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Young attorneys seek the sweet spot in work-life balancing act

By Tom Kirvan



Max Dormer
Rothman Gordon P.C.



Elyssa Kulas
*Ferris & Britton,
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Justin Paik
*Ferris & Britton,
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“The Young and the Not-so Restless” may well be the working title for the new breed of attorneys who are taking command of their careers and shaping their professional identities in the wake of the pandemic.

The COVID outbreak in the first quarter of 2020 upended many workplace norms, blurring the line between professional and personal life, while adding a different sort of challenge for many attorneys committed to maintaining the proper work-life balance.

Striking the right balance between work and home responsibilities has been a key priority for attorneys Elyssa Kulas, Justin Paik, and Max Dormer, three young lawyers representative of the Millennials involved with the Primerus™ community in recent years.

Justin Paik, an alumnus of California Western School of Law, is an attorney with the San Diego law firm of Ferris & Britton, specializing in business, commercial real estate, and trust and estate matters. He joined the firm in 2014 after serving as a judicial extern for a pair of magistrate judges with the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California.

A native of South Korea, Paik immigrated to the United States with his family at the age of 17, and attended the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in global and international studies. During law school, he served as Executive Lead Articles Editor for the California Western International Law Journal, setting the stage for his heightened involvement in bar association activities in the years ahead.

Soon after passing the bar in 2013, Paik methodically began building his professional network, joining the San Diego County Bar Association, serving as vice chair of the New

Lawyer Forum in 2016. Simultaneously, he ramped up his involvement with the Korean American Bar Association of San Diego, serving on its board of directors from 2015-19, including a year as president for the 2017-18 term.

“I found my service with the bar associations to be very fulfilling and it was a great way to meet members of the bench and bar,” said Paik, who currently serves as vice president of the San Diego Korean American Coalition. “I see volunteer work as a totally enriching experience.”

Paik could say the same about parenthood, which he and his wife, Linda, began experiencing in 2019 when their son, Lucas, was born.

“It was an adjustment, but in a very good way,” Paik said of becoming a father. “Our son has brought great joy into our life, while also bringing new responsibilities for both of us. It can be a real juggling act, trying to balance work with parenting.”

Fortunately, said Paik, he works at a law firm that values the importance of striking a healthy work-life balance.

“My wife is an elementary school teacher and so I have the primary responsibility of tending to our son’s childcare needs in the morning,” Paik related. “We’re fortunate that the firm gives me the flexibility to get our son ready for his day before I begin mine at the office. It’s a very caring culture, and that’s something I placed great value on when I was looking for a firm to join.”

Paik got his first taste of Primerus™ in 2015 when he attended a Young Lawyers Section meeting in Orlando, and now will serve as the firm’s chief liaison to the international organization following the retirement of longtime shareholder Michael Weinstein.

“I recently attended the Global Conference (in San Diego) and expect to become more involved in Primerus™ in the years ahead,” said Paik. “I’ve really enjoyed the opportunity to meet lawyers from around the world and to develop relationships with them.”

Elyssa Kulas, a colleague of Paik’s at Ferris & Britton, is an associate in the Litigation Department of the San Diego firm, focusing her practice on labor and employment law. As a seasoned litigator, Kulas has defended a range of employers “against single-plaintiff, class action, and PAGA (Private Attorneys General Act) claims” involving discrimination, harassment, retaliation, wrongful termination, and alleged wage and hour violations.

Born and raised in Chicago, Kulas earned a pair of bachelor’s degrees from Loyola University, graduating *magna cum laude* while majoring in political science and Spanish. She also holds a degree in psychology from the Jesuit school in Chicago, where she was a four-year member of the women’s soccer team for the Ramblers.

She ventured west for law school, graduating from the University of San Diego School of Law, where she was the editor-in-chief of the Vis International Commercial Arbitration Moot Team and a member of the International Law Journal. Kulas joined Ferris & Britton in 2015 after clerking for the U.S. Attorney’s Office in the Civil Division and volunteering for the University of San Diego’s Small Claims Clinic.

“I wanted to branch out a bit and to enjoy a different kind of lifestyle,” Kulas said of her decision to pursue a legal career on the West Coast. “The decision came with a bonus, as I met my husband (Ray) out here while he was on active duty with the Navy after graduating from the Naval Academy in Annapolis.”

The couple is hoping to celebrate their four-year wedding anniversary in a big way on February 16, the due date for the birth of their first child, a baby girl.

“Hopefully the timing will be just right,” Kulas said with a smile.

In the meantime, Kulas said she is grateful to work for a firm that is “family-oriented” as she approaches the many joys and challenges of parenthood.

YOUNG LAWYERS



Left, Pittsburgh attorney Max Dormer, who is on the road to becoming a CPA as well, is pictured with his girlfriend, Haley. Center, San Diego attorney Elyssa Kulas has strong family ties to the legal profession, as both her father and grandfather have practiced law in Chicago. She is pictured with her husband, Ray. Right, a favorite photo captures the essence of Justin Paik's family, which includes his wife, Linda, and their 3-year-old son, Lucas.

"I can't imagine being on a parenthood journey where the expectation of a certain number of billable hours would come at the expense of raising a family," said Kulas. "It would be particularly difficult in my situation since I already have a limited time to see my husband because of his regular deployments.

"Our firm also really was prepared for the remote work model when COVID hit, making the pivot in a very seamless and effective way," Kulas said. "We didn't miss a beat."

Kulas, who was raised in a close-knit Ukrainian community in Chicago, said she has "felt the pain" from afar for those in her ancestral country who are suffering from the devastating impact of the ongoing Russian invasion.

"My family has distant relatives in Western Ukraine, so the war going on there is personal to all of us," said Kulas, whose father and 88-year-old grandfather are both attorneys in Chicago. "We so hope that the war will end soon, and that Ukraine can begin the process of rebuilding."

Max Dormer, an associate with Pittsburgh-based Rothman Gordon P.C., joined the law firm in October 2021 as a member of its Estates & Trusts practice group. With a strong accounting background and a focus in tax law, Dormer also practices

with the Business & Corporate as well as with the Closely-Held and Family Business groups at Rothman Gordon, a firm that will mark its 70th anniversary in 2024.

A Penn State University grad with a bachelor's degree in accounting, Dormer obtained his juris doctor in 2019 from the University of Pittsburgh Law School, where he received a Tax Law Certificate. Following law school, Dormer went to work for an accounting firm, a two-year stay during which he began the grueling four-step process of obtaining his CPA license.

"It's a grind and involves passing four separate exams," Dormer said of the licensing process that can stretch over several years. "I've completed three of the four and should receive the results from the last one – auditing – in February. It will be a relief to be finished, as it feels like I've spent a great deal of my adult life prepping for exams."

In fact, he has, considering that Dormer has faced the challenge of passing the bar to obtain his law license, followed by a two-year arduous journey to earn the CPA designation.

"A lot of people ask me which is harder," Dormer related. "I would have to say that I found the bar to be harder because there is so much material to digest. On the other hand, I definitely found it much easier to

study for the bar because the subject matter was much more interesting to read."

Dormer grew up with his sister (Maggie) in the Pittsburgh area, where their father (Brian) has spent 40-plus years as a commercial airline pilot while their mother (Esther) has worked in the venture capital field.

"My dad never pushed me to follow in his footsteps, principally because he wasn't sure I had the desire to do it," Dormer said. "He also has experienced the volatility of the airline industry, especially after 9/11, and he didn't want me to go through those kinds of ups and downs."

Now, as he is on the verge of having the letters JD and CPA attached to his last name, Dormer is confident of a bright future, particularly with a law firm that values professional development and growth.

"I wanted to work for a firm with a great culture and I'm very fortunate to have found it here," Dormer said of his experience at Rothman Gordon. "I consider myself extremely lucky to work at a firm that encourages growth and is willing to bring in young blood. I'm also looking forward to getting more involved with Primerus™ and to utilize the resources they provide in terms of marketing and continuing education." 

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