

From High Heels to High Success: Estes Thorne & Carr Turns 10

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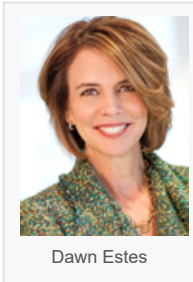
By *Natalie Posgate*

(April 3) – When people ask Dawn Estes how she decided to start her law firm 10 years ago, she used to tell them a friend came up with the idea over a dinner in Houston.

But now she owns up to what was really going on: “We were shoe shopping.”

Her friend, Kim Phillips, told Estes she should leave Big Law to start her own women-owned law firm.

“I said, are you kidding me?” Estes recalls.



Dawn Estes

Phillips, who had practiced with Estes at Gardere Wynne Sewell, had recently gone in-house to work for Shell. She pointed out that she didn’t know of a women-owned law firm in Dallas that serves corporate clients in business litigation, though she knew one in Houston that she respected for knowing how to truly “collaborate with in-house counsel.”

Though Estes didn’t bring any new Stewart Weitzmans back to Dallas with her, she came home with something more valuable: the courage to follow Phillips’ suggestion.

This week, Estes, Jessica Thorne, Lori Carr and 10 of their colleagues are celebrating the 10-year anniversary of Estes Thorne & Carr. Now at 13 lawyers, it is one of the largest women-owned law firms in Texas.

“In some ways it feels like it’s been 10 years but other times it feels like it’s been 10 minutes,” Estes says. “I’m so happy we took the chance and jumped into the deep end. We’ve had opportunities in the last 10 years that I can’t imagine we would have had if we stayed at a big firm.”

Clients of the firm include AT&T, D.R. Horton, ORIX USA and Vistra Energy.

Estes said she anticipates the firm to grow even more in the next decade – particularly with Big Law continuing its exponential growth in Dallas (last week’s merger between Foley Lardner and Estes’s alma mater, Gardere, is the latest example.)

She said her boutique offers opportunities for women and minorities who want an alternative from Big Law, where the statistics of women and minorities in leadership positions at firms hasn’t changed much in the decade since she left Big Law.

“I wish the statistics were different in big law firms,” she said. They really haven’t changed much and I wish they had. I think because of that, there’s a place for women- and minority-owned firms because while some choose to stick it out and continue to fight in the trenches at Big Law, there needs to be a place for other attorneys who choose not to do that.

“I think I’m most proud of giving lots of wonderful lawyers, most of whom have been women, opportunities that they may not otherwise have,” she added.

Estes could have stayed in Big Law and continued to succeed. Already a partner at Gardere when she departed, she was happy there. It’s where she started her legal career and where her husband also worked. But she wasn’t opposed to making a change; a couple years prior, she had run for judge but didn’t get elected.

With Phillips’ idea “still needling” at her in 2007, Estes approached fellow Gardere partners Carr, Thorne and Jane Taber about going out on their own. They took a year to put their plan in motion and then opened their doors to business in February 2008.

Asked how starting a firm is different than it was 10 years ago, Estes said her situation was unique since she made the jump in the middle of a recession.

“It would be very different today; it’s an easier environment to start a business in,” she said. “Had we known what the rest of 2008 held, I’m not sure we would have been brave enough.

“When the economy doesn’t do as well, litigation surges typically,” Estes continued. “That’s definitely what happened in 2008 – we had lots of work, but a lot of the time it was work people couldn’t afford to pay for.”

Though when just starting out, Estes and her partners “felt we had to take everybody on as a client,” she says now they’re “able to be much more selective,” choosing primarily clients that are “long-term relationships.”

Asked what her biggest advice is to anyone wishing to start their own firm, Estes answered, “Hire happy people, find clients you truly enjoy working with and find partners that you truly love being in business with.”

Also, she says, it’s “not enough to be just women-owned or minority-owned.

“Being women [or minority]-owned is great, but it doesn’t matter at all if you can’t do amazing legal work,” she said.

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