



THE **BEST LAWYERS** IN DALLAS

The Good Ol' Girls Club

Four female attorneys
left the security of a large firm
to start their own practice.
And make no mistake—
it's kind of a big deal.

By **Stacey Yervasi**
Photography by **Dan Sellers**

WHILE PREPARING FOR MY INTERVIEW WITH JANE TABER, Dawn Estes, Jessica Thorne, and Lori Carr, I had a few preconceived notions about what they might be like. The former partners at Gardere Wynne Sewell in Dallas opened their own practice—Taber Estes Thorne & Carr—a little more than three months ago.

One: that the ladies had created a touchy-feely, kid-friendly pseudo-day care, where a pacifier or a bouncy seat was as commonplace as case files or law books. Second—and this one might have been influenced by my male co-workers—was that

the women were *Sex and the City* types, prone to brunches laced with innuendo-laden conversation, short skirts, and full-to-the-brim cosmos. Last, I had a vision of them as chop-busting, hard-nosed shrews, unwilling to be hemmed in by gender expectations and frequently referred to as a word that rhymes with “witch” by male and female colleagues alike.

I discovered after our hour-long meeting that the women of Taber Estes are not so handily stereotyped. Three of



WOMAN TO WOMAN:
Lori Carr, Jessica Thorne,
Dawn Estes, and Jane
Taber recently opened up
one of the few female-
owned law firms around.



the four are moms, but you won't find evidence of children anywhere except in family photos perched on the ladies' desks. Exchanges containing insinuating remarks are reserved for the two male-centric radio stations that have studios across the hall. And the "witch" thing, well, I didn't see proof of it while sitting with the four partners around their brand-new conference table. But when I think of them getting ahead in a competitive and traditionally masculine field, a part of me wishes it were true. Even just a little.

Their Maple Avenue offices are decidedly feminine. The space is flooded with natural light, and, instead of the typical dark-wood paneling and granite surfaces characteristic of many Big-Tex law offices, the reception area is furnished with white leather seating and a sumptuous brown leather couch. A funky rug with stripes in greens and blues covers the tile floor, and Tiffany-blue and chocolate-brown artwork by a local attorney/painter—female, of course—adorns the long hallway.

"What we really wanted to do was bring in some feminine colors so people know this is not a regular law firm," Estes says.

Ironically, the ladies share a floor with the bastion of maleness that is the studios of 93.3 The Bone and 1310 The Ticket. ("Do you want to meet some Ticket Chicks?" Estes quips while leading an office tour.)

Despite the stylishly outfitted entryway, Taber Estes' offices are still a work in progress. Pictures and mirrors stand leaning against the wall where they are to be hung, and a room beyond the reception area sits empty, save for a couch, waiting to be filled with secretary bays.

While the women want the space to convey femininity, they have a definite idea of what they don't want the finished product to look like. "Not frilly," Taber says. "Because we're not frilly people." A glance at their attire underscores this statement. Each woman is dressed in a no-nonsense dark suit (two in skirts, two in pants), and appears ready to face a client or a judge at a moment's notice. Harriet Miers, Dallas' ultimate glass-ceiling shatterer and the first female president of both the Dallas

Bar Association and the State Bar of Texas, would fit right in.

There are a few traces of girliness, though. The women sip their coffee from white, tulip-shaped coffee mugs, and the coffee—well, it's not your garden-variety office brew. "It's not like we walk in and go, 'The coffee's the coffee and whatever soft drinks,'" Taber says. "It's like, 'What do you want?' So the refrigerator has the four sodas that we like, and water." An uncorked bottle of red wine in the kitchen hints at the after-hours "partners' meetings" the four enjoy regularly (a femme take on *Boston Legal's* Denny Crane and Alan Shore knocking scotch glasses at the end of the day).

A new firm isn't usually news. Lawyers job-hop and hang out their shingle all the time. Nevertheless, even in 2008, a women-owned firm in the male-dominated Dallas legal landscape is notable. The ladies' new venture is one of only a handful of women-owned firms in the state and an anomaly locally (rare enough that the quartet was featured in an NBC Channel 5 news segment when Taber Estes launched). According to statistics released in January 2007 by the State Bar of Texas, women comprise 31 percent of the attorneys in Dallas County, a 6 percent increase from 10 years ago. Twenty-three percent of female State Bar members work at firms of two to five attorneys, though the data don't reveal the gender of the practice owners.

For Taber Estes, the female-only idea took root in 2007. An unsuccessful run for judge in 2006 left Estes unsure of her next career move. Carr had departed Gardere to start her own practice; Estes,

owned firm with Lori.' "Initially, the thought was met with skepticism. Estes had always been hesitant to go it alone, and Carr was enjoying her lone-gun status. "It took awhile for the whole thing to gel," Estes says.

She and Carr eventually presented the opportunity to Taber and Thorne, who were concerned about abandoning the security of a guaranteed paycheck. After some deliberating, the two jumped on-board. "Lori's success in a one-person firm I think really gave us that last push over the edge to say, 'You know, we can do it,'" Taber says. "We're much more effective as a group than any one of us."

All four say that the leadership at Gardere understood their desire to form a women-only practice and create a more flexible working environment. "It has nothing to do with Gardere," Estes says of their decision to leave. "It has to do with us seizing an opportunity." Still, the departure of four female partners in a two-year span had negative repercussions for their former firm's demographic statistics, which are carefully tracked for agencies such as the National Association of Law Placement (or NALP) for reference by clients and potential law clerks.

The partners at Gardere were more dismayed at losing four good lawyers. "I think they recognized that four women were leaving and were saddened by that," Taber says. "They've been very supportive of us. It's not all numbers." Estes' husband is a partner at Gardere, and the firms have already referred business to each other.

The women's experience with Fortune 500 clients and their scope of legal

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Taber, and Thorne remained. It was during lunch with a colleague that Estes had a conversation that would trigger the evolution of Taber Estes Thorne & Carr. "I was down in Houston, having lunch with a friend who was in-house at Shell Oil," Estes says. "And she said, 'You know, you should go start a women-

knowledge—Taber in corporate, Estes in litigation and arbitration/mediation, Thorne in litigation, and Carr in labor and employment—set them apart from most niche practices. Their hope is to carry on their big-firm work in a small-firm setting.

"We want to swim in the deep end,"



Estes says. “We don’t want to splash around in the baby pool.”

Whether they’ll be able to manage the demands of big-name clients with reduced numbers is yet to be seen. So far, Taber has received 20-plus résumés from paralegal, staff, and attorney candidates wanting to help out—and to get a piece of the firm’s girl-power culture. The women have already been asked if and when they will hire a man. For them, it’s a no-brainer. “We are an equal opportunity employer,” Carr says

in quintessential lawyer fashion. They would like to keep the firm female-owned, however, allowing their clients to check off a box saying they employ a minority-owned firm. Regardless of gender, though, there is a baseline requirement.

“It’s important that anyone who works here is not a slouch,” Taber says. “They have to be a hard worker.”

When asked if there have been critics of their all-female setup, the four ladies answer in unison, “Not to our

face!” before cracking up at the thought of high school-like rumor mills spreading catty comments about their newly formed clique. But they are serious when defending their arrangement as more than mere novelty, insisting that their clients employ them because of their legal skills, not their gender.

“We’re not your grandfather’s law firm, and all that kind of stuff,” Estes says. “But we’re first and foremost competent lawyers. It wouldn’t work if we weren’t good lawyers.”