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MONEY MATTERS

Were the golden handcuffs supposed to close around my neck?

Tracey I. Batt / Special to NLJ.com
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New Jersey Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts director Tracey Batt

If you are a regular reader of this column (admittedly, that may be wishful thinking on my hubristic part), then you may have noticed a common thread running through my writing. Here's a recap: Back in June, in "Make Your Own Kind of Music," I [wrote](#) about having at least one personal item in your office that makes you happy, but not necessarily following my lead by going completely over the top and stuffing every available inch of office space with tchotchkes. Then, in October, I [exhorted](#) my readers to take advantage of opportunities to do enjoyable things outside of the office, but not necessarily to follow my lead by

going completely over the top and seeing every show that comes to town. Do you see a pattern evolving here?

When I was at a big firm in New York, I assumed that I had more money than I could possibly spend, but I certainly gave spending all of it the old college try. I earned it, I told myself confidently. I earned every Alice Cooper action figure, every Ronnie Wood portrait of Eric Clapton, and every ticket to see Ringo Starr

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(even on successive nights).

My family earned it, I rationalized as well. If I wasn't going to have the time to plan family holiday and birthday celebrations, then I at least owed them great presents. When my brother started a family, it was imperative to me that my amazing niece receive a ¼-size drum set, a ¼-size guitar, and a tiny little convertible (to be pushed by someone with more time than I had available, of course) for her first Christmas.

In short, I developed terrible spending habits while I was at the firm. I was decidedly in the grip of the dreaded Golden Handcuffs, forced to work for the firm forever to keep myself in the manner to which I had thoroughly enjoyed becoming accustomed.

Except, I wasn't. I left the firm after seven exciting and educational years, and went into pro bono work. "The money was never the important thing to me," I declaimed haughtily to anyone who might be listening. It probably does not come as a surprise to you that going from seventh-year associate at a big firm to Legal Services Manager at a small legal services non-profit required a big pay cut, but I ran the numbers and decided that I was ready to downsize. I have since worked my way up to Executive Director of another small legal services non-profit, and although I am well compensated for my field, let's face it, it's not New York big firm attorney pay.

The problem is, I still work very hard. What's more, a rather loud and aggressive part of me is still demanding the perks of working very hard. In other words, I haven't been able to get rid of my terrible spending habits. I am incapable of resisting the charms of a rare tchotchke, saying "no" to the aggressive Ronnie Wood gallery salesperson, foregoing tickets to the Eric Clapton and Steve Winwood reunion concert, or buying some outrageous gift for my amazing niece or her equally amazing little brother.

So this is finally the time when I can say to you in all honesty, DON'T do as I've done. By all means, give yourself the occasional reward for your efforts. But don't let yourself develop habits that you cannot break if and when the time comes for you to leave the big firm. If you are even considering the possibility of giving up big firm life and venturing out into the rewarding world of pro bono, you should start cutting back on your spending now to see if you can do it. You may be surprised to discover that you can't. I know I was, and I still am. I should have cut up those high-limit credit cards when I had the chance.

As I write this, it is the holiday shopping season. I am making a concerted effort this year to spend less on presents for my family. Will I succeed? Well, probably not, particularly where my niece and nephew are concerned. They call me "Fun Aunt Tracey." How can I cut back on spending for anyone who calls me "Fun Aunt Tracey"?

How about this: I didn't even try to get tickets to the Led Zeppelin reunion concert in London. Baby steps, Fun Aunt Tracey. Baby steps.

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

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