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Wonder Women: New BigTex Partners on How They Chose Their Firms
Jeanne Graham

There are momentous occasions in every lawyer's career, like passing the bar exam, starting a first job and making partner. But, along the way, smaller events also can have a big impact, nudging a lawyer in one direction or confirming that she's on the right path.

For Andrews Kurth corporate and securities partner Stephanie Beauvais, such an event occurred when she was still an associate. Like many new parents, Beauvais was trying to balance her career and her family life. She had picked up her 18-month old son from daycare and returned to work for a client conference call at 5:30 on a Friday evening.

When her son started banging on the conference table during the call, section head Mike O'Leary, who had asked Beauvais to attend the meeting, jokingly told the client that the child was the firm's youngest associate.

"It was an accommodation that let me know that everything was going to work out, and it had a huge impact on me," says the 2004 graduate of South Texas College of Law in Houston.

"It always stuck with me," she says.

Beauvais is one of 31 new female partners at Texas' largest firms. Women make up 36.9 percent and minorities 14.3 percent of the large firms' 2013 Texas partners.

That's up from 2007, the first year for which Texas Lawyer has comparable data. Back then, women made up 32 percent and minorities nine percent of the new partners.

In total, 84 lawyers made partner or shareholder at 21 of the 25 firms with the largest Texas operations. The firms are listed on "The Texas 100" poster published in the April 30, 2012, edition of Texas Lawyer. Four of the firms announced new partners after presstime on March 21.

Beauvais' firm, Houston-based Andrews Kurth, is one of four firms among the 21 where more than half of the new partners are female and more than 15 percent are minorities. The other firms are Haynes and Boone, Jackson Walker and Strasburger & Price, all based in Dallas.

Like Beauvais, new female and/or minority partners with each of the other three firms recall events early in their careers that gave them each a lasting, positive impression of their respective firms.
Leslie Thorne, a litigation partner in Haynes and Boone in Austin, recalls reading the information listed under the news section on firms' websites when she was researching large firms before on-campus summer associate interviews.

"I found with Haynes and Boone there were a lot of highlighted female attorneys," she says.

The information indicated that Haynes and Boone had female lawyers who were well-respected both inside and outside the firm, she says.

Thorne says she was interested in advancing up the ladder in a large firm, and although a firm’s focus on women was not her main priority, it did matter.

"I wanted to feel that, wherever I chose, there was potential for the rest of my career — a place for me — in 10 years, 20 years," she says.

She became a 2003 summer associate with the firm and a permanent associate after graduating from the University of Texas School of Law in 2004.

Lauren McLaughlin, an estate planning partner in the San Antonio office of Strasburger & Price, says she joined what was then Oppenheimer Blend Harrison & Tate about three years before its 2011 combination with Strasburger & Price. The combined firm's San Antonio offices are known as Strasburger Price Oppenheimer Blend.

The 2004 graduate of Columbia Law School thought that Oppenheimer might be leery of hiring someone with a 3-month-old child and mentioned the baby during her interview with tax department head Lindsay Martin.

"He just immediately asked about the baby," she says. "I felt supported from the very beginning."

McLaughlin says that supportive atmosphere continued after Oppenheimer's merger with Strasburger.

"As a woman, and being a mother as well, I've never felt any sort of stigma or glass ceiling or anything," she says.

Jackson Walker corporate partner Marisela Peña says she was impressed when she was a first-year student at the University of Houston Law Center and learned that the firm was hiring a 1L.
six-week summer associate as part of the Houston Bar Association's Minority Opportunities in the Legal Profession program.

"The idea of coming in, in the summer clerkship program like the 2Ls, and having exposure to being in the legal world — that was absolutely what drove me to apply with Jackson Walker," she says.

She returned as a summer associate after her second year of law school and joined the firm as a permanent associate after graduating in 2005.

"I have always felt there is a great diversity in the [firm's] associate and summer associate ranks," she says. "I have seen diversity grow into the partnership ranks, which is really good to see."