

Junior

PARTNERS



Jenna Peregoy with Austin
Photo by Rachel Zahumensky

Law firm welcomes wee ones

By David A. Maurer
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The blissful moment probably was registering somewhere deep in Sunny Pleasants' 9-week-old mind. The newborn managed a contented coo as she lay tummy-side-down across her mother's lap while receiving a gentle back rub. Yes, life can be pretty sweet at the law offices of Tucker Griffin Barnes.

When Bill Tucker founded the full-service law firm in 1989, his aim was to staff the company with happy attorneys and employees who were

passionate about their jobs and the place they work. As a father, he was aware of the additional stress working parents often have to deal with.

One major stressor was when mothers had to separate from their babies after a brief maternity leave. In a firm like TGB, where the vast majority of attorneys and staff are female, this can amount to a lot of angst.

"Soon after I started the firm, one of the staff members was going to have a baby and said she would be out a certain period of time," Tucker said in a conference room that also sees service as a play area. "She

asked if it would be OK if she brought the baby in with her a couple days a week so she could get a little work done."

"So it started evolving where a baby would come in with the mom, and she would be able to come back to work earlier. It was a win-win for everybody, because she got to bond and spend time with her baby while continuing to contribute to the business and earn a paycheck."

"I'm surprised more businesses don't think about doing something like this, because you lose so much productivity by not doing it. We've had more than 30 babies brought in by staff members

since we started this policy, and I've never heard one negative remark from a client about it."

Positive comments are another matter.

Mike Griffin, office manager for the Charlottesville law firm, has only heard clients compliment the company for having such a forward-thinking policy that goes the extra mile to help working moms.

Griffin, a retired no-nonsense Army officer, thinks the policy makes sound business sense. He feels it also adds a certain homey warmth to the office atmosphere and makes people a little more accommodating with each other.

"The way we look at it is that we would rather have an employee or an attorney here working, even if they're only productive 75 to 80 percent of the day," said Griffin, whose wife, Yvonne, is a senior partner in the firm. "That's better than not having them here at all."

"In some situations, it could be a choice between bringing the baby to work or not coming back to work at all, because daycare is so expensive and so hard to find. There's no doubt that this takes teamwork, and everybody has to be pretty much in agreement with the policy."

"What we do when the mother has to deal with a client is, someone else in the firm will volunteer to take care of the baby until the mother is finished. It's not uncommon to hear a staff person tell the mother, 'Hey, you go and do this real estate closing, and I'll take care of the baby for you.'"

The company's official policy is that mothers can bring their newborns to work with them until the babies are 6 months old. Tucker said this is more of a guideline than a hard and fast rule, and exceptions are made when warranted.

"Originally, the policy allowed mothers to bring their children in until they were toddlers," said Tucker, who helped furnish the conference room by donating a large,



Kim Richardson with Hunter

wooden toy chest with a no-slam safety lid.

"But then we had babies running up and down the hall, and we thought we should slow that up a little. We do allow parents to bring in their children on snow days when the schools are closed."

"On snow days this is like a day-care center, but it's actually a lot of fun. We all dress down and usually wear jeans and snow boots, because we enjoy going outside and playing with the kids."

Lynn Bradley had been practicing law with the firm for less than three years when she gave birth to her first child, Katie, in November 1998. Her introduction to motherhood was made infinitely easier because the company was willing to be flexible and work around her new priority.

"I've benefited greatly from the family-friendly business atmosphere here," Bradley said. "After my daughter was born, I took three months off, which for an attorney is pretty rare, because most are back in the office within a few weeks."

"Then I worked part time for two days a week for a good year and a half. Then I worked three days a week for a few years, and then four days a week. It was only when my daughter began kindergarten last year that I actually started working full time again."

"I became a partner in the firm in January 2005, so obviously my ability to advance wasn't damaged because of my working part time. The firm gave me the support that was necessary for me to forward my law practice while I was also growing my family."

When Bradley learned that Children, Youth and Family Services in Charlottesville was starting an annual award to be given to family-friendly businesses, she knew whom to nominate. She and her coworkers prepared and submitted an application, and the law firm became the first recipient of the award in 2003.

Bradley said working in a family-friendly environment means it can get a little noisy on snow days, but the stress this option eliminates is incalculable. Instead of having to do a lot of last-minute scurrying to find coverage for Katie, she just packs her snowsuit and they're off to the office.

"Having the snow-day option means everything to me," Bradley said. "Both my parents and my husband's parents live in Pennsylvania, so we don't have family in the area that can take care of Katie during the day."

"She and another little girl who comes in likes to play office. They have clients and make up their own folders, and have telephone calls and make appointments. It's fun to see



Suzanne Pleasants with Sunny

them mirror what they see us doing.”

TGB reaps benefits from increased productivity as well as a level of loyalty that many employers couldn't dream of getting from their staff. Sunny's mom, Suzanne Pleasants, said she would have to be dragged out the door and thrown in the parking lot before she would leave her job.

“I'm extremely loyal to the firm, because they have done so much for me,” Pleasants said as she rocked Sunny in her arms. “Babies really need their moms at this age and stage of development.”

“When I had my first child (Charlotte) eight years ago, I ended up quitting the job I had then. I had to go back to work after six weeks, so I had no choice but to put her in daycare. It was so traumatic that I cried all the way to work for a week.” “Within three weeks, I put in my notice to quit, because it was so emotionally taxing. By the time I'd get home from work I would have just an hour or so of time to spend with Charlotte before having to put her in bed.”

Pleasants has become something of a multi-tasking marvel. For example, she has become proficient at feeding her baby by cradling her in one arm, holding the bottle with her chin and typing with her free hand.

Newborn babies tend to sleep a lot, so they're actually much less disruptive than many people might think. On the occasion when Sunny kicks up a fuss, she and Mom go for a walk until everything is OK again.

Jenna Peregoy and her 3-month-old son, Austin, serve as living proof that happy moms make happy babies. She and Pleasants are paralegals and share an office.

The first-time mother said a day doesn't go by without someone remarking on how well behaved the babies are.

“Being able to bring our babies to work with us certainly makes us happy, and it definitely makes Austin and Sunny happier and calmer,” Peregoy said. “The bonding experience didn't end after six weeks, because we had to leave our babies with someone else during the day.”

“Being able to come back to work and not be worrying about your career falling apart while you're out is also a huge plus. There are so many benefits, like not being stressed out during my maternity leave trying to find daycare.”

“The downside is that Austin needs a lot of attention, so I'm not at 100 percent all the time. There are times when I have to stop work to take care of him for a minute or two. But everyone here is wonderful and helpful when I have to take a phone call, meet with a client or just take a break.”

Peregoy said a lot of people

get their “baby fix” by dropping by the office. If someone wants to nuzzle a bit with Austin or Sunny, or practice their rock-a-bye-baby technique, the chubby buddies are often available.

“I used to think watching fish swim around in a tank was the best thing for relaxing a person,” Tucker said. “Now I think holding a baby or just watching them sleep is even more relaxing.”

“This policy has really worked well for us and makes us feel like an extended family. When we have a snow day, it's nothing to have a pack of boys in one area of the office shooting rubber bands, and the girls upstairs cutting out paper dolls.”

For the time being, Sunny and Austin are happy together. They often can be found working out side by side in their bouncy chairs or offering a contented coo or two of comfort to those in need of some law work.

“I always get the biggest chuckle when I'm scheduling appointments for clients with young children,” Pleasants said. “They'll say they don't have child care and don't know when they can come in because they have no place to leave their kids.”

“Then I tell them about our office, and suddenly it all works out.”