

Whitsett native finds her niche in the law

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Most people would be terrified at the thought of standing in a courtroom facing a judge. Not only once, but three to four times per week. It's a good thing Autumn Johnson isn't like most people.

The 31-year-old Hermitage resident is an attorney working for the nonprofit group Northwestern Legal Services out of Farrell, Pa.

After graduating from Frazier High School in 1998, the former Commodore went on to Slippery Rock University, graduating in 2002. From there she attended Widener School of Law. She graduated in 2006 and passed the bar in 2007, on her first attempt.

"I was one of only four or five minorities in my graduating class," Johnson declared. "I'm proud of that. I worked hard to get where I am." Johnson said the work ethic she learned growing up in Whitsett helped her succeed in her career.

Johnson, the daughter of Andy Johnson and the late Laura Johnson, said she still manages to make it back to her hometown to check in on family and friends. Her brother Andrew, 29, lives in Maryland.

Andy Johnson retired from Peoples' Gas Co. and Laura Johnson was a former nurse.

"Both worked long hours," Johnson said of her parents. "Growing up and seeing my parents work really motivated me to get through law school and embark on my career. They both worked hard throughout their lives."

Johnson said she enjoys her time away but looks forward to the two to three times per month that she gets to come back to the area.

"I'm away, but not that far away. Now that my dad is retired, it's like having a child of my own," she said with a laugh. "I really miss being close to my family."

Without a doubt, Johnson's schedule can get a little hectic. Northwestern Legal Services is a group that provides free legal services for low-income families.

"I wouldn't change a thing about my job. I love doing what I do," the young attorney said. "It's not as much money as other types of lawyers, but I get to leave knowing that I've done something good for someone else."

Johnson's caseload ranges from family law and custody cases, bankruptcy and housing disputes to civil cases involving protection from abuse orders and divorces. "I really enjoy being in the courtroom. I see where it could be intimidating, but I'm not intimidated at all," Johnson said.

Johnson also volunteers for the Mercer County Literacy Council and the Mercer County Community Court. With the community court, Johnson is able to use her law background to help first-time juvenile offenders avoid a life filled with trouble. "The Community Court is literally that," Johnson said of the program. "We listen to cases about the offenders and give them community service or something along those lines. "If offenders fulfill their duties, they can have their records expunged."

She also plays volleyball weekly at the Grove City YMCA. I'm fortunate that I am able to have the time to do the things I do," Johnson said. "I'm not married and I don't have children." The single, career-oriented attorney wouldn't mind finding that someone to settle down with, someday. "Until then, I'll keep doing what I do," Johnson said.

Another aspect of home that Johnson misses is being on the Youghiogheny River. "My friends and I try to float the river as often as we can," she said. "It's nice in the summer because I have some flexibility with my schedule depending on how hearings and cases get scheduled."

Johnson looks back upon her days in Whitsett fondly and has managed to take her upbringing with her to northwestern Pennsylvania. "I love my life and my job. I love helping people," Johnson said. "That's the best part."

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