

Prioritizing: A Strength of Lawyers

BY NEDRA BLOOM

Maibeth Jernigan Porter cites one overriding reason for her success — her law firm, Maynard, Cooper & Gale PC, is “supportive of me and of women in general.”

She follows that tribute immediately with a nod of appreciation for the women who “blazed the trails” in Birmingham’s world of law. Listing a half dozen female role models in Birmingham, she adds, “They did it first, so people were more used to seeing women in the courtroom. I don’t think I was ever treated with disrespect by any judge.”

While her firm is remarkable for its policies that make working life easier for parents, it also was remarkable for helping her get started at all, she says. “There are some very generous people here,” she says. “When I started, they shared their clients without expecting anything except for me to do a good job. When people are generous with you when you first start, you learn to be generous with those who are younger.”

Growing Up with the Law

Porter grew up with the law. Her father, a Montgomery attorney, put her to work as a runner when she was 12. “I got a good idea of what a broad spectrum law practice can cover.”

As an undergraduate at University of the South in Seawannee, Tenn., she was tempted by a career as an English professor. “But I decided I was not original enough to do that in a dramatic way.”

So she went off to Vanderbilt for law school, recognizing that the need for briefs would allow her to continue writing. “You do a lot of that as a young lawyer,” she says, adding that she really enjoyed it.

“As you get older, you’re pulled in many other directions, so it’s harder to put in six or seven hours polishing and doing research,” she says. Instead, she spends more time taking depositions and trying cases — though she notes that there are fewer cases tried in America now than 20 years ago.



MAIBETH JERNIGAN PORTER

Specializing Brings Benefits to Clients

Although Maynard Cooper handles a broad spectrum of cases, Porter says that individual lawyers are more likely to specialize than in her father’s day.

She spends most of her time doing drug and medical device defense work. “It’s given me a change to develop a team and manage people,” she says, adding, “I wish I could say I planned it, but I didn’t. It started with one client and one particular product and blossomed from there.”

She loves the field because it gives her a chance to delve into the science behind the product or situation, which translates into becoming well versed in another field in addition to law. It’s a benefit to clients, too, because “what you learn is applied to more than one drug or device.”

But the main issue for an attorney, she says, is “to do a good job and be aware of not wasting the clients’ money. Be efficient.”

In fact, she thinks women are good at

being efficient, “especially women who have children. They try to get as much done as possible so they can go home and take care of the family. They try not to waste time.”

Ironically, she thinks that fathers whose spouses work full time face many of the same pressures as working mothers, but that their conflicts are “perhaps less appreciated.”

Choosing Priorities

Porter thinks the glass ceiling a woman might face in corporate America is less of a problem in law firms, but that “women have so many demands on them that it’s difficult to fulfill all the things it may take to get to the top. You have to pick and choose what’s important to you. If you want to get to the top, you can, and your sex won’t hold you back. But it’s hard to have a successful family life and a high-powered career at the same time.”

She tends to favor being a mom when kids are smaller and being a high-powered businesswoman later. But she cautions not to make the transition too soon. “A little kid will talk all day long, but if you miss the one time during the week when your teenager wants to talk, you’ve missed it.”

“Maybe it’s not the best thing to have a straight-line-to-the-top plan,” she says. “There are a lot of detours and you can still get where you want to.”

Although Porter and her husband, Robert Eckinger, are both attorneys, she says that none of their three kids wants to be a lawyer. “The youngest says it’s because I have too much homework,” she quips. “But I try to instill in them that it’s important to have a skill so they’re never dependent on anybody.”

When she’s not at work, Porter enjoys running, especially for its calming effect, watching her kids play sports, and knitting sweaters for other people’s babies. She’s active in her church and in the local bar association and serves as a bar commissioner at the state level. •