

CHAMBLISS, BAHNER & STOPHEL, P.C.

DANA PERRY LEADS
CHAMBLISS, BAHNER &
STOPHEL, P.C. AS IT
CELEBRATES THE
125TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE PRESTIGIOUS
LAW FIRM AND SERVES
THE NEEDS OF A
CHANGING WORLD.

ON A STEADY Course

Story by Carolyn Mitchell
Photography by Brad Cansler

The first woman managing partner of Chambliss, Bahner & Stophel, P.C., is supervising a pivotal relocation for the company, exploring new specialties for the practice and encouraging expansion of the firm's pro bono work and community service.



Chambliss, Bahner & Stophel lawyers go in the classroom to talk to students about legal careers.

At 48, Dana Perry leads one of the largest and most prestigious law firms in the region with offices in Chattanooga, Nashville and Cleveland. This year marks the firm's 125th anniversary.

"She's doing a good job as president and manager," says Chambliss attorney Rick Hitchcock. "She's managing a large group of independent-minded people with patience, good listening skills and a receptiveness to new ideas."

Perry, who took the helm at Chambliss in 2009, acknowledges her indebtedness to two Tennessee universities and her small town Mississippi upbringing.

Her 23-year tenure at Chambliss began immediately after her graduation from Vanderbilt Law School. She entered Vanderbilt with a bachelor's degree and a Phi Beta Kappa key from the University of the South.

"I feel a special bond to both schools," Perry says. "I owe them so much. My professors were supportive even though I was preparing for a profession that was just beginning to really open up to women."

Perry enjoyed considerable assets as a prospective college student in Brookhaven, Mississippi, 55 miles south of Jackson. Her parents were professionals who instilled in her the importance of education and hard work.

"My father was a high school football coach and later an administrator in the public school system," she says. "He refereed ball games on Friday nights, in addi-

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tion to handling his administrative job, while he was working on his graduate degree."

Perry excelled in academics and extracurriculars, including the marching band and yearbook staff. What's more, she was serious about her career goal. With the women's movement flowering, Perry predicted in her class prophecy that she would become an ACLU lawyer.

Perry investigated other colleges and was wait-listed for Yale before deciding on Sewanee. Her membership in the Episcopal Church—still a profound influence in her life—made the University of the South a familiar institution. Familiar in name and reputation but not in the rigor of its curriculum.

"My first semester at Sewanee was incredibly difficult for me," Perry says. "I could do multiple-choice questions, but that's quite different from writing a 1,000-word essay on a 16th-century poem. I never worked so hard."

To help pay for her education, Perry worked as a food server in the Sewanee cafeteria. From part-time jobs in Brookhaven, she was no stranger to rite-of-passage adolescent gigs. "My resume reads Chambliss Bahner, Fred's Dollar Store and McDonald's," she says with a smile. The work ethic paid off as she proved equal to Sewanee's lofty demands and graduated with a degree in American history, a place in the top 10 percent of her class and gratitude to her "fabulous" professors.

Today Perry and her husband, Dr. Charles Perry, a Sewanee European history professor, enjoy a mountaintop getaway near campus, as well as a condo in the Lovemans Building. "We wanted to live downtown to show that we are invested in Chattanooga as a place to live, work and play," Perry says.

Vanderbilt vindicated Perry's career choice. Not only in class but in summer law clerk stints at Chambliss, she knew she had found her professional niche. After graduating in the top 25 percent of her class, she joined Chambliss in 1988.

Perry learned the legal ropes from Jac Chambliss, Max Bahner and other veteran, practicing attorneys. "The firm gave me every opportunity to succeed," she says. She was the third woman attorney hired by Chambliss. As president of the firm, she hopes to broaden opportunities in telecommuting, flextime and other initiatives for women seeking to balance professional and personal obligations.

The lawyer, whose high school was 50 percent African-American, is focused on ethnic as well as gender diversity. "We partner with Brainerd High School and BCBST to conduct Chattanooga's Street Law Diversity Pipeline Program to promote diversity in the legal profession," she says. "Our lawyers go into the classroom to talk to students about legal careers, and the students visit the firm to get a close-up view of lawyering.

"My work with the Urban League as a board member, as well as

the firm's financial support, offers another approach to increasing our diversity. Seventeen of our 69 lawyers are women or minorities. We haven't reached our diversity goals by a long shot, but we're working on it."

Perry is also committed to continuing the firm's tradition of pro bono work. Three Chambliss attorneys have been elected to the Legal Aid of East Tennessee Pro Bono Hall of Fame, and the LAET Pro Bono Volunteer of the Year Award is named after Chambliss attorney Bruce Bailey, who spearheaded creation of the Chattanooga Bar Association pro bono program.

Like her predecessor Mike St. Charles, whom she applauds for his effective leadership, Perry is not a litigation attorney. She specializes in estate planning, special needs and trust planning, and elder law, a specialty she pioneered at the firm. "Elder law focuses on the legal needs of the elderly," she says. "I work with clients on retirement planning, life insurance, medical costs and estate planning."

Much of what Perry envisions for Chambliss, Bahner & Stophel is encompassed in the firm's first relocation since 1983. In early 2013, the firm will move from the Tallan Building to the top four floors of Liberty Tower at 605 Chestnut Street.

In the process the firm's space will shrink by 4,000 square feet, or over 9%, so the change represents an economic move. "People sometimes forget that we're like other businesses," Perry says. "We're also affected by the economy. Our efficiencies in the new building will help us hold down costs for our clients. We won't be charging an arm

and a leg for ostentatious space, and the savings from our LEED design approach speaks to the firm's commitment to the environment."

The three-block move down Chestnut will bring an upgrade in technology and communication capabilities. "The new technology will allow us to export our legal services to virtually anywhere," Perry says. "And we'll have a broader technological base to keep up with technology advances in the future."

Another innovation will be standard office sizes, from the space for the most junior lawyer to the managing partner. And all corner offices will be reserved for attorney-client conferences and staff meetings.

"The arrangements will promote more collaboration among our staff, and that will serve the interests of our clients," Perry says. "We're keyed in on value-oriented and efficient results for our clients."

Despite her 60-hour work schedule, Perry serves on numerous boards, manages to do several weekly 5K runs and makes time for music—vintage gospel, indie and classical—and equally eclectic reading. On her night stand: The Cello Suites, Hemingway's *Boat*, and *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone*?

"Dana has an extremely keen intellect," Rick Hitchcock says. "She has a range of interests broader than the law, and she's well-read. That makes her a very interesting conversation partner." 

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