
Life Lessons Learned Along the Way: Cliff Jumping

We continue our series of personal, impactful stories that have shaped how we practice law.

By David M. Saperstein

As our family sat on the sandy bank of the Dry Fork River in West Virginia, the warm day was quickly heating up. Some locals had told us about a great swimming hole. It had not been easy to find – MapQuest was useless. The directions were to take a right after the state park, another right at the dead end, a left at the field, the one with the rolled-up hay, another right at the green bridge that goes over the river, and then you drive a couple more miles until you see a bunch of cars parked on the side of the road.

Once we arrived, we knew we were in for a treat. The river was probably fifty yards wide. The first 30 yards were very shallow. Our children could play all day in the slow-moving river, walking up and down its length – from the dam at one end to the mini rapids at the other. The setting was magnificent – a forest of pine trees, rocky ledges, and small waterfalls. Even before we dipped our toes into the water, we knew this would be one of those perfect days that you look back at in ten years and say, “Remember when...”

Across the river, the valley wall rose steep and high. There were ledges, mini-cliffs, on that wall. Kids were swimming across the river, climbing onto those ledges and jumping off. The Dry Fork was shallow for 20-30 yards, but the last 20 yards were much deeper. Perfect for jumping into.

When you go to the high dive at a swimming pool, jumping off can be scary. But when you jump off the ledges in the Dry Fork River, jumping off is not the only scary part. When you get to the opposite bank, first you have to hoist yourself out of the river onto a rock. Then, you have to search for hand holds and foot holds. Slowly, step by step, foot by foot, you climb up the valley wall to a ledge four inches wide about six feet above the river. Then, you face the hillside, and inch yourself across that ledge 30 feet farther, until you get to the place where it is safe to jump.

As my son recalled, the hardest part is just getting up there. “You have to walk like this,” he said, and demonstrated how you have to cling to the hillside. He continued, “Once you are ready, you have to think about where you are jumping. You have to jump forward, not just straight down.” He paused, smiled and said, “Once I did it, I knew I wanted to do it again.”

In both our personal and professional lives, we are constantly facing the tension between risk and reward. At home, do we spend our weekends doing the household chores, or do we pack up, get out of the house early and do that thing that we want to do, but never seem to have the time for?

At work, do we stick to our routine, or do we accept that new assignment that lies just outside our comfort zone? Do we settle a litigated case on terms different than we had hoped for, or do we prepare the case for trial knowing that trial brings uncertainty?

There is no single right answer. As General George Patton said, “Take calculated risks. That is quite different from being rash.” We are prepared to navigate the terrain and explore options without compromising our clients’ goals. Often times, the best choice will be the familiar, the routine, the safe. But sometimes, when we have searched for the proper hand holds and foot holds, when we have ascended one step at a time, climbing carefully, we will find ourselves in a place where it is safe to jump. As my son taught me, once you are ready, you have to jump forward, not just straight down.

May we choose those moments wisely, so that when we look back, we will pause, smile, and appreciate all that we have accomplished.