

‘YOU HAVE A VOICE’

The Texas Young Lawyers Association president seeks to empower future leaders of the legal profession.

INTERVIEW BY ERIC QUITUGUA

RIGHT: “As a young lawyer, you are constantly faced with new challenges and new opportunities,” Texas Young Lawyers Association President Britney Harrison said. “Though the lessons learned may come from mistakes or failures, it is completely worth it.”



When Britney Harrison was a kid, she aspired to work for the FBI as the real-life Clarice Starling, making sure from an early age to keep her background as clean as possible for future background checks. But as lousy eyesight would have it, a life of chasing cannibalistic serial killers as a federal agent wasn't in the cards.

Instead, Harrison went the law route after being inspired by a criminal law course she took at the University of North Texas. The criminal justice major and social science minor moved on to earn a law degree at the University of Texas School of Law. And after working with clients pro bono, she realized she wanted to work in family law.

Perhaps that's no shocker as Harrison is close with her own family. She grew up in north Austin within a five-mile radius of most of them, joining in Bible school, Pop Warner cheerleading, tap dancing, twirling, and cooking wars on holidays. Not shying away from her self-described nerdiness, Harrison admits to playing school with her cousins in the summer and thanks to that scholarliness, we find her now at the helm of the Texas Young Lawyers Association.

Harrison, who was sworn in June 26, 2020, spoke with the *Texas Bar Journal* about her plans for promoting financial literacy and business planning as well as educating students on pioneering women in civil rights in the upcoming year for TYLA.

WHAT PIQUED YOUR INTEREST IN FAMILY LAW?

I worked at a litigation boutique my first three years of practice but did not have much courtroom exposure. The one time I did go to court, I saw that the majority of the cases were family law cases. I decided to take a pro bono divorce case through Volunteer Legal Services in Austin. Once I met with the client and developed a plan of action, I fell in love with family law. I realized what was missing from my current work (other than the lack of actual litigation)—I was not able to help people on an individual basis. I was finally able to combine my two passions, litigation and helping individuals.

YOU ALSO HELPED YOUR DAD GO TO COLLEGE. TELL US MORE ABOUT THAT.

I've always been a “daddy's girl.” My dad was the best person I knew, and he understood and appreciated my extreme nerdiness, which I fully embrace now. He worked for UPS for 30 years as a delivery driver. He worked hard to allow my mom to stay home with my sister and me—which we were very fortunate to have. He always dreamed of finishing college and becoming a teacher. I remember him tutoring students after working long days delivering packages and even attending some night classes at Austin Community College.

When I learned he was finally able to retire and wanted to go back to school, I had to help. It worked out that he was retiring the same month that I was graduating from law

school. I had a job lined up and knew that I could afford to pay his tuition. I wanted him to be able to be a full-time student and not have to carry the burden of student loans in his retirement. He reapplied to Texas, was accepted, and started back in fall 2010. He graduated December 2013. Dropping him off to line up in the robing room where I had gone for two of my graduations was so surreal. That was one of our family's favorite memories. We are so proud of him!

WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME INVOLVED WITH TYLA AND WHY?

Early on in my career I learned about TYLA and saw all of the projects that TYLA developed. I was so encouraged by the amount of resources available for the public and members of the bar. The servant leader approach was right up my alley, and I knew TYLA would be a wonderful way for me to give back and serve others. I applied to TYLA for an at-large large city director spot in spring 2015. However, my application was not selected. I was sad but did not give up. I applied for LeadershipSBOT that summer and had the wonderful experience learning more about TYLA, the State Bar, and leadership in general. I knew that serving on the board was the next step. I applied again for the at-large position the next year and was selected. As soon as I went to new director orientation, I was hooked.

WHAT PROJECTS HAVE YOU WORKED ON THAT YOU'RE THE MOST PROUD OF?

The Free from Violence website aimed toward survivors of domestic abuse and elder abuse and the Not a Victim website are probably my favorite projects. Both projects featured compelling stories about survivors and their journey to rebuild their lives. They educated the public about the resources available to survivors and the legal rights and responsibilities related to domestic violence and sexual assault from the perspective of survivors, family, and friends as well as the accused.

WHAT WILL BE YOUR FOCUS GOING INTO YOUR YEAR AS PRESIDENT?

We have so many great projects that center around empowerment, innovation, and education. I plan to focus on young lawyer issues such as business development and financial literacy as well as providing resources and opportunities meant to empower young lawyers to become our future leaders of the profession. Given the current nature of things (i.e., the pandemic), we will need to be innovative in our approach to reaching the public. This will come in the form of podcasts and other virtual events and programming. I

am so excited that we received a grant from the Texas Bar Foundation to develop a program called *Iconic Women in Legal History*, which will consist of educational videos and written content satisfying state educational curriculum focused on the role of women and their organizations in promoting and protecting civil rights.

WHO IS THE BIGGEST INFLUENCE IN YOUR CAREER?

John Barrett in Austin. I tried my first case with him. We were preparing for trial and I was extremely nervous about putting on my first witness. He said four simple words that literally changed the trajectory of my career and helped me boost my confidence. He said, "You have a voice." I wrote those four small but powerful words down on a Post-it and put it in my trial binder. I will carry those words with me the rest of my life. Honestly, I don't know that I would have run for president-elect had I not had that encouragement from John early on in my career. Though he's retired now and I moved to Dallas, to this day, I still call him to get advice as well as hear one of his "war stories." I always learn something every time we talk.

WHAT'S THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE YOU'VE RECEIVED?

In addition to "You have a voice," other words I live by: "All money is not good money." My mom has always said that phrase and it applies in so many different situations. I left a big firm salary behind to pursue my passion as a family lawyer. Best decision I could have ever made. Though family law can be stressful, I love my job. I've declined to take a case despite a client willing to pay a high retainer. Some situations are not worth the hassle.

WHAT'S THE TOUGHEST PART ABOUT BEING A YOUNG ATTORNEY?

Confidence. I am often faced with opposing counsel who have had decades of experience. You can feel unsure about yourself, but I find it best to turn that around and just prepare even harder. I don't second-guess

myself as much now that I am almost 10 years in, but I still have some of those nights where the anxiety keeps me up.

WHAT'S THE MOST REWARDING PART?

Gaining knowledge and learning lessons. I am the type of person that always enjoyed school and enjoyed learning. (Confession, one of my favorite summer pastimes was playing school with my cousins.) As a young lawyer, you are constantly faced with new challenges and new opportunities. Though the lessons learned may come from mistakes or failures, it is completely worth it. **TBJ**



ABOVE: (Top) Britney Harrison poses with her family during her father's commencement ceremony at the University of Texas in fall 2013. From left: sister Brandi Harrison Trotter, mother Jackie Harrison, father Richard Harrison, Britney Harrison, and nephew Brayden Harrison. (Bottom) John Barrett and Britney Harrison at the 2019 Advanced Family Law CLE in San Antonio.