



OUT IN THE WEST TEXAS TOWN OF EL PASO

Cori Harbour Takes Office as TYLA President

By Patricia L. Garcia

There is a phenomenon that pervades El Paso that keeps things easygoing and laidback. The “mañana attitude,” as it’s called, persists on the thinking that tomorrow always comes. Things will get done. No worries. It’s not that things aren’t accomplished in El Paso, it’s just that most people don’t try to juggle their morning coffee, cell phone, briefcase, and breakfast all while trying to drive and text on their BlackBerrys. And though one of the big I-35 metropolitan cities it is not, El Paso has one of the nation’s busiest federal court dockets. For 12 years, sole practitioner Cori Harbour has called El Paso home, and like all the others in El Paso, she has learned to relax. “I love practicing in El Paso. It’s a very tight-knit legal community,” Harbour says. “You can call somebody and depend on their word. In El Paso, you don’t have to put everything in writing. It’s still very much handshakes, and it’s very collegial.”

After graduating from Texas Southern University Thurgood Marshall School of Law in 1997, Harbour moved to El Paso to clerk for the 8th Court of Appeals. Harbour did such a great job with the Court that the clerkship was extended by a year. Although she had been accepted into the Master of Laws Program on Law and Government at American University Washington College of Law in Washington, D.C., Harbour opted to stay in El Paso. She was soon a staff attorney for the Court and was later promoted to senior staff attorney. In Janu-

ary 2004, she decided to hang out her shingle and has not looked back since. “I love the freedom,” she says of her civil and criminal appeals and criminal defense practice. “But there are a lot of challenges that come with being a small business owner. Attorneys at firms don’t have to worry that there will always be paper and pens. On payday, there is always a check waiting for them. But I’ve been able to take a lot of cases that I probably wouldn’t if I were at a firm. The freedom of being a solo is just incredible.”

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That freedom has translated to much time spent with husband Tavo Vidal, daughter Chanellor, and the family pets (two dogs and two cats). It's obvious that despite her busy schedule, Harbour has found a happy middle ground that allows time for family, friends, and work. As a sole practitioner, this is no easy feat, but she makes it look effortless. "Cori is the master of multitasking and will take on any project. If she tells you she will handle the project, then she will complete it on time and better than you could have ever expected," says 8th Court of Appeals Justice Ann McClure, who met Harbour when she clerked for the Court and who introduced her to the local bar associations as a way of meeting other attorneys.

Cori Ann Harbour grew up in Liberty, one of the oldest towns in the state. Nestled between Houston and Beaumont, Liberty boasts an exact replica of Philadelphia's Liberty Bell and has a total area of approximately 35 square miles — it is "the country," Harbour says. There, Harbour, the oldest of two children, often spent time on her father's and grandmother's farms baling hay, digging fence posts, feeding animals, even shearing sheep. "I think it creates a good work ethic when you have to experience all those types of little jobs," she says. "I didn't appreciate it at the time, but growing up in a small town was great. I had opportunities that I wouldn't have had in a bigger place and learned about hard work and how to get along with people. I was well prepared for everything life threw at me."

As a student, Harbour participated in just about everything — student council, speech and debate, anything, she says, that would take her to state conventions in Austin. Though a huge sports fan, Harbour shied away from sports, because she "was terrible and uncoordinated." "I tried playing basketball in the fourth grade," she laughs. "In our first game, I got a pass. I took the ball, ran down the court — no dribbling, mind you — and made it down to the other side. I ended up making a basket. For the other team."



Harbour with daughter, Chanellor, and husband, Tavo Vidal.

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Though there were no lawyers in the family, Harbour set out to be an attorney at a young age. "Once I realized that I probably couldn't make a living as a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader, I decided that I wanted to be a lawyer," she quips. "I don't really know where it came from. My dad would tell you it's because I'm ornery and I like to argue." Harbour excelled at academics, and along the way, influenced her younger brother, Clint, who is now an assistant attorney general in the Office of the Texas Attorney General, to join her in the legal field. "I helped Cori study for the LSATs when I was a freshman in college and thought, 'I could do this,' " he says with a laugh. "That's when the sibling rivalry really kicked in." Cori was so thrilled when she learned Clint was accepted to law school that she gave him air-

plane tickets to Europe.

If you didn't know that Cori and Clint are siblings, you'd think them to be best friends (unless, of course, you notice that they share the Harbour dimples). During a recent dinner in Austin, the two shared childhood stories of growing up in Liberty and stories about their love of sports. They've got a collection of stories about the other and they play off of each other while telling them. They poke fun at each other, in that nice sort of way. There is the typical sibling rivalry, but there is also a deep mutual respect between the two.

"Cori is extremely intelligent and hardworking," says Clint, who served on the TYLA Board of Directors at the same time as his sister and who will soon return as the Access to Justice liaison. "She's also very social, and when it comes to getting people to come behind you to complete projects, that is extremely helpful. The talent that she has is identifying others' talents and capitalizing on that. She's a good delegator and leader."

Using that talent, Harbour has helped countless adults and children as president of the El Paso Young Lawyers Association, the El Paso Women's Bar Association, the El Paso Bar Association, and the Planned Parenthood Center of El Paso. And she's

a mentor in the Positive Role Model Program. Harbour credits her grandmother and mother for passing the volunteering gene on to her. Harbour's grandmother, Ann "Hannie" Glass, devoted much of her time to her church and to the St. Stephens Society, a secondhand store that the church ran, and to the local battered women's center. She was quite the animal lover, too. "She was known as 'the dog lady' because she would take in strays and get them fixed and then give them away, but she ended up keeping a lot of them," Harbour laughs. Her mother, Cathy Harbour, formerly a teacher and now a librarian, volunteered for countless committees and gave much of her time to church and school functions. She's been president of the local teacher's organization since 1989. (Cori has followed in her mother's footsteps — one semester a year, she teaches "Courts in Action" at the University of Texas at El Paso.)

On June 26, Harbour will take the helm of the Texas Young Lawyers Association. She's already got a jumpstart on some of the projects she'd like to tackle in her year as president. As a parent and a mentor to countless children and young adults (she is often appointed guardian ad litem for children as well), Harbour will concentrate on TYLA's commitment to serving and protecting the state's youth, focusing particularly on a cyber crimes video aimed at third- and fourth-grade students. "More and more kids are getting online," she says. "We need to make them aware of cyber bullying and other cyber issues. You just hear stories of kids meeting someone online and going to meet them — it's scary." In addition, Harbour wants to expand one of last year's projects, *Healing the Wounds: Navigating the Legal System After Surviving Domestic Abuse*, to address teen dating violence. Along with that, she and TYLA Secretary Natalie Cobb Koehler hope to film a victim impact panel (where victims talk about how a crime has affected them) that could be used in smaller counties without the resources to provide their own. Her list doesn't stop there: Harbour says she'd like to expand TYLA's pamphlets to include information on foreclosure and fair debt collection, as well as farm workers' rights.

True to her teaching roots, she also aims to start a mentoring program for new attorneys. "I think mentoring is so important for young lawyers. The practical experience of a mentor is just invaluable," she says. Other initiatives Harbour would like to offer are a guide for those who are caring for elderly parents and environmental awareness projects.

Most of all, Harbour wants to help make the State Bar relevant to Texas attorneys, particularly solos and small firm practitioners and those in areas of the state that are rather far from the bigger cities of Austin, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio. "I hope that I can be the voice for the smaller, outlying areas of Texas," she says. "When I hear attorneys ask, 'What does the Bar do for me?' I'll start naming things and they say, 'Really?' We need to do a better job at promoting what we offer. I hope to do this through the upcoming, completely redesigned TYLA website, which will be much more user friendly."

Harbour's fellow El Paso attorneys are excited for her opportunity to lead TYLA, which prides itself as the "public



Cori Harbour with her younger brother Clint.

service arm" of the State Bar; she's served on the board since 2003. "Cori brings a lot of integrity to the legal community and credibility to the El Paso legal community," says 327th District Court Judge Linda Chew, who has worked with Harbour on several projects. "She will bring some recognition not only to El Paso, but to those small towns that may be overlooked by the rest of the state, to show that we can be state leaders. She'll open the door for a lot of us." Justice McClure agrees and says that Harbour's innovative way of thinking will serve her well as TYLA president. "She can look at an issue she believes needs to be addressed and come up with a novel way to approach it. This ability leads to renewed interest in a tired topic or thorny problem and serves to invigorate the problem solvers."

Though Harbour has reached the highest point of her young career thus far, she has no plans to slow down. "I definitely aspire to be on the bench someday," she says. "I've talked to several friends who are on the bench, and they've all told me that I'll know when the time is right. But for the time being, I like where I am. I've been really happy with the way things have turned out. I feel very fortunate and blessed, and I'm looking forward to serving as TYLA president."

PATRICIA L. GARCIA

is associate editor of the *Texas Bar Journal*.