IGNORANCE IS BLISS:
CONFESSIONS OF A GUY ON A LADDER

“A chasm reminds us that there is a fine line between bravery and idiocy.” I had never heard this quote before, but for many sole practitioners its truth is evident.

My decision to go solo was not based on fate or logic; to the contrary, it was foreign to anything I had known. Following law school I went to work in a large insurance defense firm. At first I loved it: the guaranteed salary, the latest in technological gadgets, the great people, and the free meals during all-too-frequent firm meetings. In this life I often said that there were three things I would never do: (1) be a sole practitioner, (2) represent plaintiffs, and (3) work out of a home office. Those things seemed like vinegar to my water life.

But then it hit me. Like so many rock stars before me (yes, I refer to myself as a rock star even though I am tone deaf, cannot clap on beat, and look ridiculous in leather), I wanted to do my own thing. I wanted to climb my own ladder, not someone else’s. For some reason the ladder I envisioned climbing was as a sole practitioner, representing plaintiffs, and working out of a home office.

So I went for it. But not since my first day as an attorney had my ignorance been so embarrassingly obvious. And it was not just the big questions that revealed my lack of knowledge, it was the most elementary ones: How do I set up a business entity, or do I even need to? How much money will it cost to start? How do I represent a plaintiff? What is an IOLTA account and how do I open one? Where is the courthouse in this town, anyway? (Well, not quite that bad.)

While I was ignorant about so many things, even I could see the challenges ahead. With not a single friend or family member here, I had moved my family from West Tennessee less than a year earlier. I had a wife and a toddler who were accustomed to luxuries like supper, shoes, and an occasional Redbox movie. If I had made any friends at all since arriving (you would have to ask them if they considered me their friend), they were not likely to volunteer to pay my mortgage. If I were going to climb this ladder, I needed help to get on the first rung.

I started reading as much as I could, not only about starting a law practice, but about how to run a service business. I talked—or rather tried to listen—to people...lots of people. Still, I had to decide what to do with the information I gathered. After all, I could not “do my own thing” by following everyone else’s map. Stubbornness? Yes. Foolish? I hoped not. But right or wrong this journey was going to be mine.

Being very little the wiser, I opened my law office (that is, my dining room table) in the fall of 2011. In no small part due to the KBA’s Lawyer Referral and Information Service, one client became two, and then ten. I was starting to see success. Not financial success yet but client satisfaction success. And I was helping people.

Now nearly two years into my climb, there are so many great things happening: The phone rings. I have a full-time paralegal who is overworked. I get a decent paycheck most months. And even greater still is that sometimes I crawl off my little ladder for the day and take my precious daughter for ice cream and a movie. If ever I forget—which I rarely do—it is those times that remind me how fortunate I am to have found my way here.

Admittedly I am sometimes reminded of all of the things that can go wrong. It is often when I am surrounded by other sole or small-firm practitioners that I become the most scared. This is not an indictment of them, to be sure. In fact, it is a reflection of the camaraderie that develops between climbers. We break down the façade and share our challenges, our fears, and yes, our failures. Still, it is their fears that validate my own. Fears like adverse legislative meddling, losing a big client whose payments ensure there is money left over after the bills are paid, or making a major mistake in the handling of a case.

For those who are considering flying solo, I wish I could say that I have overcome all my fears and am nearing the top of my ladder, albeit a skinny, wobbly, short one. But I cannot, at least not yet. The higher one goes the harder he will hit the ground if he falls. That law of gravity still makes me nervous. I am, however, more confident than ever before.

I remain blissfully ignorant as to whether my experiences are common to the group of sole practitioners in Knoxville. But if nothing else, I hope to instill confidence in the would-be solo attorney that not having all the answers is not fatal to your dream of flying alone. Learn all you can, do not be afraid to reveal your lack of knowledge to those who can help you, and go for it!

I am still not sure where this ladder leads. But God has blessed me more than I can put into words. I know He will not let me fall. So I keep on climbing, trying not to look down.