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Lawyer shares her struggles

Private defense attorney fights drug addiction, works to pursue her dreams

BY MARY KATE MALONE
Law Bulletin staff writer

Private defense attorney Elizabeth A. Johnson wanted to be a lawyer her whole life, but her dream nearly slipped away when she became addicted to marijuana at 17 years old.

The once straight-A student became caught up in the wrong crowd and started smoking pot every day, all day, in a crack-house in Joliet, she said.

Eventually police arrested her, charging Johnson with felony disorderly conduct. She bonded out of jail, returned to her parents' house in Morris and experienced something close to rock bottom, she said.

"I remember holding a pillow on my couch, thinking I had lost everything," Johnson said. "I had no idea what my future looked like. It was just complete fear.

"That's probably the moment where I was like, 'Something's got to give.'"

So began a hard-fought journey toward achieving the dream she nearly lost.

Johnson plead guilty to the charge and enrolled in Will County's drug court program, which was only a few years old at the time. If she completed it, the charge would be dismissed.

The program required her to receive outpatient counseling, report weekly to a probation department, take drug tests, attend group alcohol counseling meetings and perform 200 hours of community service. She also

had to get a job or go back to school.

"I started (drug court) with the intent to skate through it and get the charges dismissed," Johnson said.

But she found that sobriety was addicting in its own way and she wanted more of it.

Johnson recommitted to school and eventually enrolled at a local junior college and then at Northern Illinois University. She gave birth to a daughter while in school and graduated in 2006, her eyes set on law school. In fall 2007, she began classes at The John Marshall Law School.

The single mother commuted to Chicago by train every day from the south suburbs, sometimes with no choice but to bring her daughter with her.

"I think I slept an hour a night for two or three years," Johnson said.

One of her first professors, Arthur Acevedo, remembers Johnson as the student who never came to class unprepared and sometimes had a toddler in tow. He saw a fearlessness in

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Elizabeth A. Johnson

Johnson that pushed her to argue her point if she disagreed with a classmate.

"Liz managed to balance law school and being a mom quite well," Acevedo said. "She is very studious but she also manages to be pretty spirited at times. She doesn't let a lot of pressure overtake her."

But privately, Johnson hit low points. During some particularly stressful stretches, she laid on her bedroom floor in the middle of the night, sobbing.

"I would think, 'This is so hard. I can't go on.' But after so many breakdowns here and there, you know, I decided I either do it or I don't," she said. "So I decided to put my all into it and fight for it."

On graduation day, her classmates were puzzled by her tears.

"I think I just sat there (at graduation) and cried," she said. "I didn't tell them I almost missed my chance to be here. I was just beyond grateful."

Johnson worked as an assistant state's attorney in Will County for about a year before starting her own practice — the Law Office of Elizabeth A. Johnson P.C. — last fall.

"There's a lot of drive there to essentially take that risk and go off into the unknown," said

Chuck Pelkie, Johnson's former colleague and spokesman for the Will County state's attorney's office. "It's a huge commitment, and even when you have 10 or 20 years of experience, it's a difficult decision to make."

Johnson spends half her time doing criminal defense work and the other half doing family law.

Both as a prosecutor and now as a defense attorney, Johnson said her story of recovery impacted her interactions with certain defendants.

"I think I have a more grounded and empathetic perspective to certain clients," she said. "I know with some clients, I'd like to say I've changed their life just telling them what my story is."

To the defendant facing drug charges, who insists he doesn't have a problem but keeps testing positive on his drugs tests, she said: "Look, let me level with you. I've been there.

"I don't tell (my story) to everyone. ... God prompts me to face certain things with certain people. I find that every person I've brought it up to, that I've represented or otherwise, has had a very positive response to it."

Johnson also shares her story in speaking engagements around northern Illinois. She has spoken to frequent and first-time offenders, telling them it is indeed possible to make a choice and turn their lives around. She said she has spoken publicly of her story about 10 times.

"That's what I try to reach people on, that it doesn't matter what drug you're on — when you associate with bad people and you involve drugs, it gets a hold of your mind and willpower," she said.

The first item Johnson bought for her new law office was a wall picture, which hangs beside her office door.

It shows a large cross and reads: "Faith in what you cannot see."

"It means everything to me, just having the faith to be here," she said. "Every day I'm grateful for where I am."