direction of my practice,” he says, “I can explore and develop new ways to deliver services to a wider range of clients.”

SAGE ADVICE

“Find a network—and learn *how* to network.” Being a solo practitioner can be lonely and stressful, and building support for yourself is crucial. Learning how to network is one of the toughest parts of being a solo practitioner, especially for attorneys who are new to solo practice. “Start connecting with people practicing in your area,” says Tuzzo, “and ask if they are interested in helping you.” Introducing yourself to the participants in the BASF section that relates to your area of practice—or the area in which you wish to practice—is a great way to start. (Tuzzo has served as chair of BASF’s Family Law Section.) Learn about your options and upcoming events at www.sfbar.org/cle/sections.aspx.

Kathleen Guthrie Woods is a San Francisco-based freelance writer.

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- **20% off** IT services, including cloud and mobile, from **Langtech IT systems consulting**.
- **Receive \$100** when you open a new **Provident Credit Union** membership with business or personal checking.
- Valuable discounts on a wealth of offerings from **LexisNexis®**, including research, client development and practice management tools.
- Savings of 15% on custom printing from **Papyrus**.
- Special introductory discounts on **The Recorder** and **therecorder.com**—deep discounts for solo and small firms.

www.sfbar.org/discountsandoffers

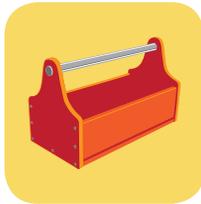
SOLO/ SMALL FIRM TOOLKIT

A guide to hanging your own shingle, written by San Francisco attorneys

www.sfbar.org/toolkit



Topics covered in the toolkit:



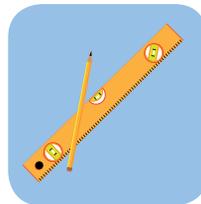
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