

# Display of determination opened doors for a young attorney in Rhode Island



By Brian Cox

The fall after Melissa Green graduated law school and passed the bar exam, she continued to wait tables to support her two young children while submitting applications and resumes to the limited law firm listings online. The Great Recession was refusing to loosen its stifling grip on the economy and jobs with law firms in Rhode Island were scarce.

After a particularly difficult night at the restaurant, a frustrated Green asked herself, “What am I doing here? I have a law degree.”

She decided she was done waiting for an opportunity to present itself. She would take matters into her own hands and go find it.

“I went door-to-door to different law firms in the state with my resume in hand,” recalls Green.

One of those firms was Sayer Regan and Thayer, LLP which was founded in 1989 and had grown to become the largest firm in Newport. Green says the receptionist looked at her “like I had

12 heads” because the firm wasn’t listing a position, “and here I was, walking off the street, asking to speak to the person in charge about a job.” The receptionist kindly took her resume and passed it on to Peter Regan, the managing partner who oversees the firm’s Land Use and Litigation Practices.

Green’s grit and audacity paid off when Regan called her later that day. He didn’t have a position to offer, but he did need somebody with a legal mind to help organize more than a dozen boxes of documents for a case he’d recently inherited and that was going to trial in a couple of months.

Green seized the opportunity to get her foot in the door. Over the next several weeks, as Green began sorting through the documents, other attorneys in the firm recruited her to work on various probate and estate administration issues. Soon, she found herself putting in 40 hours a week, which did not go unnoticed.

Six months after Green walked in the firm’s front door and presented her resume, she was offered a position. The firm’s founding partner, Richard Sayer, took her under his wing and taught her everything he knew about estate planning and administration.

That was 14 years ago. Today, Green’s practice is thriving.

“I have a voluminous estate planning practice, and I also handle all of the estate administration for the office,” says Green. “I really like the work, which actually came as kind of a surprise to me. I had always expected to be a criminal defense attorney, but it turns out these areas of practice are very rewarding. It feels gratifying to be able to help people at the worst times in their lives; allowing them to grieve without the stress related to all the work required after one passes.”

Green also handles real estate conveyancing, as well as Medicaid and asset protection planning, resolving complex issues that she knows are often distressful for her clients.

“The most fulfilling part of my job is leaving the office at the end of each day knowing that I have made someone else’s life slightly easier,” says Green. “People come in here distraught. They’ve just lost their loved one. They don’t know where to start



**Attorney Melissa Green carries a lifelong love of soccer and now coaches a U6 soccer team sponsored by Sayer Regan & Thayer. Her daughters Amaya and Ayla (back) are assistant coaches and her son, Wesley, 5 (front with red hair) is on the team.**

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or what to do. And although it's very sad, it's very gratifying to say, 'Don't worry about the work. I will guide you through that part, step-by-step.' They're always thankful and very appreciative of that."

Green says there is nothing more satisfying than taking the responsibility for these legal and financial tasks off her clients' shoulders and providing them with the opportunity and time to grieve the loss of their loved one.

Born and raised in Rhode Island, Green grew up on the "mainland." Her parents were both raised in Newport on Aquidneck Island and were considered "Islanders," but they chose to move inland to a small farming town called Little Compton where they built a house. It was an uncommon move for Islanders.

"Islanders don't like to leave and head to the mainland," explains Green wryly. "And if we do, we pack a lunch. When you have an Islander mentality, crossing over the bridges is a big deal."

Her parents continued to work on the island. Her mother was a schoolteacher in Newport and her father worked in finance for a government contractor. Little Compton was so small that it did not have a high school. Instead, Green traveled back to the island to attend high school in Middletown.

"Growing up in Little Compton was a great experience," says Green. "We had free rein to run in the neighborhood and in the woods. We were very much responsible for ourselves and found a lot of fun and experiences in nature with friends."

Soccer played a central part in Green's early life. She began playing the sport when she was 5 and continued into high school. Most of Green's closest friends today were made through soccer.

"The sport taught me discipline, team responsibility, and gave me the gift of life-long friendships. My life wouldn't have the value it does today, without those bonds." She currently serves as treasurer on the board of the Middletown Youth Soccer League and has coached all three of her kids, including her youngest, Wesley, 5, who she now coaches alongside her two daughters, Amaya, 20, and Ayla, 15.

Green credits soccer with helping her build a strong, supportive circle of friends and for developing within her a fierce sense of drive and determination.

In the fall after she graduated high school, Green's life took an unexpected turn when she found out she was expecting her daughter, Amaya. She was living in a dorm, with two roommates in her first semester at LaSalle College outside of Boston. Her plans for the future had to be re-imagined.

She completed the first semester of her freshman year before returning home to Rhode Island to finish the year at Roger Williams in Bristol. Her daughter, Amaya, was born the day after classes ended in May, and Green spent the summer learning to be a new mother. In the fall, she returned to Roger Williams for her sophomore year, while Amaya stayed with an aunt who ran a small

in-home daycare. She graduated in 2007 with a degree in legal studies and political science.

People who hear the story often marvel at how Green managed to meet the demands of being a young mother and a college student at the same time. She tells them it wasn't as difficult as it may sound.

"The truth is, when I was an undergraduate, all the other students would go out partying, but at 8 or 9 at night, I was putting my daughter to sleep and doing schoolwork," she says. "I think her birth helped me. She gave me a drive and purpose and the schedule of early nights, with limited freedom, created discipline. I had to step up and take care of her and so it created structure for me."

Immediately after graduating, Green began pursuing her law degree at Roger Williams Law School. She had always thought she wanted to be a pediatrician, but a high school biology class where she had to dissect a cat persuaded her differently. Her second choice was law.

In her second year of law school, Green had her second daughter, Ayla. Again, however, she didn't allow circumstances and unexpected responsibilities to deter her from her goal.

"I never saw any other option for myself, but success," says Green. "My parents created an environment where education was priority. I was expected to work hard and to do my best all the time. I was required to treat others with respect, to support family, teammates, and friends, and to honor my commitments. I credit them for my success. They taught me I was in control of my destiny. I just had to set my mind to it and keep following the plan."

She treated law school like a job and focused on the work. When it came to law, she was interested in helping people less fortunate or who didn't have representation. An internship with a criminal defense attorney opened her eyes to the demands of that particular field and though she found the work interesting, she realized that with two kids, it might not be a good fit.



**Melissa with her children Ayla and Wesley and her fiancé, Jacob, on a recent vacation.**

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At Sayer Regan & Thayer, LLP on the other hand, Green has found a perfect fit.

In the estate planning area of her practice, she often has the pleasure of working with families after some of the most joyous occasions of their lives, such as a wedding, the birth or adoption of a child, the purchase of a new home, or retirement. She finds reward in knowing that she's prepared a plan for her clients that allows them to rest easy each night.

"Something that's very important to me – that I think a lot of other attorneys sort of lack or don't care as much about – is educating my clients and making sure they actually understand their choices," says Green. "I can't tell you how thankful clients are or how much they appreciate really understanding."

Clients often confess to having experienced other planning meetings where they left confused and with "their heads spinning."

Green sees value in taking the extra time to educate her clients.

"They have more confidence in me as a result," she says, "So when I offer advice, they trust me because they understand why I think a choice is best for them."

Green has most recently been recognized for her work with an Excellence in Law Award and a Greater Newport Chamber of Commerce Women of Distinction Award.

For several years, she has taught classes to real estate agents on buying and selling real estate from an estate and might someday look for opportunities to teach at the collegiate level.

When her estate administration paralegal recently had to leave because her military husband was transferred out of state, Green was having some difficulty finding the right candidate as a replacement. Not long ago, a young woman who had just graduated from undergraduate and was looking for her first job walked through the law firm's door to drop off her resume without any awareness that the firm was looking for a new paralegal. Green decided to give her an interview.

"She came in off the street with zero experience, and we're going to give her a shot," says Green. "Somebody saw the value of my courage and gave me a crack, I'll give her a crack, too. We'll see."

After all, why not? It worked for Green.