

# Share Your Story

## *of Power and Progress*



### ***Jessica L. Cleary***

It was during my junior year of college when I came to the realization that I needed to take ownership of my life. I struggled with what this meant for me and ultimately decided that I should keep going to school. I thought, maybe I could be a lawyer. During my first week as a 1L, I realized I would not make it through law

school if I didn't go "all-in." I was open to the challenge and met it head on. In October 2000, I was sworn into the Rhode Island Supreme Court as a member of the Rhode Island Bar Association. For the following eight years, I practiced workers compensation insurance defense and developed trial advocacy skills at the Rhode Island Workers Compensation Court. Through all of this, I gained experience, knowledge, and a sense of confidence, but still was not completely fulfilled in my profession. I was looking for a change that would allow me to truly make a difference. In 2009, I accepted an opportunity to work with Chisholm Chisholm & Kilpatrick, LTD (CCK) in Providence, R.I. The position at CCK called for legal advocacy on behalf of disabled veterans before the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Board of Veterans Appeals, and the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. I knew that by leaving one practice of law behind and entering an underpopulated area of law I was taking a risk professionally. Today, I know it was worth the risk. When people ask me what I do and how I make a difference, I tell them about the 2 million veterans that are returning home after a dozen years of war and about the countless numbers of veterans that are struggling to reintegrate, facing a staggering backlog in having claims processed or have to fight against a massive bureaucratic process. Since I joined CCK in 2009, our veterans' practice has grown by 850 percent. I am humbled and proud to be singled out as one of the architects of the firm's growth. I am one of three attorneys, (under the co-owners) who hold a leadership position at CCK. In 2013, I was selected by the Providence Business News as a winner in the "40 under Forty" competition, an honor that underscores one's career success and dedicated community involvement. On a personal note, I strive to be a role model for other young women. Although much has changed, women today still face glass ceilings and the struggle to balance family and a career. When I got married in 2003, I became a stepmother to two teenage children. By 2008, I had been further blessed with two young daughters, and my oldest stepdaughter was on her way to law school. I am cognizant of the example I set for my daughters. Every day I advocate for a disabled veteran, a person who has advocated for me and other citizens of our country. There is no better way to use my legal skills than to represent U.S. armed forces disabled veterans, who by their own actions have protected the very ground that I walk on. ©



### ***Erica Benites Giese***

I was raised in Eagle Pass, Texas, a small town located on the Texas–Mexico border by a single mother who worked as a secretary with the district clerk's office. My mother never made very much money, but always instilled in me a sense of independence, tenacity, and a desire to achieve a formal education beyond high school even though she never accomplished it herself. While

working full-time and maintaining a full course load at the University of Texas at Austin, I managed to graduate in four years. While in graduate school, I was hired to work as a caseworker for Child Protective Services. As a caseworker, I handled cases involving children who were abused and neglected and whom the state determined were unsafe in their home. I primarily handled cases with Spanish-speaking families and successfully placed five children with grandparents in Mexico after coordinating with the court system and several agencies in Mexico and the United States. Because I spoke Spanish, I typically carried a higher caseload than anyone else. I worked full time during the day in Austin, Texas, and attended graduate courses in the evening in San Marcos—an hour away from work. While in my last year of graduate school, I took the LSAT and began applying for admission to law school. Shortly after graduating from St. Mary's University School of Law, I began work as an intern with the Harris County District Attorney's Office in Houston, Texas. I was sworn in as an assistant district attorney after passing the bar exam, my first step toward a long career as a public servant and prosecutor. It was at the D.A.'s office where I honed my skills as a trial attorney, trying more than 60 trials to Texas courts and juries and rising through the ranks in the office. I began as a misdemeanor prosecutor handling driving while intoxicated, theft, and assault cases, and left the office as a felony prosecutor handling murder, sexual assault, robbery, and child abuse cases.

In 2006, newly married and with a husband attending the FBI academy in Quantico, Va, I was hired as an assistant U.S. attorney (AUSA) for the Western District of Texas. When I started there, I was the only female AUSA in the office. As an AUSA in Del Rio, Texas, my caseload was unique. I handled a variety of federal cases and carried between 100 to 200 cases at any given time. I handled a significant number of complex cases involving child pornography, firearms trafficking, drug offenses, and violent crime, as well as actively participated in multiagency investigations. During that time, I participated in the Department of Justice Merida Initiative, teaching trial advocacy skills to prosecutors and agents in Mexico. I was selected to act as the City Chief of the Del Rio Division in January 2012 and promoted to city chief of the San Antonio Division just a year later.

I was the first woman to hold the position of city chief in both the Del Rio and San Antonio offices, and the first young Hispanic woman to hold such a high-level position. It has taken some tenacity on my part to get my foot in the door and ensure that my office is

The FBA asked women to share their stories of power and progress throughout their careers in the legal profession. Here are excerpts from their amazing stories. Full versions are available online at [www.fedbar.org/Share-Your-Story-Essays](http://www.fedbar.org/Share-Your-Story-Essays).

informed and brought into the fold as cases progress at the agency level. I have attended meetings in which I am the only woman in the room and oftentimes feel like an outsider in the group, but I know that sticking my head in the sand does nothing for us as women and does nothing for my office in its pursuit to see that the goals of the Department of Justice and the Western District of Texas are brought to fruition. I am proud to say that my adventure is not over and that as I continue to push forward in my work and raise two girls, I share with my daughters the things I learned from my mother: work hard, stay in school, become financially independent so you don't have to rely on anyone else, and always work diligently to overcome the challenges you meet along the way. It would be a great honor to share my story with female law students ready to take on the challenges of a legal career. They should know that everything is possible. If I have been able to achieve all of these things in my career, I know they can as well. ☺



### **Wendy Hickock Robinson**

My professional story begins when I was about 10 when my then stay-at-home mom made the brave decision to go back to school to get a law degree with two young children at home, at a time and place in which it was still uncommon to be a female lawyer. She was one of only two women in her law school class and was affectionately called “mom” by her classmates because of her ripe old age of 35. She went on to graduate at the top of her class and to score the highest grade in the state on the bar exam that year. Clearly, she set the bar high for me. I applied to law school and was accepted to Columbia, which was in the process of starting up a strong public interest program. I worked very hard, did well in my studies, and was selected to be an articles editor of the *Law Review*. I clerked for a year in Dallas for Jerry Buchmeyer, chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas. I learned a tremendous amount from the judge, other staff in his chambers, and from watching lawyers practice in his court. I was then awarded a two-year public interest fellowship from Skadden Arps Slate Meagher and Flom. During this time, I had my first child, and with a husband working in academia, I faced the realities of supporting a family and paying off student loans with a full-time public interest practice. I decided to join the law firm of Gordon, Arata, McCollam, Duplantis, and Eagan LLP, where I was an associate and then a partner for seven years practicing commercial litigation. I continued to do a lot of *pro bono* work, pursued outside interests, and had my second and third children during that time period. I am currently assistant general counsel in the litigation group at Entergy Services Inc. My position requires me to be current on both relevant legal issues and also market and industry matters that affect the internal business clients that I support. I am also honored to serve as co-chair of the Entergy legal department's Pro Bono Initiative. In this role I'm responsible for encouraging and supporting the department's 74 lawyers (in 10 offices spread over six states) in their *pro bono*

efforts. In 2013, lawyers in the department provided more than 1,500 hours of volunteer legal services to low-income members of our communities, and 81 percent of the department's lawyers participated. Additionally, I have moved up through the Federal Bar Association and became president of the New Orleans Chapter in August 2013. I supervise a Board of 35 members and a membership of more than 1,200. Lastly, but most importantly, I'm raising three amazing kids, Walker, Gardner, and Tinker, who are now 15, 11, and 7. As a divorced mom, working full time with an active practice and the desire to give back to my community, it is always a struggle to feel that I'm doing the very best that I can in each of these areas without another area suffering. I have learned that it cannot be done without personal dedication, effort, and organization, but that it's also necessary to have help. I seek out mentors and good examples of how other successful women are able to pull off this ultimate balancing act. I try to recognize when I need assistance, to not be reluctant to reach out to colleagues, family, friends, and babysitters, and to remind myself that all of us work better, both professionally and personally, when we're part of a supportive team, rather than working on our own. ☺

Given my set of circumstances—caring for two young children, managing a household, and working as a full time attorney—I thought at the time, if I lean in anymore, I may drown. But then I attended a panel discussion on women in the law last fall at the Federal Bar Association's Annual Convention. There, I learned about the staggering female leadership gap in the legal profession: how could it be, that women lawyers today make up only 4 percent of managing partners, 15 percent of equity partners, and 24 percent of federal district judges when approximately half of all law students have been women for more than two decades? Women are entering the legal profession on an equal basis as men and have done so for nearly 20 years, but why is it they aren't ascending to the top of the profession like men? I began to think about how most of my female friends do not work full time and stay home with their children. I began to think about my own career choices and whether I leaned out of my legal career to plan for children years before it was necessary to do so. For instance, I remember briefly contemplating applying for federal appellate clerkships near the end of my federal district clerkship, and I remember that my age was one of my considerations in deciding not to apply. I thought I was getting old and it was time to settle into a city and law practice before I had children. And by the way, at the time, I was 27.



### **Stephanie Marchman**

We need to talk about these external and internal barriers keeping women from advancing into leadership positions. We need to talk to younger lawyers and law students and let them know what's going on, and that while we have made great strides as of 2014—did I mention women are earning half of all law degrees?—we've yet to achieve true equality. Indeed, we have far to go. ☺