

THE GLASS CEILING Shatters

A new class of younger female attorneys is upending the Texas legal world

by ROSE NISKER AND ANDY STEINER

HOW A COURTROOM VANQUISHED SHYNESS

**Lou Thompson Black
Brent Coon & Associates**

If you knew Lou Thompson Black when she was studying for her J.D. at South Texas College of Law, you might never have guessed that she'd end up being one of the toughest litigators in Texas. "In law school I was the quiet one who sat in the back of the class," Black says. "I didn't want to speak up in front of the group."

But when this shy-but-driven law student discovered that she actually loved the intense mental challenge of arguing a case before judge and jury, everything changed. "When you are cross-examining a witness, you find out what you are made of," she says. "Either you like it or you don't. I love it."

By the time Black landed her first job—in the Dallas office of Haynes and Boone—this wallflower had blossomed into an eager, driven associate willing to "volunteer for any and all of the grunt work just so I could be in the glorious courtroom." Black wanted real-world experience, and she wasn't afraid to ask for it.

This ability to set a goal—combined with the willingness to do what it takes to meet it—first became evident while Black was in law school, where she graduated magna cum laude.

"The mid '90s, when I graduated from law school, was a tough time to get a good job," Black explains. "I needed to find a way to distinguish myself because I was competing with everybody coming out of law school in the state of Texas. Good grades helped set me apart from the competition."

Today, Black's determination and ambition are part of what makes her a successful attorney. What makes her a good litigator, she believes, is her natural concern for her clients' well-being, an honesty that comes across to jurors.

"I'm not an actor," she says. "I'm not the showy type. I want to connect with the jury by showing them I'm a normal person like they are. I have feelings, I trip over the cords in the courtroom, I sometimes stumble over my words. You are going to see me and all my flaws, but you are also going to see the truth."

In 2001, Black joined Beaumont personal injury attorney Brent Coon at Brent Coon & Associates; today she heads up the Houston office and is second in command at a firm that employs more than 60 attorneys. Her primary practice area is toxic tort law, managing hundreds of cases for clients afflicted

with mesothelioma, a latent, painful, aggressive form of lung cancer that is caused by asbestos exposure.

"Asbestos diseases are latent," Black explains. "You can be exposed 20, 30, 40 years before you know you are sick."

Because mesothelioma is an incurable form of cancer that is usually diagnosed in late stages, most of Black's clients die before their cases come to trial. "We run as fast as we can to the courthouse," she says. "We want to give our clients something to look forward to for their families."

Black, whose career was inspired by her lawyer-grandfather, thinks of herself as a crusader.

"My favorite part of this job is when I get to help little people—people who could not help themselves, who do not have the financial resources or the knowledge to help themselves—hit corporate America where it hurts," she says. "The belief my parents and grandparents instilled in me was, 'Protect those who can't protect themselves.' I truly believe that I work for the greater good. I wear the white hat."

—Andy Steiner

THE WOMAN WHO HATES LOOKING YOUNG

**Claudine Jackson
Brackett & Ellis**

When Claudine Jackson won the Texas Bar's "Outstanding Young Lawyer of the Year" award last June, the Fort Worth attorney never thought that the honor would be a "double-edged sword." It drew attention to something that Jackson battles everyday—the appearance of being young, and by inference, inexperienced. Not only does she look and sound significantly younger than her 36 years, Jackson's legal experience exceeds what most would expect from someone her age. Throughout the past 12 years, the Brackett & Ellis shareholder has litigated countless cases involving medical malpractice, nursing home defense, employment and labor issues, and has served as in-house counsel for Bell Helicopter Textron.

So how does a young lawyer get that much experience under her belt? To begin with, Jackson graduated from law school at 23. She applied to an early admittance program at Baylor University and jumped into law school without even earning her undergraduate degree. After completing her J.D., she hit the ground running. Just a few short months into her first job with Bourland, Kirkman & Seidler, she argued a case to the Fort Worth Court of Appeals.

Being the youngest lawyer in the courtroom could be daunting, but Jackson is not easily intimidated. It's a quality she attributes to growing up in a military family and moving often. "By the time I was 18," she says, "I had lived in 18 different homes." Much of her childhood was spent in Germany, which she credits with giving her the ability to "relate to a wide range of people and adjust to situations quickly."

Considering her extensive career achievements, one might assume Jackson has little time for hobbies. But during her youth overseas, she began developing her creative side. Along with her three sisters, she wrote music and plays, putting on performances for friends and family. Her passion for music continues to this day. A member of the Nashville Songwriters Association, Jackson is currently collaborating with her youngest sister on their first album, a collection of country and folk songs the two have written over the years.

If you don't find her in the recording studio, or in the



Lou Thompson Black loves being in "the glorious courtroom."

courtroom, you'll likely find her in the kitchen. Cooking is one of her major creative outlets. "Even just chopping vegetables is relaxing for me," Jackson says. She definitely gets her share of relaxation. She periodically caters parties for more than 100 people, and recently catered the Fort Worth-Tarrant County Young Lawyers Association 70th anniversary celebration at Fort Worth's Bass Hall, attended by 245 people. The menu included many of Jackson's own recipes, which she describes as a "modern take on the cuisine of her Italian country roots."

At home, Jackson's cooking focuses on the "family friendly." The attorney is mother to two children, 5-year-old Grant and 2-year-old Sarah.

So just how does she manage to fit everything into 24 hours?

"I just focus on the moment and being present," she says. "If I'm with my kids, I'm totally there with them. Same goes for work and everything else," she says with a laugh. "But I also don't sleep very much."

Perhaps being young isn't such a bad thing after all.

—Rose Nisker

FINDING A RED DOG'S FAVOR

Laura Benitez Geisler
Jones Geisler

A young attorney usually has to struggle through round after round of stressful interviews in order to land her first job. Not

Laura Benitez Geisler, partner in the Dallas personal injury firm of Jones Geisler. As she tells it, she just stumbled into her first job.

One day, as she was wrapping up her studies at Southern Methodist University School of Law, Geisler attended a conference of the professions. There she met Ralph C. "Red Dog" Jones, an SMU alum and famous Dallas trial lawyer.

"I walked up to Ralph and I introduced myself," recalls Geisler, who went on to graduate from SMU Law with honors. "He asked what I was doing after graduation, and when I told him I wasn't sure yet he said, 'Why don't you come by the office next week?' I figured he was suggesting an informational interview, so I said, 'Sure. I'll show up.' When I got there, he said, 'I've got to meet with an expert. Why don't you join me?' I went along. At the end of the day Ralph said, 'Why don't you show up next week?' I still wasn't sure what was going on, but I showed up on Monday and they gave [me] a desk and a paycheck." She pauses and laughs: "He never even asked to see my résumé."

Nearly 10 years later, Geisler is still working with Jones. And from all accounts, both are happy and satisfied with their partnership.

"Who would've thought?" Geisler asks. "But it turns out we complement each other well in terms of our skill sets. And we enjoy working together. I feel so fortunate that Ralph's been a part of my life. I've learned so much from him. It was a really lucky day I met him."

Jones dismisses Geisler's suggestion that her hiring was simply a lucky break. If anything, he insists, he's been the one who's lucked out with the arrangement.

"She is the complete package," Jones says of Geisler. "She's brilliant, beautiful, caring, talented, creative, competent and one hell of a great lawyer. I could go on and on."

It's not like Geisler has always had opportunities handed to her. As a young girl in Corpus Christi, she knew she wanted to become an attorney ("I read a lot of true-crime books," she says. "I wanted to right the wrongs."), but she also understood that she'd have to work hard to achieve that goal.

"I waited tables through college and law school," Geisler says. "Now when I get nervous before a jury or making an argument before a court I tell myself, 'It's like telling the specials.' It's my little mantra that calms me down."

Usually, Geisler doesn't need any help calming down. A natural litigator, she's passionate and focused when it comes to her work, handling cases with a resolve that comes from the belief that she's doing the right thing.

"I always knew I wanted to do plaintiffs' personal injury work," Geisler says, "because I liked the idea of standing up for the little guy and helping people get the fair treatment they deserve."

Sometimes the "little guy" actually is a little guy. Geisler and Jones have handled many day care abuse cases, representing parents of children who claim to have been sexually or physically abused by one of the employees in a child care center.

"I'm inspired by cases where there's a minor involved," Geisler says, explaining that she and her husband have a 9-year-old daughter. In these cases, Geisler says, "Day care directors tend to close their eyes to what's going on. They don't like to think that something like that could happen in their center." It's Geisler's goal to win monetary compensation for her clients, enough "to make sure there are sufficient funds for the kids to get the psychological treatment they'll need."

Geisler has taken her share of high-profile cases (her role in

the 1998 “Cadet Murder” trial led her to become an expert commentator on the *Leeza Gibbons Show*, for instance), but she says that her heart is with the smaller trials, cases where she knows she can make a big difference in one person’s life.

“Sometimes I’ll take a small case because I feel the person has been wronged and there needs to be a remedy,” Geisler says. “The multimillion-dollar cases are good, but at the end of the day for me it’s really about helping people—not making money.”

—Andy Steiner

THEY MAY NOT BE TV MATERIAL, BUT BILLION-DOLLAR CORPORATE CASES ARE DRAMATIC, TOO

Kelly Dybala

Weil, Gotshal & Manges

“I always had this idea that when I grew up I would be a lawyer,” says Kelly Dybala, a partner in the Dallas office of Weil, Gotshal & Manges. “No one in my family was an attorney, but in high school I was a big fan of the TV show *L.A. Law*. It seemed like the kind of job I’d like to have someday.”

But Dybala’s legal career—while rewarding and intellectually stimulating—hasn’t exactly been the stuff episodes of *L.A. Law* are made of.

“On TV, you see the D.A. and the litigators,” she says with a laugh. “I never expected to be what I am today—which is a corporate finance lawyer. That doesn’t make good TV, but it does make a good career for me.”

It was because of “a happy accident,” she says, that she ended up where she did. “Between college and law school I was looking for a summer job. I didn’t want to work retail, and I knew I could type really fast, so I applied to be a temporary legal secretary.”

After going on a couple of jobs, she ended up at a firm that specialized in corporate finance. “I got exposed to a lot of what happened there, and I quickly saw I was interested in what they were doing,” she says. “There were some great people there doing really fascinating behind-the-scenes work. It was a real eye-opening experience.”

And who cares if corporate finance law doesn’t make good TV? Dybala still finds it exciting. She thinks others should, too.

“You’re dealing with billions of dollars,” she says. “There’s always some drama involved.”

One of her more dramatic cases was last spring’s Univision Communications acquisition. Weil Gotshal represented the purchasing investor group in the \$13.8 billion transaction.

“It’s always great to read about your deals in *The Wall Street Journal*,” Dybala says. “It helps your family understand what’s been keeping you at the office all those evenings and weekends.”

Dybala earned her undergraduate degree from Oklahoma State, and went to law school at the University of Texas, where she graduated with honors. Her husband, Paul, a



From left: Kelly Dybala, Laura Benitez Geisler, Claudine Jackson and Tonya Parker.

Dallas-based audiologist, says that people who meet her are always impressed with her intellect.

“Kelly is one of the smartest people I know,” he says. “I actually read a copy of an evaluation of her from a partner in her firm who wrote that Kelly was ‘scary smart.’”

But smart is not the whole story. In high school, Dybala was bitten by the cheerleading bug, and she continued to compete in the activity even when she was in college. “I loved it,” she says. “I loved the stunts, being tossed up in the air, getting to know people.”

Sometimes the right person just falls into your life. Dybala met her husband when the two were cheering partners in college.

“I was a junior and she was a freshman,” Paul Dybala recalls. “She claims that I broke her leg during cheerleading practice. But the truth is, she was falling from a pyramid and I saved her life by catching her as she fell. Regrettably, by some act of God, when I caught her and saved her life, her leg did hit the ground at a strange angle.”

After nine years of marriage and two children, some of his wife’s natural lawyering abilities seem to have rubbed off on him. “It was the ground that broke her leg, not me,” he hedges. “Spoken like a true lawyer, eh?”

—Andy Steiner

TONYA LOVES DIALOGUE

Tonya Parker

Gruber Hurst

Growing up, Gruber Hurst attorney Tonya Parker thought she would channel her love of dialogue into a media career. “It sounds ridiculous now,” she says, “but Oprah had just made it big when I was in high school so I decided that I wanted to be a talk show host.”

But her aspirations shifted after a chance meeting with former Fort Worth judge Mary Ellen Hicks. As an undergraduate at the University of North Texas, Parker hosted a Black History event that Hicks attended. The judge approached Parker and suggested she consider a career in law.

“That was my first direct exposure to someone who worked in

law,” Parker says. “Up to that point the only judges that I heard about were the ones who sentenced members of my community to jail. Something just clicked for me when she made the suggestion, and I knew law was the path for me.” Parker went on to receive her J.D. from Southern Methodist University in 1998.

Parker is rarely at a loss for words, but what she likes to do even more than talk is listen. “My philosophy is just be quiet and you might learn something,” she says. After she was named an American Marshall Memorial Fellow in 2005, she put that philosophy into practice. As a fellow, she traveled for 25 days to five European countries, participated in high-level briefings at NATO, the European Union, German Bundestag and Slovakian Parliament, and generally crammed in as much exposure to the sociopolitical and economic structures of Europe as possible. During the trip, she spent evenings at the homes of foreign dignitaries, politicians and business leaders, discussing everything from religion to economics.

After the whirlwind trip, she returned home eager to engage the Dallas legal community in the same kind of open discussion she experienced in Europe. As co-chair of the Dallas Association for Young Lawyers’ Diversity Committee, she helped to create an event in 2006 called “Dinner and Dialogue.” Parker and her committee carefully orchestrated the evening so that judges and lawyers with opposing perspectives could come together, over dinner, and discuss everything from politics to religion.

Being at a table full of people who avidly disagree with each other isn’t everybody’s idea of a good time, but for Parker, it was a dream. “Even if I agree with its members,” she says, “a group that’s made up of only like-minded people is probably not the place for me.”

—Rose Nisker

THE JOURNALIST TAKES ON THE LAW

Kate McConnico
Looper Reed & McGraw

When Kate McConnico enrolled at University of Houston Law Center in 1993, she never intended to become a practicing attorney. “I went to law school to learn how the world works,” the Houston-area native says.

At the time, McConnico was a journalist writing for publications like *TEXAS MONTHLY* and *The Texas Observer*. “I wanted to be a real Woodward and Bernstein-type investigative journalist,” she says. In order to do the job effectively, she felt the need to refine her understanding of politics, economics and social issues. “Otherwise,” she says, “I would just be chasing after the coattails of what other people were doing.”

But once in law school, she quickly decided that uncovering corporate malfeasance in the courtroom could be just as effective as uncovering it in the newsroom. The budding attorney jumped into the world of consumer rights law while still in law school.

Consumer rights was a natural extension of her interest in social justice issues. While an undergraduate at Vassar College majoring in philosophy and political science, she designed her own study-abroad program that landed her a year in Cape Town, South Africa. She explored the region’s economic system at the University of Cape Town, and lived with numerous different families from across the South African socioeconomic spectrum—Afrikaaner, black, English, rich and poor. She volunteered in the townships during the height of the notorious

“taxi wars,” and even had the opportunity to shake hands with Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu.

“My experience in Cape Town made me realize how little I knew, and how much I could learn by keeping my mouth closed and just absorbing what was happening around me,” she says.

After she graduated from law school, McConnico returned to Houston and began building a successful track record in the



products liability, wrongful death and business litigation arenas. Last March, she won a jury verdict for a company whose pipeline exploded at the hands of a subcontractor, a case that had been pending for seven years.

When Looper Reed began expanding its family law practice, her colleagues encouraged her to give it a shot. “Actually, during law school I looked down on family law,” she admits. “I thought, ‘I don’t want to spend my time negotiating over pots and pans.’” But she immediately loved working in family law. “I found I could be one-third therapist, one-third courtroom litigator and one-third financial planner.”

McConnico has worked on a slew of uniquely complicated cases since switching to family law. She recently won full custody for a mother who had been kicked out of her family’s house and subsequently accused of child abandonment.

Even more unconventional was a case that McConnico handled involving the parental rights of a cross-dressing sperm donor. A lesbian couple made a contractual arrangement with a male friend to donate sperm so they could have a child. While the contract stated that the friend would have visitation rights and pay child support, the couple reneged on the agreement after the father came to the house late at night, wearing mascara and in drag. At the time, Texas law stated that a sperm donor does not have any standing as a parent. “But they hadn’t accounted for the turkey-baster scenario,” McConnico says. Representing the lesbian couple, she lost the case when the Court of Appeals decided that the father had standing to visit and pay child support. Because of recent changes to Texas law regarding a sperm donor’s lack of ability to sue, McConnico believes they would have won the case if they were in court today.

No matter the situation, the 37-year-old McConnico says her work is most gratifying when she can give people “the small tools that can help them deal with a divorce or family crisis.” She adds, “My work in family law, more than my work as a journalist or personal injury attorney, actually gives me a direct opportunity to counsel people to take the high road.”

—Rose Nisker

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