

New managing partner at Dentons' Evansville office focused on well-being

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Trisha Dudlo wants to have frank discussions.

The 37-year-old is the new managing partner of Denton Bingham Greenebaum's Evansville office and the first woman of color to hold that leadership position. Named the office chief in April, Dudlo is stepping into her role at the same time as she sees the legal profession rebuilding from the upheaval created by the pandemic and consequently having to do things "alarmingly different."



Dudlo

Lawyers in general are facing heavy workloads while many in and outside of the law are rethinking work life and questioning old norms. Into this mix, Dudlo is encouraging her colleagues to talk honestly about their feelings, their struggles and their joys.

"Some of the ideas that I have for this office and that I'm hoping will create a unified work environment and to make everybody excited and reengaged to be back in the office is to do things like ... talking about the emotional toll the pandemic has taken on us," Dudlo said. "Let's start being more open about our brain health and our mental health and the emotions associated with practicing such a high-intensity occupation."

Her focus on mental health and burnout comes naturally from her practice in family law. Dudlo became interested in representing families while she was a student at Indiana University Robert H. McKinney

School of Law, and she has since established a thriving statewide practice that includes divorce, child custody, paternity, protective orders, guardianships, grandparents' rights and adoptions.

In learning how to help clients going through very personal issues as well as how to manage her own stress from handling the demands of her practice, Dudlo said she has gained an understanding of how people are impacted by trauma. She said she believes that any hardships she may be experiencing are probably similar to what others are going through and that not talking about those hardships will be detrimental.

"Being a lawyer is not a career, it's not a job, it's a lifestyle for us," Dudlo said. "... Lawyers have to be very dedicated to be successful. So we need to teach our lawyers how to place boundaries, how to select cases with purpose and intention, what cases are going to serve their practice, what boards to serve on that will serve them and meet their personal goals for service."

Culture of caring

Dudlo decided to become a lawyer rather than a physician while she was still an undergraduate biology major at Mercer University in Georgia. When her parents moved to Indiana, she followed and enrolled in IU McKinney, where professor Jennifer Drobac sparked her interest in family law and became a mentor.

The year Dudlo graduated, 2010, the Great Recession was hitting the legal profession so hard that she remembers classmates having their job offers rescinded. Her parents, having settled in Evansville, invited her to join them, so she moved back home and became an associate at Bamberger Foreman Oswald Hahn.

Trisha Dudlo

Title: Office managing partner of Denton Bingham Greenebaum's Evansville office

Age: 37

Education: B.S. in biology, Mercer University; J.D., Indiana University Robert H. McKinney School of Law

Hometown: Chattanooga, Tennessee

Quote: "I love being a lawyer. I think it provides me with a lot of opportunities, with joy and with the ability to help people."

She joined what is now Dentons Bingham Greenebaum in 2017.

As the COVID-19 public health emergency took hold, Dudlo assisted former Evansville office managing partner Reed Schmitt, helping to handle staffing and personnel items that would arise. She discovered she liked leadership, feeling the role gave her a stake in building something. When Schmitt stepped down, Dudlo readily accepted the position.

"Our firm has a long history of being in and of the community. Our lawyers strive to not only serve their clients at the highest level but also to make a positive impact on their communities," Keith Bice, Dentons Bingham Greenebaum managing partner, said in a news release announcing Dudlo



Bice

as Evansville office managing partner. "Trisha embodies this foundation of Dentons through her excellent client service and active roles with

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many community organizations. As the Evansville office managing partner, she will continue to strengthen our relationships with clients, and community and business leaders.”

Dudlo has set about creating a culture of caring in which attorneys who need a break can retreat to a quiet room in the office, and in which diligence and hard work are celebrated, rather than only cheering the victories.

In addition, the Evansville team is taking time for reconnecting socially and having fun. Dudlo has adopted the motivational technique she saw in the Apple TV+ show “Ted Lasso” of installing a comment box. The suggestions have ranged from making a TikTok video, to hanging bulletin boards on the office doors to entice colleagues to walk down the hallway to see other people and leave messages, instead of staying at their desks and emailing.

Again, Dudlo said she sees all this as a

way to create more positivity, which will enable attorneys and staff to better represent the clients, who often are struggling emotionally themselves.

“When we help people who are possibly coming to us with maybe the worst problems they’ve ever had, we have to find a way to remain positive and grateful for our practice of law,” Dudlo said. “... Eighty percent of our job is to help them through an emotional time. If we don’t understand emotions, then it’s hard for us to effectively serve our clients.”

Being the first

Dudlo realizes that along with leading her office, she is also creating a path for other women of color to follow.

Acknowledging that breaking a barrier has put a lot of pressure on her, the new managing partner said she wants to make sure her seat is on the same side of the table as everybody else’s and she does not have to keep fighting for what she has already earned.

“It was never my intention to be the first of anything. It was my hope that I wasn’t,” Dudlo said. “But I think that as we move forward and this is my reality, I want to be sure of how I define success. My definitions of success maybe different than what other people think my success should be, but I do think that at every step I am able to see even the smallest of successes ... and give those success the do that they need before moving on to the next thing.”

To relax from her work, Dudlo stays active, walking the family dog, running and doing yoga. Also, she spends time with her 7-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son and credits her daughter, unencumbered by society’s expectations, with teaching her leadership skills.

“A great lesson for us all is to move forward in that gratitude and in that moment of seeing that our opinions do matter and that there is a way for us to be heard,” Dudlo said. “I say this to my clients as well, ‘I may not be the loudest in the room, but I usually get my way.’”•