



DEBRA LEE HOVATTER

Pursuing an ideal life, legal career in the EP

Debra Lee Hovatter wasn't unhappy working in Richmond, Va., as in-house legal counsel for SunTrust Mortgage Inc. and Capital One Services.

But she wasn't as satisfied with her career and home life as she wanted to be, either. In late 2010, she began meeting with an executive coach to decide on a next step.

As Hovatter described what she viewed as the ideal law practice and the life she wanted outside of work, it became clear she needed to relocate, and a particular area became the obvious choice for her next home: the Eastern Panhandle.

"My husband's family has been in West Virginia for generations and we've always loved this area," she said. "When I started thinking about what I wanted from life, I realized how much I longed to spend time with friends and family. When my husband and I looked at where our friends live, we saw we have something like 15 sets of friends within 50 miles of the Eastern Panhandle.

"We're big on history, too and love visiting Harpers Ferry, Shepherdstown, Berkeley Springs. For so many reasons, we saw this as where we wanted to spend the rest of our lives."

She and her husband, who is retired from CSX, quickly found a dream home in Jefferson County, and next on Hovatter's to-do list was landing a job she felt passionate about.

She got back in touch with former co-workers at the Charleston-based law firm of Spilman, Thomas & Battle. She'd worked at the firm in Morgantown from 2004 to 2008.

"I said, 'I know you aren't in the Eastern Panhandle, but I am moving there and if you ever decide to open an office there, please keep me in mind,'" Hovatter said.

The firm's response was fast, unexpected – and left her thrilled.

"When the firm suggested I could live in the Panhandle and telecommute, I couldn't have been more ecstatic," she said. "I'd loved working for Spilman before. A lot of law firms wouldn't be open to a non-traditional arrangement like this, but this is a firm that's very supportive of new ideas."

"I believe anyone would tell you it's clearly important to the firm that employees feel satisfied in and out of work."

Hovatter, who grew up in upstate New York and earned

a degree from Cornell before finishing summa cum laude from South Texas College of Law in Houston, technically is based back in Spilman's Morgantown office, where she serves as co-chair of the Consumer Finance Litigation Practice Group.

Her experience makes her an expert in consumer and commercial litigation, bankruptcy, consumer lending, regulatory matters and consumer finance.

"My work will take me all over the state," she said. "I'll go to the Morgantown office a couple of times a month and spend some time in Charleston but thanks to a high-speed Internet connection, most of my work will happen from my home."

Eric W. Iskra, who heads client relations for Spilman, said Hovatter's return to the firm is a solid win.

"Some of our larger clients, Fortune 100 companies, are really focused on work-life balance," he said. "We've taken note of the importance of this issue, and made it a priority for Spilman. Working remotely, as Debra Lee is doing, is one element in the larger initiative to be very innovative in making Spilman a flexible workplace."

"The program also encompasses flexible work hours and alternative career paths for attorneys. Clearly, our goal across all of this is to gain a competitive advantage to position Spilman to be able to attract the top talent in the marketplace."

Besides its headquarters in Charleston and offices in Morgantown and Wheeling, Spilman also has locations in Pennsylvania (Pittsburgh and Harrisburg), Virginia (Roanoke) and North Carolina (Winston-Salem).

The firm, which employs more than 150 attorneys, dates to 1864.

Hovatter, who may be reached at 304.216.5835 or dhovatter@spilmanlaw.com, says she's eager to begin making a difference in her new hometown.

She hopes to find a way to use her financial expertise and legal background through volunteer work with local veterans.

She regularly accepts invitations to speak on financial topics and also is the author of a bankruptcy handbook. Published by the American Bankruptcy Institute, the book is designed for non-lawyers working in the financial services industry.

Devoted to racewalking since 2008, she'd also like to introduce her favorite sport to the Panhandle.

"In every way, we're so happy that we made the move here," she said. "We've already met so many friendly, interesting, welcoming people. We felt at home from the day we arrived."