

Delaware trust attorney displays sense of grit in all aspects of life

By Brian Cox

Lacrosse has always been more than just a sport for attorney Allison Neff.

When she was inducted into her high school's Athletic Hall of Fame in 2022, she thanked her lacrosse coach, Bob Russell, for instilling in her a passion for the sport. Her former coach was sitting in the audience, and they both had tears in their eyes.

"It was a special moment," says Neff, now an associate with McCollom D'Emilio Smith Uebler, LLC, in Wilmington, Del. "I'll always carry it with me."

A multi-sport athlete at Kenwood High School in Baltimore, including softball, basketball, and track, Neff also was an all-state field hockey player. When he was looking to revitalize the lacrosse program, Coach Russell recruited Neff and other athletic girls to play for his nascent team. Their first "jerseys" were T-shirts – Neff still wears hers on occasion.

"He wanted to build a special program," she recalls Russell telling her. "He built a community around the team and showed us that lacrosse could really give us opportunity."

It certainly did for Neff, who went on to make the lacrosse team as a walk-on freshman at The Ohio State University, where she studied criminology and forensic science. She says trying out for the lacrosse team as a walk-on remains "the hardest thing I've ever done in my life." She says the training, which involved getting up at 5 a.m. to run three miles before practice, was intense, but character molding.

"I've always prided myself on giving the utmost effort," she says. "Effortless is a term that does not resonate with me. I don't think anything is effortless."

After graduating and becoming a paralegal, Neff stayed connected to the sport by starting and coaching the lacrosse program at Westerville South High School outside of Columbus, Ohio. While it was a varsity sport, the team had to provide its own funding.

As a young coach for a new team, Neff says she learned valuable lessons about organization, leadership, and fund-raising. She passed on to her teams what Coach Russell had engrained in his players.



"You need to have grit," she says. "You need to have passion, which I think I always embodied."

Some of the grit Neff embodies is a result of losing her father, Martin, when she was 20. Her dad had always enthusiastically embraced her athletic pursuits and accomplishments, and his loss was devastating.

"Losing my dad at a young, formative age really taught me financial responsibility," says Neff. "I think his death molded me into a far fiercer and more independent person today than I would have been."

Neff remembers sitting down with her best friend's mother, Sharon Driggers, who helped her figure out how to secure the finances to finish college.

"She sat down and helped me map out how I was going to get to the next step," says Neff with gratitude. "She was the only person at that point in my life who really took an interest in my academic future. She always had my back and motivated me to achieve things academically and is still one of my biggest cheerleaders."

After six years coaching at Westerville South, Neff took the opportunity to coach at Olentangy High School, a team that finished fourth in the state under her helm.

Her years of coaching are an ongoing source of pride for Neff, who remains in touch with many of her former players and celebrates their successes. Some continued with lacrosse and played at Division 1 schools. Some now coach the sport themselves. One works for NASA.

"It's cool to see them build their lives up," says Neff. "That is what gave me purpose."

While she was coaching high school lacrosse, Neff was working as a paralegal. After completing her undergraduate degree, she had attended Capital University Law School, one of the first ABA-accredited paralegal programs in the country. For three years, she worked for a foreclosure and bankruptcy firm before moving over to the creditor's side of the industry.

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In college, she had thought she might want to work in forensics, but she discovered pretty quickly that she didn't want to spend all of her time in a lab. She considered becoming a police officer for a while, even interning for the police in Dublin, Ohio, where she ended up running the department's DARE program. In time, though, she realized the militant nature of law enforcement didn't fit her personality. Her brother, who was a lawyer, suggested she try being a paralegal to gauge her interest in law.

After her lacrosse team at Olentangy placed fourth in the state, Neff was ready for a change and a return to the East Coast to be closer to family. She lined up a job in Philadelphia as a practice manager for an orthodontics office. Two weeks after starting her new life in the City of Brotherly Love, Neff met her future husband, Matt, who not long after encouraged her to take the LSAT and pursue a legal career.

For the next several years, Neff kept up a grueling pace, working at the orthodontics practice during the day and commuting from Philadelphia to Widener University Delaware Law School in Wilmington for classes at night. She was ready to be focused and challenged. In the night program, she was studying with people for whom law was a third or fourth career, who had families, and who were serious about what they wanted to do in life.

"It was a close, competitive class," says Neff, who maintains a strong friends' group with her former classmates. "We were go-getters."

She belonged to the Transactional Law Honor Society, earning first place in the 2019 Transactional Law Competition. She served as vice president of the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Honor Society, where she placed first in the 2018 ADR Competition. She also served as editor-in-chief of the Delaware Journal of Corporate Law.

"I tried to take every opportunity I could because some of the best advice I heard from alumni was to do as many things as you can because you'll never have this experience again," says Neff. "I took that advice to heart."

During her 3L year, Neff worked as a law clerk at Winget, Spadafora & Schwartzberg, LLP in Philadelphia. At the same time, she seized the opportunity to extern with Judge Megan Adams of the Delaware Superior Court, an experience Neff describes as a defining point in her career.

"She definitely took my skills to the next level," says Neff. "She is a giving person with her time and her connections. I've never met someone who was so willing to help another person out. She's amazing."

It was Adams who suggested Neff should talk with Tom Uebler, with whom she had gone to law school.

"I know him professionally and personally," the judge told Neff. "Your personality would fit well at a firm like that."

Judge Adams, it turned out, was "right on the money" in her assessment of the fit.

When Neff interviewed with McCollom D'Emilio Smith Uebler (MDSU), she felt a connection and recognized that the firm offered her an ideal environment for growth and success.

"I knew the firm took a lot of cases to trial and I knew I was going to get a lot of opportunities and a lot of hands-on experience that I wouldn't get elsewhere," says Neff.

The firm agreed to let her take a year to gain experience as a law clerk for Senior Magistrate Selena E. Molina of the Delaware Court of Chancery before coming on board. After learning about the importance of the Court of Chancery in the global corporate space, Neff says she knew it was what she wanted to do. She embraces the intellectual stimulation and complex challenge that the Court of Chancery presents.

For her first six-to-eight months at MDSU, Neff commuted from Philadelphia before convincing Matt to leave his beloved city and move to Wilmington. The couple married in 2019 and now have two daughters, Esame, 3, and 4-month-old Eloise.

Being a young mother and a young attorney at the same time can be a real challenge.

"Some days, you're just trying to keep it all in the air," says Neff with a laugh. "I'm very lucky that I have an amazing contributing partner."

Neff focuses her practice on trust, estates, and tax, as well as corporate and fiduciary litigation. She counsels both individual and corporate trustees in all corporate, business, and trust litigation matters.

"The litigation department is very collaborative and I'm thankful that we have all walks of professional careers in this one litigation sector," says Neff. "It's really great to feel you've made the right choices and end up where you're supposed to be. And that's definitely how I feel here."

Neff says she feels she can be herself at the firm and practice law in her own style. She recalls Uebler telling her that she would find her way of litigating. "Always be you," he told her. "Don't worry about fitting into a mold. Be you and you'll become more and more the type of attorney you want to be and that you're proud of."

Like other good advice she's heard, Neff has taken Uebler's words to heart.

"I will never be just an attorney," she says. "I feel that I am a bunch of different Allisons, and I love all of them, and I'm glad that they can coexist. I believe you can coexist as yourself everywhere you are."