The Luckiest People Are Those Who Work the Hardest

Jennifer Evans Morris Takes Office as TYLA President

By Patricia L. Garcia



ot many people get to say no to Juilliard. **Jennifer Evans Morris** is one of the few. Before Morris, a partner in Carrington, Coleman, Sloman & Blumenthal, L.L.P. in Dallas, set her sights on becoming an attorney, she was an aspiring concert musician. From the time she was in fourth grade until she was in her sophomore year at Southern Methodist University, Morris was determined to be a professional French horn player. She worked hard enough to be accepted to four music conservatories, with Juilliard at the top of her list. The scholarship she was offered to Juilliard, however, did not cover room and board. This was Morris' tipping point.

"I panicked," Morris says. "I learned that if you went to a conservatory you earned a bachelor of music, which didn't allow you to do anything other than get a master's in music as your next step. I was worried that I had closed too many doors."

So, rather than live as a poor student at Juilliard, or displease her mother by moving across the country from Baltimore, Md., to attend the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (or stay too close to home by attending the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore or Oberlin College Conservatory of Music in Oberlin, Ohio), she opted for SMU's Meadows School of the Arts in Dallas, where she could study under one of the nation's top hornists, Gregory Hustis, and where she could change her major if she ever decided on something else.

Jennifer Evans Morris grew up in Tampa, Fla., a Gulf Coast city with a variety of musical traditions. The eldest of four girls, Morris was the serious yet independent child that her younger sisters looked up to. (Morris' sister, Gail Schroeter, followed in her footsteps and is now a sole practitioner in Del Rio.) Morris was very disciplined in her studies and "loved to read." ("If I ever got into trouble, my books were taken away.") She first picked up an instrument — a recorder — when she was in the second grade as part of a Carl Orff music education program at her elementary school. In the fourth grade, she took on the French horn and did not look back. "I knew that I wanted to be a French horn player," she says matter-of-factly, adding that she never dreamed she would waver from that path. When she was a sophomore in high school, her mother and stepfather moved the family to Baltimore, where Morris attended the Baltimore School for the Arts.

Morris may have realized at a young age that while she loved music, it would not ultimately be the path for her. When she was about six years old, she told her grandmother that she wanted to be a lawyer, to which her grandmother replied, "Oh, you can't be a lawyer. No one in the family's ever gone to Harvard." And so, with that, Morris' courtroom dreams faded away. Until, of course, she was a sophomore in college.

Having worked hard to get to college — she was the first in her family to do so — Morris was determined to stay there. She worked three jobs even though, as a scholarship recipient, she was not supposed to work. Her music instructor, Gregory Hustis, found out about her employment and gave her money out of his own pocket to keep her from working. Morris was unhappy being isolated in a room for six to eight hours a day, practicing her instrument. So, she put her horn into her case, shut it, and quit. "I thought my career was going to be in music," she says. "But once I accomplished the goals I had set out for myself, I realized that music wasn't what I wanted anymore. It was really hard to step away from it. But it was a good decision for me.

"It was awful to quit, though, because I had so much help along the way," she says. "But I realized that what I really loved was something else." After a few months of searching, an English professor suggested to Morris that she join the mock trial team. That was it — Morris was in love with the art of debating. "I loved debate and mock trial," she says. "I love trying cases. It's not that far from being a musician in that there's a certain level of performance." She soon went to work building a law career. Ever the industrious one, Morris put herself

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through the rest of undergraduate and law school by selling cemetery plots, planning weddings, and even working in a law firm. She married a fellow SMU resident assistant, Thomas Morris, who is an attorney and mediator.

It wasn't easy to convince law firms that a former musician would make a good attorney, but Morris was resourceful: She used the experience of famous composers who were also attor-

neys and explained that it was important to have good analytical skills to be a good musician.

Morris found a home at Carrington Coleman, a place she says has nurtured her personal and professional growth. She's grateful for a firm that is supportive of her community service and bar work. In fact, Carrington partner Monica Wiseman Latin was the reason Morris found herself involved with the Texas Young Lawyers Association in the first place. Latin served on the TYLA board for four years. Morris joined the board in 2004 and served as TYLA secretary in 2007-2008. "I don't think Jennifer needed much nudging," Latin says. "She's an incredibly active and engaged person in general."



Jennifer with husband Thomas Morris.

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Wiseman added that Morris' friendly demeanor and approach is an asset to the organization that she will lead starting this month. "Jennifer is really the complete package when it comes to a participating attorney. She has the intellectual ability to reason through whatever an issue is, but frankly, the harder thing to find in a lawyer is a person who brings a per-

sonality that is very likeable and yet still professional. Jennifer shows what's good in the legal profession."

The firm's senior counsel and founding partner agrees. He first met Morris when she was a second-year law student at SMU and was chosen as a summer associate for the firm. "She is a superb attorney and she's honorable to a fault," says

James E. "Jim" Coleman, Jr. "Bar associations sometimes suffer when some of the best and brightest don't participate, and I think it's wonderful that she is participating in the local and state bars. A person like Jennifer adds credibility to the profession. The sky's the limit for Jennifer."

Morris is passionate about fighting domestic abuse and child abuse and about providing support to abuse survivors. She is active with Community Partners of Dallas, a nonprofit that assists abused and neglected children, and Attorneys Serv-

ing the Community, an organization that raises awareness and funds for charities that help women, children, and families. As part of TYLA's public service, Morris plans on educating the public about its obligation to report child abuse through a three-part project. The project will include a 30-second public service announcement on recognizing child abuse and a video for those who work with children.

In the coming year, Morris also expects to implement several programs that focus on TYLA members to help meet the needs of young lawyers in a bum economy. "When I was campaigning, I realized that this is not about me, this is about the 25,000-plus young lawyers across the state." Office in Your Pocket will give young lawyers everything they need to know about opening their own law practice — CLE podcasts, checklists, and forms — on a flash drive.

Morris' second project will be a job message board for young lawyers, which will include an online forum where young lawyers around the state can share information regarding job opportunities and other important issues.

The last project Morris hopes to focus on will be *Partnering for Pro Bono*, where in-house counsel will be paired with young lawyers in law firms on pro bono cases to help increase free legal services to Texans in need.

In her spare time, Morris enjoys bicycling and cooking. (Morris even dabbled in being a food critic for a small Dallas magazine before it went broke.) "She loves to cook," her husband, Thomas

Morris, says. "She's the go-to girl if anybody wants to find out where the good places to eat are." A good friend, he explains, once requested for her birthday that Morris make Beef Wellington — a very elaborate and time-consuming dish — and Morris was more than happy to oblige. (We hear her chocolate truffle cheese-cake is quite delicious, too.)

— Monica Wiseman Latin

Thomas says she brings as much passion to her recreational activities as her professional ones. A while back, Morris decided to participate in a triathlon, convincing five others to take part as well. Despite a torn rotator cuff, Morris completed the event. "She was still out there, swimming and biking," Thomas says. "If Jennifer puts her mind to do something, she's like a force of nature."

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