



In Their Own Skin

Young Women Lawyers Share the Inspiration of a New Leadership

BY ELIZABETH LAUDERBACK '13

In Spring of 2012, I sat down with three women lawyers and recent graduates of Oklahoma City University School of Law to talk about their experiences as young female lawyers and the mentors who have showed them the way. At the time of the interview, former Judge Valerie K. Couch had recently stepped into her new position as the School of Law's first female dean.

Kendra Robben, of Robben & Associates, is a close friend and mentee of Dean Couch. She noted that *“OCU's decision to hire Valerie Couch is good for OCU and good for the state of Oklahoma.”* Hiring a female dean reflects the school's commitment to diversity and its awareness of the reality that fifty percent of the student body is female. *“Couch was a particularly good choice because of the combination of her stellar academic record, private practice experience and years on the bench.”*

More importantly, Couch is a local with a local reputation that precedes her – a reputation for being a fantastic leader. *“People want to do well for Valerie Couch because she wouldn't ask you to do anything that she wouldn't do herself. She is down in the trenches with you for everything,”* said Robben. *“She has the ability to get everyone on the same team and focus on a common goal.”*

Michelle Briggs, who was a first-year associate at Dunlap Codding at the time we interviewed her, shares Robben's sentiment. Briggs described Couch as “wise and warm” and as “a woman that you want to keep listening to in hopes that she will keep giving you advice.”

Emily Campbell, a senior associate at Dunlap Codding, is another female trail blazer in Oklahoma's legal community. Campbell is the head of Dunlap Codding's Soft IP practice group and is the firm's first female practice group leader in a legal field traditionally dominated by men. She is also inspired and empowered by Dean Couch's success. *“If she can do it, it makes me believe I can do it,”* said Campbell.

Female mentors are particularly important for young female lawyers because women have different responsibilities throughout their life to which other women can relate. There are some issues that are just different for men and women. But male mentors certainly should not be short changed. For example, Bill Conger was one of Robben's and Couch's most beloved mentors.

Also, Campbell, coming up in a male dominated legal niche, looked to her male superiors for guidance. Dunlap Codding's partners supported Campbell in her endeavors to branch away from patents to head the Soft IP practice group. Furthermore, as a new mom, Campbell has been especially pleased with their willingness to be understanding and sensitive to her efforts

to achieve a work life balance while taking care of herself, her family and her little one. “They are all fathers,” said Campbell.

So, what is it about our mentors that make us want to seek their advice? *Based on our conversation, a good mentor, or a good leader, is one who can find commonality with her mentees, who asks of other people only what she would do herself and who rallies people around a common goal.*

There is also a new generation of women in law who have been successful not necessarily by playing by men’s rules but by creating their own rules. This seems to require being honest with yourself about who you are, which brings us back to Dean Couch. *“Dean Couch is an example of how to work with your own strengths and in your own comfort zone. She has taken her personality, who she is, her style, and instead of doing it like a man would do it, she has defined her role based on where she comes from as opposed to fitting into a predefined box,”* said Robben.

According to Robben, it’s not just women who can benefit from this alternative leadership style, which is largely based on inspiring people as opposed to dictating. “This inspirational concept can be effective for other minority groups or any type of people who are breaking into the legal field and are looking for ways to be successful without fitting into the old model or mold,” said Robben.

And it’s always time to share the torch. While it might seem daunting to think about trying to live up to super stars like Bill Conger and Valerie Couch, Robben said, “It is important to try to give back what we’ve received from our mentors.” Campbell added, “We often see ourselves as mentees or as law students who have just graduated, but we are mentors too, now walking in the steps of the mentors that came before us.”

There’s no time like the present to be an Oklahoma lawyer. “In a time when we have the opportunity and the ability to embrace our natural tendencies for leadership – for bringing our “femaleness” into the mix – people realize that, hey, *it’s a good thing that there is not just one way to do things.* It makes for an exciting time, a potential for real growth and real opportunity to let people grow and flourish in their own skin and on their own terms,” said Briggs. ●



About the Author: Elizabeth Lauderbeck was born in Austin and raised in Palestine, Texas. She graduated from Oklahoma City University School of Law in May 2013. Before law school, she served as the Youth Service Corps Coordinator at Ghost Ranch in

Northern New Mexico where she organized extensive volunteer projects with junior and senior high kids and taught yoga. Elizabeth has passions for photography and cooking. She plans on making Oklahoma City her permanent home and looks forward to joining Dunlap Coddling upon passing the bar in July 2013.

Left: Kendra Robben '07 of Robben & Associates. Middle: Michelle Briggs '11, Associate at Dunlap Coddling. Right: Emily Campbell, Trademarks and Copyrights Practice Group Leader at Dunlap Coddling.

