

Detroit Legal News

December 28, 2011

The rewards of 'going for it'

Head of litigation group finds niche in 'Complex'



Photo by Robert Chase

A graduate of the University of Detroit and Wayne State Law School, Michelle Harrell originally planned to become a CPA before turning to a career in the law.

By Sheila Pursglove
Legal News

Michelle Harrell has a favorite quote from Theodore Roosevelt: "Believe you can and you're halfway there."

"I wrote that saying in my binder on my way to my first day of law school and still believe it today," she says.

Harrell, an attorney with Maddin Hauser and manager of the General and Complex Litigation Practice Group – and named as a DBusiness Top Lawyer for 2010 in the areas of Real Estate and Litigation – also drew inspiration from her parents. Her father, the first in the family to obtain a college degree, spent 13 years earning an accounting degree while working full time, and her mother worked as a legal secretary, to make a good life.

Wanting to provide the same stable life for her children, Harrell – who worked as a cashier at Kmart and at similar jobs – went on to obtain her bachelor's degree in accounting from the University of Detroit, with the goal of becoming a Certified Public Accountant.

She was intrigued, however, by stories from her mother, a legal secretary for a small law firm in Highland Park, and then on the General Motors legal staff.

"I heard a lot about the legal profession, and the work the attorneys in her offices did interested me," Harrell says. "I heard exciting stories of cases, court hearings, clients and the law profession from my Mom and some of the attorneys from her office."

Harrell considered going to law school, but was unsure whether she had the smarts or the finances.

"There were no attorneys in my family. I had two small sons and I needed to start earning an income beyond the typical jobs that I had," she says. "When I was getting ready to graduate from the University of Detroit, my parents again encouraged me to continue my education and obtain a law degree. I decided I was going to 'go for it.'"

Wayne Law opened up an entirely new world.

"Much like the actual practice of law, the level of critical thinking, the course content, the intensity and drive of the other students, and the expectations of and teaching by the professors, were challenging and often stressful," she says.

"At the same time, the atmosphere was very collegial, friendly and enjoyable, and I learned to be a critical thinker. For example, prior to Wayne Law, I had not deeply understood anything about the Constitution, and learning about it while discussing society's issues was interesting beyond what I imagined it could be. I also learned about myself and that I was competitive by nature."

Clerking for the Hon. Deborah Servitto in the Macomb County Circuit Court, Harrell learned the tremendous difference between studying in law school and practicing law in court where the law intersects people's lives.

"I looked forward to coming to court every day and observing attorneys, the parties, and the judge interacting upon pending matters, in particular the matters that I had conducted research upon or had written memos," she says. "Judge Servitto exemplified the traits of a smart, caring, and fair jurist. After clerking for her, I made the choice that I wanted to be a litigator."

Harrell's practice focuses on complex commercial, real estate, receiverships, and family law litigation, allowing her to handle a variety of issues every day.

"No two matters are the same," she says. "I enjoy having the ability to help our clients through what is sometimes the most difficult times of their lives, and to provide practical advice that I would follow myself if I were in their shoes."

The General and Complex Litigation Practice Group, formed two years ago, is one of three litigation groups at Maddin Hauser.

“On a daily basis, we can be called upon to handle a complex matter involving a shareholder dispute and a municipal violation cited against a client,” she says. “We’re fortunate to have a variety of types of matters because it keeps things interesting. Much like a court, one never knows what matter will come through our door each day. We’re equally fortunate to have the skill and experience to handle anything well.

“Working at Maddin Hauser is like coming to work each day with a group of smart, good friends who have the highest level of integrity, skill and concern for each other and the clients. I look forward to the daily interactions with everyone, and know there is always someone here that has insight and knowledge about whatever legal issues we may face with our clients. Maddin Hauser is not just a law firm, but is a place to engage in the practice of law with the very best colleagues, staff, and support.”

Harrell is a Barrister Emeritus in the American Inn of Court, “an organization committed to increasing and promoting high levels of skill, integrity and interaction among its members,” she says. “Membership has enabled me to interact with some of the finest attorneys and judges in Oakland County both on legal practice issues and socially.”

An Oakland County Circuit Court Case Evaluator (Complex Commercial Neutral), Harrell also serves as a mentor with the Oakland County Bar Association, and enjoys seeing so much of her younger self in attorneys just starting their careers.

“When I was a new attorney, I was lucky to have several mentors, including Joseph Sulek, a well-known and liked general practice attorney in St. Clair Shores. Joe, who passed away in 1997, kindly imparted a lot of his practical knowledge and wisdom to me about practicing law, the courts, other attorneys and clients that I still think about today,” she says. “Joe showed me that an attorney needs to be able to find a way to enjoy the practice of law and have fun in spite of the stress, adversarial attorneys and other frustrations that come with the practice. Every new attorney should have a mentor like Joe, and I try to contribute to the mentoring process both inside and outside of my firm.”

Harrell serves on the U.S. Courts Committee of the State Bar of Michigan, interacting with many attorneys from across the state and federal judges from East and West districts about high level issues and the betterment of the relationship between the districts.

“Never pass up an opportunity to interact with people who are smarter and more experienced than you,” she says.

Harrell has been very involved with the Hydrocephalus Association, Michigan Chapter, since her youngest son was diagnosed with hydrocephalus at age 16.

“A parent’s nightmare, my son collapsed in the street when the pressure in his brain reached too high a level due to an over-accumulation of spinal fluid,” she says. “It was like our family had been struck by lightning as we were thrust into brain surgeries,

recovery and rehabilitation and medical uncertainty.”

Harrell had previously incorrectly believed that hydrocephalus was a very rare condition that afflicted only babies either before or at birth. She learned it affects hundreds of thousands of people at all ages, and one to two of every 1,000 babies are born with hydrocephalus, making it as common as Down’s syndrome, and the most common reason for brain surgery in children.

“My involvement is to raise awareness of this condition because its symptoms can masquerade as other conditions and, if it goes unchecked, critical treatment time is lost and the damage can be devastating,” she says.

Harrell and her husband, David, a leadership and sales consultant, have eight sons, ranging in age from 24 to 12, and two dogs.

“Our family is very busy with a multitude of activities, including church group activities, Hydrocephalus Association events, band practices and competitions and all of the other happy chaos that comes with family life,” she says. “I enjoy attending theatre events and concerts. Our oldest son operates a business incubator in Ferndale, and a racing event each year at the old Dorias Park velodrome in Detroit called the Thunderdrome, and his adventures often keep us busy.”

Harrell, who has lived in the Detroit area her entire life, says the city, with all of its challenges, still has a vibrance that outshines its difficulties.

“If you want something to do on any night, there is something you can do in the ‘D,’” she says. “Detroit is being reinvented and reborn and this transformation is fascinating to watch as new ideas, energy and entrepreneurial spirit takes hold and grows. We need to keep it going and stay positive.”