

STATE BAR LITIGATION SECTION REPORT

# THE ADVOCATE



**If I  
Knew  
Then**



**What  
I Know  
Now**

IMPORTANT READERSHIP SURVEY INSIDE



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# A LICENSE TO HELP OTHERS

BY CHARLA ALDOUS

## Learning Opportunity

Growing up a Pentecostal preacher's kid in a small north Texas town, I never dreamt that I could one day become a lawyer. My biggest dream was to work in a law firm in any capacity. During my junior year of high school, I was in the Vocational Office Education Program. I remember like yesterday when a female lawyer came to speak to our class about job opportunities available for V.O.E. students—job opportunities in real law firms. After that visit, I knew I wanted to be a legal assistant and that was my end goal. (What I didn't know then—what I've since learned from working with my legal assistant for many years—is that if they are really good, legal assistants engage in the unauthorized practice of law on a daily basis).

After graduating from Sherman High School, I enrolled in Grayson County Community College—everyone in town called it Harvard on the Hill—taking mostly vocational courses. After the first two semesters at Grayson, one of my professors asked if I had ever thought about going to a four-year college. He inquired about my SAT/ACT score. I was embarrassed to confess I had not taken either one. He insisted that I do so and started helping me figure out how to change my course load to allow for the possibility of a transfer to a four-year college.

I ultimately received a partial scholarship to Austin College, and it was a blessing that changed my life. I enrolled in a Constitutional law class, which to this day is the hardest course I have ever taken. I loved every minute of it. What intrigued me about the class—what drew me to want to study and practice law—is still what drives me today: the idea that through the application of basic legal principles, we can make the world more just, equal and fair, and, in so doing, we can improve people's lives. My Con law professor, Dr. Ken Street, pushed me harder academically than I had ever been pushed in my life, insisting that I would go to law school. So here I am, 35 years later, wondering how in the

world I am lucky enough to do something I love and be able to support my four children doing so.

## Learning Juries

When I first began practicing law, I was the only associate and only female lawyer in a firm in my hometown. From the outset I let it be known that I would try anything, anytime, anywhere. I tried everything from traffic ticket cases in municipal court to eventually tackling complex medical malpractice work. Since that time, I have tried to verdict more than 200 cases. Each and every trial has been a learning experience to me, and it is important to always treat them as such. As a lawyer, you can never stop learning. Through each trial, I get better at presentation, and, more importantly, learn what matters to juries. But one thing has never changed: I am always just myself, Charla from Sherman, who can talk to real people about real issues.

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Much has been written and said about the "vanishing jury trial," and I think it is a very important issue in our country. Because so much has been done to do away with the sacred right of trial by jury, it is incredibly difficult for young lawyers to get trial

experience. My advice to them: make it known that you will try anything, anytime, anywhere.

I have always believed and still believe that juries are motivated by fairness. For the most part they instinctively know right from wrong. Although we do not argue the golden rule in trials, juries are always subconsciously thinking about how they would feel if the same thing happened to them. Juries are made up of people, after all.

Much of what makes a trial lawyer "successful" is when they can make an emotional connection with a jury and earn the jury's trust. I don't want juries just to like me; I want them to want me to be in the box with them. And to have that kind of connection, I firmly believe a lawyer has to be authentic. Be yourself, flaws and all.

### Learning Success

What does success mean? In my practice, it means being a voice to someone who otherwise would not have a voice. It means righting wrongs. It means helping those who have been wrongfully treated. It means trying to bring some closure to brokenhearted families. It means really making a difference in people's lives. I always tell my clients that at the end of their case—win, lose, or draw—I want them to give me a personal memento to remind me of them or their loved ones. In my office I have everything from a newborn baby's original handprints to the hat a cancer patient wore to chemotherapy. I treasure these mementos and when I get discouraged they remind me of why I continue to fight.

I have found one rule in my thirty years of practicing law that I always try to follow and that continues to be a valuable guide. The rule is to choose clients I connect with and follow the principle that made me want to become a lawyer in the first place: the desire to help others and make the world a better place. It sounds hokey, but it is oh so true. I try to remember back to when I was just a kid, in the Vocational Office Education Program, back when becoming a lawyer was still a far-off, unimaginable dream. I want to continually fight for the cases that my past self, that girl who was so excited when she got her scholarship to Austin College all those years ago, would be proud to have fought. And when I look back at all the clients I have helped over the years, I know I have succeeded.

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