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By Teresa Talerico

Mike Gibbs probably never imagined he would be asking, "Do you want fries with that?" his first day on the job as an in-house attorney.

But that's exactly what he did as general counsel for Whataburger, a Texas-based hamburger chain. Mr. Gibbs spent three days flipping burgers, ringing up soft drinks, and even taking out the trash as a way to develop a hands-on understanding of the company's most fundamental operations.

A practicing attorney for six years, Gibbs is no stranger to the business world. After earning an M.B.A. from Emory University in 1981, he worked for 15 years as an entrepreneur, CEO, and vice president of operations for various companies. At 38, he enrolled in Wayne State University Law School. After graduation, he worked at Timmis & Inman in Detroit and as vice president and general counsel for Big Boy Restaurants International. He joined Whataburger's Corpus Christi headquarters as the company's first in-house counsel in February 2005.

Q: What's your advice for the more mature student who is entering law school as a career change?

A: If you have a passion for it, don't be afraid to do it. I wrestled with it for a while. When I went to Emory, I had a chance to enroll in the J.D./M.B.A.

program. I regretted I didn't do that after a couple of years. I finally said, "You know what? I've been wanting to do this; I'm going to do it." My advice is if somebody really feels strongly about being a lawyer, go for it. I had a lot of people telling me not to. You know, "There are too many lawyers" and "You're going to be too old." That wasn't the case. For the more mature student, I actually found I could build on my experience and business relationships.

Q: What made Whataburger executives decide to hire an in-house counsel after years of using outside attorneys?

A: They finally decided they were big enough that they should have in-house counsel. One of the reasons they hired me is I did have a lot of business experience. I spend a lot of time wearing a business hat here.

Q: You have carved out your own niche by combining law, business, and the restaurant industry. How have you done that, and what's your advice for other law school graduates?

A: I'd love to say I had this grand design when I was 25 years old. But that's not the case. There were certain things I looked for throughout my life. I tried to build on my experiences and just looked for opportunity. All along the way, I tried to work for companies and firms where I thought I would like to work. My advice to students who graduate would be to have some overriding principles that will guide your decisions and then look for opportunities. I never wanted to work for a big public corporation. I did when I first got out of graduate school, and it was a great learning experience. I learned how to write a memo, conduct a meeting, build consensus among team members. After that, I wanted to stay in either a small environment or a family-owned environment.

Q: What is the biggest mistake law graduates make when job hunting?

A: The biggest mistake is that they go for the money. Your first job out of law school probably won't be your last. You can get in with a good firm, where you're going to learn a lot and it's not going to burn you out on the profession. I had some friends that did go for the big bucks right out of school, and a couple of them got pretty disillusioned. Law students reading this will probably know some of the gunners in their class. That's exactly what they want to do. If they want to go out and bill 2,500 hours a year, more power to 'em. But for a lot of people, there are a lot of opportunities out there. There might not be as big bucks right out of school, but they lead to good opportunities down the road.

Q: You actually flipped burgers for a few days at Whataburger. Was that a requirement or just something you wanted to do?

A: They did say, "We want to indoctrinate you into the culture." That was part of it. I volunteered to go down there for three days because I didn't think a day would be enough. And it really wasn't. The first day, they knew I was from corporate, and I was the company lawyer, and they kind of put me over to the side: "Mr. Gibbs, why don't you stand here?" So I took the trash out, and they said, "Oh, you don't have to do that." I said, "I didn't come here to stand around all day. I'll do whatever I can." The next day, they put me on the fryer machine. Then I worked building the burgers for a while. Then I really got into it and did a couple of lunch rushes. I really respect those folks for the job they do.

Q: How was that experience helpful? Would you recommend it to others in similar positions?

A: It did help me out. As you're working shoulder-to-shoulder with those people, they start talking to you about "Well, you know we didn't get trained very well on this" or "This could have been designed better." You can see what some of the problems are. The main thing I noticed is they had trouble with the POS system-

point of sale, which is what they call cash registers nowadays-because it's so complicated.

You talk to them about employee issues. You learn things. You're sitting back in the ivory tower, and you're trying to tweak your operating system there's nothing like getting out in the field.

Q: Any other advice?

A: It's a small professional world. The attorneys you're working with today-you're going to run into them again. It's important to be professional and civil with every attorney you come in contact with because it is a small world out there. Starting out, you think you're pretty much anonymous, but you're not. You'll develop a reputation.