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The Attorney and Her Band

An Interview with Dawn Estes, Dallas' Rock Star Attorney

PAGE 28

History Meets Hipster @ Salt Lake Hardware

PAGE 34

What's Inside: Executive Interview: Gio Cordoves • Tax Strategy • New Age Spec Suites
Heart of a Lion in Austin • The Wait for 5G • The End of LIBOR • BofA Tower @North Hills

By Phil Diment

A Virtual Visit With Dawn Estes

The Rock Star Attorney

She grew up in a dusty, oil-patch town in West Texas, where her high school graduating class totaled less than 200. Today, KBS tenant Dawn Estes is a founding partner of one of the most successful female-owned law firms in Dallas. She's also a lead singer in a popular bluegrass band. Premier Office Magazine Editor Phil Diment sits down with Estes to chat about Dallas, deals and the bluegrass music of Black Dirt Tango.



POM Editor, Phil Diment: Hi Dawn, I'd normally be in my suit and tie, but I had to quarantine for a COVID test. So I'm at home cranking up some of your music while preparing for this interview, and just felt inclined to wear my cowboy hat. Hope you don't mind.

Dawn Estes: Are you kidding? I love it. That's a well-steamed hat. But how you wear the hat says a lot about you.

POM: Oh no, I think I'm wearing the hat wrong.

Estes: Well, let me help you out. If you're very direct, you wear it kind of in the middle of the head, the way you've got it. George Strait wears his hat a certain way. If you're a really friendly, open guy, you tilt it back a little to show your eyes more. The bad guys wear them really low down over their eyes. It's a whole thing. I'm teaching your California brain something today.

POM: I love it, Dawn. You know, we have some wonderful KBS tenants in our

Dallas portfolio, and you are one of them there at 3811 Turtle Creek. I want to ask about your amazing legal career, but since we're talking music, one of your band's best songs is titled, "I Like Pike," and for those reading this who don't know what a pike is, it's a gnarly looking long fish with a mouth full of sharp teeth. The song is so fun, it sort of became the trademark for

your band. How did you come up with this crazy, fun song?

Estes: It started with my band member, Steve Henry. Music just flows out of him. You can just walk up to him and go, "Steve, pick up your guitar and write a song about a mannequin." Just pick a random topic; he'll write a song about it.



Our Zoom interview kicks off with a few tips for a Californian on how to properly wear a cowboy hat.

So, we were at band practice, I don't know, it's probably been eight or nine years ago, and somebody said something about going walleye fishing in Oregon. So, Steve says, "Well, there's not enough songs about the great northern pike, the fish that you're fishing for up in the northern states. What about a song about pike?" And I'm not joking — after a few riffs, the song just wrote itself. It's one of the best songs we've created.

So I ran for judge, and all my Democrat friends told me I was a Democrat. All my Republican friends told me I was a Republican.

POM: Tell us about your law firm, Estes Thorne & Carr, and how you started?

Estes: The idea for our law firm was sort of birthed out of my 2006 run for judge in Dallas County and not getting elected. As you probably read, politically Texas has been turning purple. So I ran for judge, and all my Democrat friends told me I was a Democrat. All my Republican friends told me I was a Republican. I figured I had a better chance getting elected as a Republican, and there was an open bench. So I ran as a Republican, and then the whole courthouse flipped Democrat.

During this time, I was working for a really good, relatively large law firm. While campaigning, I had the opportunity to tour a lot of law firms in town, and I met a lot of lawyers. I saw that there were so many really good small firms that had wonderful clientele, great offices and very sophisticated practices.

After the campaign, I was shopping with a former big firm partner of mine who works inside a Fortune 50 corporation and she suggested I partner with some of our friends to form a women-owned law firm. I sat down and took an inventory of where I wanted to be. I'm an obsessive list maker.

So I made a list of assets I had and things I wanted and where those took me. One of the assets was that I knew a lot of lawyers in town. If you know a lot of lawyers, you can get referral work. I also wanted to work with Fortune 100 and Fortune 500 clients, as well as with in-house counsel. There were several other women at the firm I was at who were having their own internal conversations wanting to do that. So three of us left together, joining with another partner who had left previously, and we formed our law firm. We're women-owned. That was our business goal, to use that women-owned certification along with top-tier attorneys to go out and approach big companies and governmental entities to do their work. It was that idea that started the firm.

POM: And part of that equation is having a great office location ...

Estes: We knew we did not want to be the discrete little law office down at the end of the long dark hall. We wanted to make sure we had beautiful offices consistent with the top-notch clientele that we would be working with and doing sophisticated legal work for. That was February of 2008, and we all know what happened in 2008 and 2009. The economy bottomed out. I'm not sure we would have had the gravitas to start the firm if we'd known what was going to happen, but because we are litigation-centric, when money dries up and the economy gets difficult, it seems like more lawsuits get filed. Our first client was AT&T — and then Parkland Hospital. After that, things just took off.

POM: You mentioned you also do government work.

Estes: Yes. We're a federal government contractor, technically. When the FDIC started closing banks, we started doing some work for them as well. Because when banks are closed and the assets are sold, any pending litigation needs to be handled. So we started doing that kind of work, too.

POM: How many employees do you have?

Estes: We usually ebb and flow around 15 to 20 employees total. We operate very conservatively with our finances. We grow when opportunities present themselves, but we've never said we want to be a certain size.

POM: What type of cases do you take?

Estes: If it touches the practice and operation of a business, we can offer legal guidance. Primarily that includes commercial litigation and employment litigation. Commercial litigation can really be anything. We handle everything from business divorces to trade-secret claims to asset-purchase agreement breaches to oil and gas lawsuits to real estate disputes. Keeping with our focus on individuals, we also do a lot of family law-related work. While that obviously includes divorce and custody-related matters, it also may incorporate our business knowledge, offering clients insights on the impact on family-owned businesses, investments, compensation packages, retiree benefits and other financial considerations.



POM: Where did you go to school, and what triggered your interest in law?

Estes: I went to SMU for undergraduate school. Go, Ponies! And I went to St. Mary's School of Law, which is down in San Antonio, for my law degree. I decided I wanted to go to law school after I did a high school mock trial competition. I really loved standing up and arguing. Also, being able to help people with their problems is one of the best parts about being a lawyer.

Continued on **NEXT PAGE** ►

◀ Continued from **PREVIOUS PAGE**

POM: What accolades has ETC earned?

Estes: We have earned numerous individual recognitions from the Best Lawyers in America, Texas Super Lawyers and D Magazine. Some of us have been selected among the top 100 lawyers in Texas, which is always such a huge honor because your lawyer colleagues vote on you. And yes, those honors are always exciting. But we all take much more pride in the firm-wide honors we have earned, including U.S. News & World Report and the Best Lawyers in America's Best Law Firms listing, where we are a Tier 1 commercial litigation and family law firm. We have also been named to the BTI Client Service A-Team, which speaks to our devotion to our clients. We also have been listed as one of the top female-owned businesses in the Dallas-Fort Worth area several years in a row.

I've seen the inside of almost every prison in Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas.

POM: Are you a native Texan?

Estes: I am. I grew up in Big Spring, a small oil-field town out in West Texas, population of about 20,000. I thought that Dallas was the center of the universe when I was growing up. The reason the town even exists is there was a watering hole there, so it became the midway point on the Texas and Pacific Railroad between Ft. Worth and El Paso, which tells you where it is — right in the middle of nowhere.

Growing up in the oil patch, you learn early about booms and busts. My dad sold property and casualty insurance, and my mom sold real estate. I was a small-town girl growing up.

POM: What prompted your love for music?



TOP: Black Dirt Tango wows an audience in Dallas with an upbeat, bluegrass sound that's hard not to dance to. LOWER LEFT: As a girl growing up in the west Texas oil patch, Dawn was a budding young musician with big ambitions, even as a youth. LOWER RIGHT: Little did Dawn realize back in high school that she would one day take her gift for public speaking and start one of the top law firms in Dallas while still keeping her passion for music alive.

Estes: I took classical piano lessons for 12 years from a wonderful woman named Ann Houser. She lived in Big Spring, but she was a Juilliard graduate. As a result, she had exacting standards; she taught self-discipline and control. She taught me so many good things.

I also discovered that I love singing too. Much to Mrs. Houser's chagrin, I did not give my senior piano recital because I had fallen in love with singing more than piano. That's one of those things that she chided me about, but I did it anyway — I was 18.

I also sang in our church growing up. We had a group which went on prison tours and sang to prisoners. It was very interesting. I always joke with people and say I've seen the inside of almost every prison in Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas.

POM: That must be a very moving thing, to sing to prisoners — you know, giving them a glimmer of hope.

Estes: We cried a lot. It was a complete emotional cleansing almost every time. We were called His Children, and there

were about 14 of us. The son of the choir director had been incarcerated. So it was his calling to give back; it was pretty cool but a little frightening at 17 to walk into "Big Mac," Oklahoma's State Penitentiary. I can't believe my parents let me go.

POM: Fast forward about 20 years, and that passion for music is not only still alive and well, but you are starting that awesome band, Black Dirt Tango. That's pretty cool.

Estes: Yes, it is. Steve Henry, who I mentioned earlier, is a longtime friend and a driving force behind the band. He is the chief legal officer at Austin Industries, so he's got a real job too. He and I were in a band before Black Dirt Tango that was called Secondhand Noise, and we did rock covers. And then a bunch of the other guys who were in that band couldn't make rehearsals because of kids and other commitments. That was pretty much the end of that band. Later on, Steve calls and says, "Come over and have a beer and we'll play some music." When I did, he said he had figured out what our next band

should be. I was like, "What?" So he plays me the Bob Dylan song "Wagon Wheel." It was before Darius Rucker had covered it. It was the Old Crow Medicine Show. He said, "This is what I want our sound to be." I was sold. I love the country thing and always kind of wanted to venture toward that sound. So that was the genesis of Black Dirt Tango, an old Bob Dylan song. I describe our sound as country that is a little bluegrass but not a lot. It's got a little rockabilly. I would call it Americana.

Being in the band is so much fun. It gets me out of the stress and pressure of what I do in an office every day.

POM: So there are five members of the band, all professionals in one way or another. I can only imagine how fun the practices are.

Estes: Being in the band is so much fun. It gets me out of the stress and pressure of what I do in an office every day. It's almost like a meditation because you can't worry about anything else when you're playing music. You've got to be all in. It's all-consuming. It gets you into that other half of your brain, which is a good thing. It's important. And I think we all really did miss it during COVID. It's just hard to collaborate music online because there's just a slight delay in transmission. Have you ever tried to sing "Happy Birthday" on Zoom? You can't do it.

POM: So the gigs you do, I have a hunch it's not about the money.

Estes: We do get paid. We do make some money. But it's not about the money. We've played Poor David's Pub here in Dallas quite a lot; it's wonderful and has been around since the 1970s. David Card is the owner. I always want to mention

Continued on **NEXT PAGE** ▶

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◀ Continued from **PREVIOUS PAGE**

him whenever I can because he has supported live music in Dallas as long as anyone can remember. We also frequently perform at Enchilada's. We've played at Red Caboose Winery down in Meridian, and we've played in a bunch of places that are north of town. So we've just kind of played all over.

POM: What's your favorite song in BDT's repertoire?

Estes: "I Like Pike" is one of my favorites. So is "Beer for Breakfast" and "Stuck in Dallas." And then there's a song that Steve wrote called "Donegal Bay." It is like an Irish pub, beer-drinking song. I love getting to sing it. It's almost like musical theater.

POM: It's pretty neat that most of your stuff is original. So who writes the music?

Estes: Steve writes probably 90% of it. Michael Brown writes the other 10%. Michael is our bass player and is the narrator on Discovery Channel's "Naked and Afraid." He has this beautiful baritone voice, and in my opinion sings Springsteen better than Bruce Springsteen. I'm kind of involved in the creative process, but I wouldn't call myself a writer. I would love to be, but I'm not there yet.

POM: Do you just do vocals?

Estes: I share the vocal role with Steve and Michael, and I play harmonica and an instrument called a melodica. It's a keyboard that you blow into.

POM: Do you have roadies who set things up for your gigs?

Estes: Yeah, my husband. But otherwise, we do all that work ourselves. Which, when you're outside in the hot Texas sun, it will take it out of you. It would be nice if we had roadies.

POM: Tell me a little bit about your family. I heard your daughter sing on one

of your tracks online — my goodness, she could be on American Idol.

Estes: Yes, Katy has an amazing voice. She's a senior in high school and at that point where she's applying at a lot of colleges, so we will see where she ends up going. We also have a son, Grayson, who is a senior at the University of Arkansas. He's going to graduate this year and hopefully go to law school. He just took the LSAT.

My husband, David, we've been married for almost 25 years. He's a lawyer too. He's at a law firm called Hucsh Blackwell and specializes in insurance coverage litigation.

I think Dallas is such an amazing and vibrant community. The redevelopment that is happening is really exciting, and I expect to see that continue.

POM: What do you all enjoy doing as a family?

Estes: Well, we are huge live music fans, so we love to go hear live music. Black Dirt Tango typically rehearses at our house, and that means that we have all the setup for the PA at our house, so we love singing karaoke — that can be very fun, especially with friends.

POM: What would you say about Dallas? Is it able to sustain the unprecedented growth that it's seen recently?

Estes: I think Dallas is such an amazing and vibrant community. The redevelopment that is happening is really exciting, and I expect to see that continue. Dallas definitely has that spirit. It will do a makeover when it needs to.

Dallas is a collection of a lot of different small towns and communities, and all

of those smaller towns are continuing to grow and develop. So it's not just that it's all on Dallas. It's a collaborative community. I think that's great.

POM: How do you like the 3811 Turtle Creek building for your law firm?

Estes: I love it. We love this area. Our employees and lawyers love not being downtown and being able to avoid that traffic. Our clients love it. The building is beautiful. The people who maintain the building are friendly. We don't have enough nice things to say about this building.

POM: How can people learn more about your law firm — and of course the band?

Estes: Our law firm Web address is <https://estesthornecarr.com/>, and the band's website is <https://blackdirttango.com/>. The band also has a Facebook page that's kept a bit more current than the website.

POM: Dawn, thank you for your time!

Estes: Oh, thank you, Phil. I enjoyed it. Would love for you or any of your readers to check us out next time you are in Dallas.

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