

NEVADA TRAILBLAZERS

Meet Jacqueline Bretell:

Hearing Loss Could Not Stop This Attorney's Professional Growth

BY MARY BACON, ESQ.

For most of us, the first major lesson in “pivoting” occurred during the pandemic. But for Jacqueline Bretell, the lesson came a year before. After an unexpected diagnosis of mid-frequency hearing loss, the frequency most humans speak in, she prepared herself for the biggest transition of her life: away from her decades-long dream of being a trial lawyer. Now she serves in a new role—the chief executive officer of her firm.

“Now, I can’t imagine doing anything else. I love my job—almost as much as I loved working at Barnes and Noble,” Bretell said with a smile.

Bretell was born in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. Her dad was in sales for Fleetguard, and her mom was in accounting for an electric company. As a kindergartener in Canada, she would walk to school in a full snow suit to help temper the frigid temperatures, which could reach as low as 40 below. Despite the cold, she was always excited to be at school, learning. It was her happy place. Well, it was her happy place unless her teachers did not assign homework. On those days, she found school “disappointing.” The fun of structured learning should continue throughout the evening at home, she thought.



When Bretell was in the second grade, her father received an offer to move to Nashville, Tennessee, where his company’s home office was. Bretell happily departed the glacial temperatures for the country music capital of the world. It wasn’t long before she saw herself as a country music artist in a cowboy hat and boots. And while she continued loving school, her parents got a chuckle when several years later, Bretell – 11 at the time – proclaimed she was “dissatisfied” with the school’s library. The books were so “elementary.” (She was in elementary school.) In response, her dad gave her a copy of “The Chamber” by John Grisham—a legal thriller that ended with the main character receiving the death penalty. Her father viewed the book as an opportunity to teach his daughter to consider all perspectives and defend her position. She was fascinated by the book, and it did not take long for her to abandon the thought of being a county music star and fall in love with the law.

Eager to learn more, Bretell signed up to listen to a lawyer’s presentation at the school sponsored career day. Shortly after, she went to a courthouse in Lebanon, Tennessee. As she sat in the courtroom, she felt immense comfort. There was no doubt about it—this is where she belonged—at the counsel table in the courtroom.

Her high school offered a teen court program (similar to the Clark County Law Foundation’s “Trial by Peers” program). Even though she had missed the summer session leading up to the program, skipping it was simply not an option. She talked the coordinator into letting her participate. As a student attorney in the program, she completed more

than 100 “mini-sentencing” hearings of teenagers in the community who committed minor infractions and loved every second of it. She prepared her witnesses, gathered her evidence, put together her storytelling strategy, and it was go time. She loved the adrenaline.

Bretell graduated high school early, and after a decade of having her green card renewed every two years, her father’s company made the decision to sponsor their citizenship. Once that was finalized, she would be eligible for more financial aid and scholarships. Until then, she decided to enroll in community college to get some general education classes out of the way. She also started working at Barnes and Noble—a job she would keep for the next seven years.

“I was a book seller, and cross trained in the café, and in the music department,” Bretell said. “I loved it there. A house of books is my heaven. It is the best job I’ve ever had.”

Shortly after receiving her green card, Bretell was accepted to the University of Tennessee (UTC) at Chattanooga, where she majored in political science, with a minor in religion. To stay busy, she got a second job as a resident assistant (so she could study while she was working) and was a member (and later captain) of the UTC Mock Trial Team. At 19, she was studying for the LSAT, and she graduated the next year, after petitioning to complete excess hours over multiple semesters.

At 20, Bretell started law school at Mercer University’s Walter F. George School of Law in Macon, Georgia. While there, she spent every hour she could participating in and later coaching multiple mock trial teams. She also served as president of the first Georgia Student Trial Lawyers Association. While participating in on-campus interviews, local attorney George Ranalli, who went to Mercer, interviewed her and offered her a position in Las Vegas. After graduating, she moved to Nevada.

“My dad had to help me move, because while I was 23 and studying for the bar, I was not old enough to rent a U-Haul truck on my own,” Bretell said.

Ranalli knew Bretell’s dream was plaintiff’s work, and took her under his wing to train her, despite knowing she would leave soon when the right opportunity presented itself. After two years of doing defense work, she left for Bighorn Law.

“I loved the plaintiff’s side,” Bretell said. “It’s exactly what I had always wanted to do.”

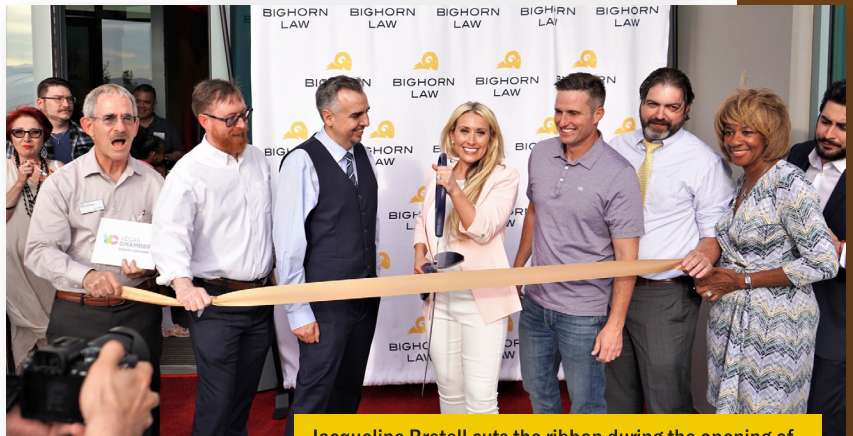
By the time she was 30, she had curated a great docket and was in court most days a week. Then, in the summer of 2018, she noticed she had a hard time hearing a judge in court—and it happened more than once. When she brought it up to other attorneys in the courtroom, it was clear that she was the only one having a hard time hearing. Finally in March 2019, Bretell started to understand. She was diagnosed with mid-frequency hearing loss—the frequency most human voices are in. By February 2020, she had hearing aids, but it was clear that with the acoustics in our courtrooms, being a trial lawyer was not feasible. A month later, her firm asked her to step into the CEO role, and she accepted.

“Jacquie is a natural leader,” said Kimball Jones, Bretell’s partner at Bighorn Law. “Most of us have natural strengths and natural weaknesses, and we make our way in life by identifying our strengths and leaning into them. While I’m sure this is true for Jacquie, she also has the rare ability to develop and become exceptional in pretty much any area she chooses. This ability has enabled Jacquie to transition between being a litigator and trial lawyer, to the exceptional CEO of one of the fastest growing law firms in Nevada. Jacquie is a force of nature. Jacquie knows how to bring talented people together to accomplish great things. People who know her trust her, because they know she is an exceptional talent, and that she is fiercely loyal. She knows what she is doing, and she cares about her people.”

In her – limited – spare time, Bretell likes to ride motorcycles, but she’s giving that a break until at least May, when she plans to welcome a baby girl. Until then, she’s keeping busy with her other favorite pastimes, including reading political commentary and business books. She also loves to travel to Europe, back home to Tennessee, and to Saskatchewan.



A young Jacqueline Bretell poses with her family.



Jacqueline Bretell cuts the ribbon during the opening of Bighorn Law. She is the chief executive officer of the firm.



Jacqueline Bretell dreamed of being a country music artist while living in Nashville, Tennessee.



A very young Jacqueline Bretell is bundled up to face the tough Saskatchewan winter.