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#### FASHION BACKWARD

## Confessions of a high-paid fashion failure

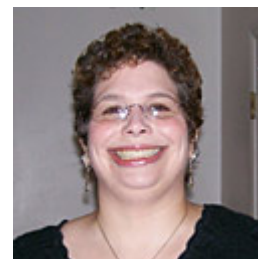
**Tracey I. Batt / Special to NLJ.com**

January 26, 2009

I have a deep, dark secret that I am about to reveal to you. This is very difficult for me to admit, but it is time for the healing to begin. When I was a fifth-year associate at a large New York City law firm, I was issued a summons by the firm's Fashion Police.

I can hear you gasping. "I thought the Fashion Police were an urban legend, like the Easter Bunny or the balanced budget," you are saying. You are wrong. They are real. I have seen them.

I have always been one to dance to the beat of a different drummer, to heed the words of my inner voice, to follow my own bliss, in everything I do. That includes fashion. When left to my own devices, I tend to dress like a cross between somebody who made a series of wrong turns on the way back from Woodstock and a lost member of Guns n' Roses, although most of the time not the one with the bucket on his head.



New Jersey Volunteer  
Lawyers for the Arts  
director Tracey Batt

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When I first started at the firm, I did my best to adapt my personal style to the demands of the professional dress code. Really, I did. All right, maybe what I actually did was try my best to adapt the professional dress code to my personal style. In any case, I thought I looked great – mannish pants suits with long jackets in black or deep colors, artistic jewelry, black leather ankle boots, and a black Egyptian leather trench coat with a half cape. In retrospect, I may have looked a little too much as though I wanted to be filmed in slow motion walking away from an action movie explosion, but still. I most definitely was making a fashion statement.

As asides, I would like to point out two related items. First, I do not have pointy feet. I cannot for the life of me understand how professional women wear pointy, high-heeled shoes, without causing themselves permanent damage. If I were to so much as try on a pair of designer heels, I would exit the store on a stretcher. Second, I do not have professional hair. I am a Jersey Girl born and bred. This means that I have, and will always have, an untamable mane of curls. On the plus side, it acts like a built-in airbag when I, for example, try on an ill-considered pair of shoes.

So there I was, having spent a fair amount of money on some very nice suits, thinking I looked fabulous and hoping I looked more like Dana Scully than like Bea Arthur, when the unthinkable happened. First, the firm adopted casual Fridays, and then it went to full-time business casual.

The really odd part about the switch was that, although the firm, to my knowledge, had not had a formalized dress code when it was full-time Business Dress, the firm initiated a slew of guidelines when it made the big switch in the late 1990s. Every employee received a multi-page, full-color brochure providing excruciating details about what was and was not appropriate Business Casual wear for men and for women. For example, during certain warmer months, women could wear shoes with open toes OR with open heels, but not with both.

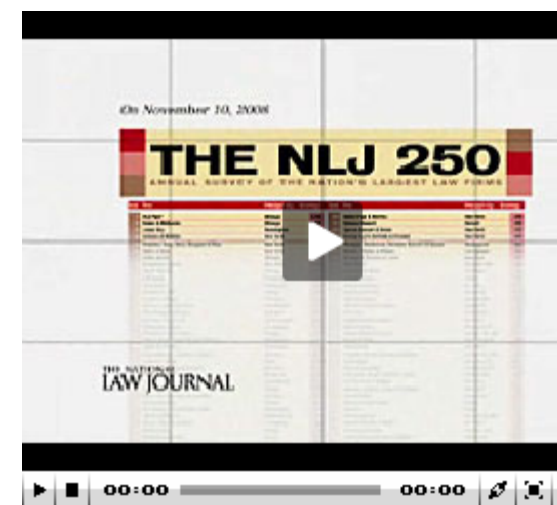
I pored over the guidelines. I made notes. I held the full-color images in my hands as I slogged through catalogs and websites. I convinced myself that my new attire was within both the letter and the spirit of the Business Casual guidelines. I thought I had done everything I was supposed to do. Apparently, I thought wrong.

Then it came. The knock on the apartment door in the middle of the night. "Open up, ma'am." Or, in this case, the blindsided attack from my favorite department partner and the Head of Associate Something -or-Other. "Tracey, we need to talk to you." It wasn't just the issuance of a citation from the Fashion Police, it was a full-scale intervention! They were sending me off to rehab, in the personage of a fashion consultant. The firm had hired someone to take me shopping and to a high-end salon for a full makeover. It was positively mortifying.

I do not think I will ever understand fashion. I have tried to educate my palate, as it were, by watching numerous fashion commentary programs, with dos and don'ts and ins and outs. I even test myself to see whether I have learned to agree



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with the "experts." Unfortunately, I still have about a 90% failure rate. If I think a celebrity looks incredibly chic on the red carpet, the pundits unanimously question whether the celebrity in question even owns a mirror. If, on the other hand, I actually burst out laughing at some starlet's ensemble, that very outfit invariably will be touted as the greatest achievement in styling history since the underwire.

Sometimes I wonder what it would be like if I put myself through the horror of one of these very public makeovers. "What do you think of this pattern?" I would be asked on national television. "I wouldn't let that fabric touch my body if I were on fire and you were using it to beat out the flames." I may not have great taste, but I am definitive in my opinions.

The good news is that I no longer work for a big firm in New York City. I run a small non-profit legal services organization, and I currently work from my home, where I can wear whatever I want if I don't have a meeting to attend or a speech to give.

But this semester I am teaching a class at the local branch of the state university's law school. I asked the associate dean, an old friend of mine from my own law school days, what the dress code was. He has no idea how horrified I was when he answered nonchalantly, "Oh, you know. Law firm business casual."

*Tracey I. Batt, Esq., is the Executive Director of New Jersey Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts, Inc., and an Adjunct Professor at Rutgers School of Law–Camden. Before joining NJVLA, she was the Associate Director and Legal Services Manager of Philadelphia Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts as well as an associate at Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP in New York, where she practiced copyright and music licensing law for seven years.*

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