When you really want to achieve something, “You can do it at any age if you work hard enough!” says Charles Vega, a solo practitioner in Daytona Beach, Florida.

For Vega, dreams of being a prosecutor, a corporate attorney or a solo practitioner filled his thoughts for decades, but they seemed out of reach. Most of his family were police officers and firefighters, no attorneys—Vega would be the first! “Law school was a lofty goal back then,” he says of his twenties.

A bachelor’s degree was hard enough to pay for. He had a wife and children. So Vega made the decision to settle into a sales and marketing career. Work and life went well—very well—with plenty of work accolades, community involvement and personal joy.

“I was happy,” Vega emphasizes. But his dream of being a lawyer persisted. As his children left home and Vega edged closer to age 56, he had a scary thought. “I don’t have forever to do this anymore. If I’m going to do this, I’ve got to do it now.”

LAW SCHOOL: “BRUTAL”

With full support of his wife, family and friends, Vega scored well enough on his LSAT to earn a spot at Florida Coastal School of Law in Jacksonville. While working full time during the day, he attended classes after work four evenings a week, traveling 90 miles there and 90 miles back, often leaving the law library late in the evening knowing he had to be at work early the next morning.

He listened to recorded lectures during his 180-mile commute to and from school, studied 10 hours a day on weekends and used up his vacation days studying for finals. “It was brutal.”

Attending law school where most students were much younger, he occasionally noticed that he wasn’t always the oldest student in class—which Vega found motivating. The law school curriculum was extremely tough, but the faculty was very open to helping students of any age, any time.

“If you needed help, you just had to ask, even outside of class,” Vega says, adding that he had to rely on email since office hours were usually during the day. “The professors’ assistance was vital since I hadn’t been in school for a while and had to relearn study strategies. In addition, I had to learn to think like a lawyer.”

And he did, chipping away at the heavy course schedule as quickly as he could. Vega got in extra hours with day or week-long intersession classes and as a visiting student at Barry University, Dwayne O. Andreas School of Law in Orlando to supplement his evening course curriculum. He never took a semester off. Vega graduated from the four-year evening program in three and a half years. “I passed the bar on my first try.”
After applying to a few firms, Vega decided he wanted to be his own boss, even though he knew the challenges of going solo.

“It takes time to get the word out,” he explains. To get those first referrals on his own without firm resources would definitely take time. And with no firm colleagues, he had no one to discuss his cases and to learn from. “There was no one to bounce ideas off.”

But Vega believes being 61 gave him an advantage, specifically his thirty years of being active in the community. He spread the word of his new practice to all of the local organizations where he had given his time in the past. He went to the local Chamber of Commerce meetings. And he relied heavily on his business and community reputation.

“People know I’m honest. They know I’m going to do what I say,” he adds.

Vega also joined the local bar association. And he picked up the phone to invite other attorneys to lunch so he could ask for advice. Within a few months, he had a growing network of colleagues, some who were quickly becoming friends.

“Don’t be afraid to reach out to other attorneys,” Vega advises, adding that the attorneys he has contacted have given him a great support structure.

“You can’t know everything,” he explains. “You may need to bounce legal analysis off other attorneys, or ask questions like ‘what’s the paperwork you need to fill out?’ and ‘have you got a form for that?’ to finish your work.”

Slowly the referrals trickled in. Vega says he focused on listening and making sure he was approachable, ready when clients had questions. “Call me Charley. Feel free to give me a call.” He was quick to return calls, and quick calls never got billed.

As Vega approaches his first-year anniversary, business is good and his network of colleagues is strong. He is now also a certified mediator for circuit/civil and appellant court and a trained arbitrator. He is even expanding his practice into Jacksonville where he has a coverage attorney.

Foremost, though, is to continue maintaining his good “I’ll do what I say” reputation. “So I’ll keep exploring, but I’ll move slow and steady.”