

From the Baltimore Sun

Former county attorney likes being on her own

Accountant-turned-lawyer has taken winding but independent path in her 20-year career

By Gerald P. Merrell
sun reporter

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Katherine L. Taylor was one year away from being named a partner at a prestigious law firm and, with that, presumably, a six-figure salary and bonus.

She did the inconceivable: Taylor walked away and took a cut in pay to become a county employee.

Then two years ago, she left the security of municipal employment to open her own law firm - with a client list of one.

Some might doubt Taylor's prudence, but those decisions came easily to her.

She has, first, an independent streak as hardened as steel, so going against convention seems inconsequential. And, more important, Taylor would rather be wedded to her family than her career.

One should not surmise, though, that she is ambivalent about her job.

"She's very bright, very tenacious and has terrific people skills," says Ward B. Coe III, a partner with Whiteford, Taylor & Preston LLP, the Baltimore firm she left in 1993. " ... She knows exactly where she wants to go for her clients, and she'll get there."

The accuracy of that assessment was learned recently by David A. Carney, one the most sought-after attorneys in Howard County, whose clients include some of the largest developers, in his first head-to-head confrontation with her.

Taylor, retained by several homeowners, made a case against a petition to rezone property for development so convincingly that the county Planning Board signaled midway through the hearing that it would side against Carney's client. The board unanimously rejected the application.

While the Zoning Board, which is made up of the five members of the County Council, will hear the case this month and could overturn the decision, Taylor's resounding first-round victory demonstrated that she is no one to take casually.

Taylor regards Carney as one of the two "gurus of zoning" in the county (attorney Richard B. Talkin is the other, she says), but she insists she was not intimidated facing him.

"It means at least someone's going to be paying attention to that case," she says. "It is an opportunity to show that I can do as good a job."

She is likely to have many more opportunities. Land-use issues are among those Taylor concentrates on in her practice. She was, for example, retained last week to oppose a discharge permit that is essential to a subdivision being proposed in [Ellicott City](#).

Taylor's entry into law was, if not accidental, simply a convenient way of getting ahead in her chosen profession - banking.

Taylor was born on Sept. 27, 1959, in Miami, the second of three daughters of Harlan and Nancy Taylor.

The family moved to Charlotte, N.C., when Taylor was 4. Her father worked in the transportation industry and later opened a storage and distribution company, while her mother cared for the home and children.

The children, Taylor recalls, "didn't have a lot of free time" as they were required to do yard work and house chores. The family, though, took frequent camping trips to the mountains, the Outer Banks and Florida.

Parents were strict

Her parents were strict and conservative and taught old-fashioned values. "Respect is probably the main thing," Taylor says. "Respect for your elders, authority and respect for the work ethic."

Their conservative views revealed themselves frequently, first as protests over the Vietnam War swept the country, then over civil rights, particularly when their community was riven by desegregation efforts.

Taylor was in middle school when a landmark Supreme Court decision in 1971 ushered in court-ordered busing for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg County school system.

Taylor opposed busing at the time. "I had friends who didn't go to my high school. ... They got sent to a school halfway across the city," she says. But in retrospect, she says, "I feel like I really gained a lot by being in an environment with kids of other races."

Taylor was always a good student, earning mostly As and Bs. She joined an honor society and a girls civic club, but she says she was shy and had only a couple of close friends until high school, when she "kind of branched out. ... Certainly in high school it was important to be a part of a larger group," Taylor says. "It was a good way to be a part of what was going on."

Her favorite subject was math ("because I was good at it"), which explains why Taylor was so shocked when she received a D in calculus. She acknowledges she took the subject for granted: "I was upset because I realized I probably didn't study enough. ... I didn't really try to learn it."

It isn't a mistake she repeated.

By the time she graduated, in 1977, her parents had divorced. Her father remarried and moved to Georgia, and her mother became a real estate broker and later remarried, as well.

Taylor had choices to make, but they were motivated more by pragmatism. She elected to go to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte ("a good school, certainly not the best, but it was convenient and priced right") and she majored in accounting because she was good in math and "I needed to choose something."

Taylor lived in an apartment and supported herself waiting tables four nights a week and with grants she received for academic achievement and financial need.

Her schedule did not allow for much of a social life, so Taylor made another pragmatic choice: She joined a sorority, she says with a hint of embarrassment.

"I lived off campus, and I felt like ... this would be a way to be a part of the community," she says. "Then I realized the whole sorority girl thing just wasn't what I was into. I was a little too independent."

When Taylor relinquished her membership, she was ordered to return her sorority pin. She refused, she says with stubborn pride.

Taylor graduated in 1981 with a degree in accounting and was hired by First Union National Bank in the internal audit division. At night for about eight months, she studied for and passed the exam to become a certified public accountant.

But Taylor soon began feeling trapped.

"I realized in order to move up in the bank, you had to either know somebody or have a higher degree. And I really didn't know anybody," she says.

While attending a two-week course on managing trusts, she mentioned to an instructor that she was considering getting an MBA.

'That's an idea'

"He said, 'Why don't you go to law school? It's just one more year,'" Taylor recalls. "And I said, 'Oh, that's an idea.' In the long run, that would be much more versatile."

She applied to law schools in the Washington area, but costs were prohibitive, so in 1983 she enrolled in the School of Law at the University of Maryland, Baltimore.

Even then, though, Taylor was thinking of law simply as a means by which to advance in business.

"I didn't necessarily intend to be a lawyer in a law firm," she says. "My thinking was I'd go back and work in a corporate department. I realized that the education was well worth it, so even if I didn't pursue law as a career, I'd have it under my belt."

That began to change in her third year in law school. "I realized that there were a lot of law firms I could apply to," she says. "I realized at that point, if I can do it, why not? And they pay pretty well."

Perhaps. Three firms recruited Taylor when she graduated in 1986, and she chose Whiteford, Taylor & Preston, even though it offered her \$37,000 - the lowest starting salary of the three.

"The firm really touted its family friendliness, in the sense that yes they paid a little less than some of the other places were paying, but they also did not require associates to work the number of hours some of the other firms were requiring," she says. "They had much more of a friendly kind of culture. That's the main reason I went there."

Taylor started in the firm's corporate and business department, working on real estate and lender deals and mergers. But the firm was also handling some cases involving the savings and loan crisis, and Taylor was quickly recruited to assist in litigation because of her expertise in finance.

That provided the passion that had been missing from Taylor's other jobs.

"I loved the intellectual challenge; putting together the pieces of a puzzle," she says.

She remained with the firm seven years and was widely expected to be named a partner the next year.

Most people were shocked when in 1993 she announced her resignation. But Taylor had married Richard Feinleib, an engineer, the year before and wanted to have children.

"There was no way I could work the kind of hours that I was working and still expect to have any kind of family life," she says.

A friend at the firm mentioned a vacancy in Howard County's Office of Law, and Taylor jumped at the chance, even though it meant taking an \$11,000 cut in pay. But the hours were reasonable and the job permitted her to hone her skills.

She handled a variety of cases filed against the county, including allegations of discrimination, lawsuits against the Police Department and claims dealing with land-use issues.

"She's a very good lawyer, very nice person," says Paul T. Johnson, deputy county solicitor.

When Taylor handled cases before the Human Rights Commission, Johnson says, she "did an excellent job. She was very prepared ... [and] effective in making her point."

Taylor took time off in 1995 to have her first daughter and returned part time, but she was doing less litigation. Three years later, her second daughter was born.

She was feeling unchallenged and considered quitting, but was persuaded to stick it out.

Three events forced Taylor to examine herself: The unexpected death in 1999 of her sister Kim at the age of 41, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and, a few days later, the death of her father.

Her sister's death "caused me to take a look at what I was doing just in general, but certainly in my work, and say to myself, 'If I'm not happy with this, then what do I do about it?' " Taylor says. "Basically confirming in my mind that happiness is not going to be made for you. You have to take it on your own and make things work and not wait around for other people to make things work for you."

A new beginning

Taylor left Howard County and accepted a position as alternate counsel for the Anne Arundel County Board of Appeals. She also worked briefly for Howard land-use attorney Talkin.

In the summer 2004, Taylor opened her law practice, concentrating in state and local government regulations, zoning and permit issues, employment discrimination and matters before the Liquor Board. She had one client - whom she had served while working for Talkin. By the fall 2004, her client list was growing, thanks to referrals. Business continues to be good.

Taylor limits herself to 30 to 35 hours a week, "trying to balance my professional life with my personal life."

She hopes one day to be able to hire a couple of associates. "If I do that," she says, "I'm going to have a far different type of law firm" because she won't require them to bill thousands of hours annually to cover their salaries.

"It's the human thing to do, but can you be profitable? That's the question," she says. "For some reason, I think you can be. You just have to figure it out."

Coe, the Whiteford attorney, says he believes Taylor will reach her goal.

"I'm 100 percent certain that it's doable," he says. "It requires managing expectations and being tuned into what people's personal needs are. Katherine is a person who can definitely do it."

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