

This Month@Moritz August2009

Cheryl Blackwell Bryson '77: Success Against the Odds



Looking back, Cheryl Blackwell Bryson '77 understands why others use the words “miracle” and “success story against the odds” in describing her. It’s no wonder: the Duane Morris partner has surmounted a slew of personal and professional obstacles throughout her career.

Bryson, whose on-line professional biography includes first African-American female editor of the *Ohio State Law Journal*, 2006 Illinois Super Lawyer, Top 50 Women Lawyers in Illinois, Top 50 Leading Women Business Lawyers in Illinois and YWCA Outstanding Woman of Achievement, began her legal career when there were few African-American female attorneys. She experienced devastating family losses and she overcame several crippling muscular-skeletal conditions that left her partially disabled. Through it all, she persevered. She built a highly successful practice, held leadership positions in her law firms and in the profession, served on numerous community boards of trustees and still found time to help others along the way.

Today, Bryson looks back on her journey as an African-American female attorney in the late 1970s and 80s with pride. According to U.S. Census figures, less than three percent of practicing lawyers were African-Americans in 1980. Due to her race and gender, Bryson felt others sometimes underestimated her ability. “I wasn’t expected to be at a law firm. I wasn’t expected to make partner or to bring in a lot of business,” she said. “In those days, discrimination is just what you had to deal with.”

The Baltimore native remembers the days when certain firms admittedly refused to consider her because of her race, and later would not always properly credit or compensate her for the business she brought to the Chicago firms where she was employed. “Throughout my career I have felt that there were differences and there were times when I could look at compensation and say, ‘Excuse me, why is he getting more than I’m getting when my track record is the same as his? I’ve billed more than he has, and I’ve collected more than he has,’” Bryson commented in a 2007 *Chicago Lawyer* story.

Bryson discovered early in her career a passion for labor and employment law. “In those days, employment law was hot, and it was people-oriented. I chose it because it suited my personality.”

Bryson made partner in 1986 at Katten Muchin, becoming the first African-American female in the Chicago area to rise through the ranks to make partner at a major firm. In 1989, she joined Bell, Boyd & Lloyd as a partner charged with bringing in new business to the firm. “It seems to me that the people who are most respected at law firms are the rainmakers,” she said. In 1992, Bryson joined Rivkin, Radler & Kremer and became the first African-American female lawyer in the Chicago area to head a practice group. Three years later, she was hired by Holleb & Coff to head and build its labor and employment practice.

In 1999, Bryson was part of the group that started the Duane Morris office in Chicago, where she remains today. She

served on the firm's Management Committee, again becoming the first African-American female to assume this role.

In 2000, Bryson's experienced the first of several personal tragedies. She lost her husband of 25 years to cancer, and less than a year later, her older son in a car accident. In the span of three years, Bryson lost a total of seven loved ones.

Then, in 2003, Bryson was diagnosed with several painful muscular skeletal conditions, the untimely onset of which she attributes, in part, to the grief and stress she experienced during that time. Bryson was diagnosed with scoliosis, stenosis, and several other disabling spine and lower back problems. "My physical condition left me pretty immobile," Bryson said. "My doctor said I should stop working."

The pain became excruciating and Bryson was eventually unable to sit, stand, or walk with any normalcy. She used a walker and continually took pain medication. "Some of the top doctors in the country said that if I didn't have corrective surgery, I'd need a therapeutic scooter within 18 months."

Yet, Bryson defied the experts and began looking into alternative therapies. "Every year since 2003, I have used different physical therapy routines to deal with the pain," she said. She also used conventional methods such as acupuncture and yoga to more atypical methods such as energy medicine and live cell analysis.

To manage the stress of her demanding career, she reduced her workload in 2005 as well. "My condition forced me to change the way I practiced law," she said. "I work part time these days." She spends her time mentoring younger lawyers, cross-selling, and serving a variety of Chicago cultural and civic organizations.

Today, Bryson says she exercises every day to stave off the degenerative impact of her spinal conditions. "I'm more fit than I've ever been in my entire life," she said.

Her experience inspired her to write the forthcoming book, *Solving the Back Pains Puzzle: Five Secrets for Unlocking the Mind-Body Connection with Complementary and Alternative Therapies*, which reflects on her recovery from pain. She has also authored magazine articles that focus on healing from trauma.

She believes that her story is one of "success against the odds." "I just wasn't ready to accept any doctor's view that I was going to need a wheelchair. I may need one someday but it won't be without a fight," she said. "They called me a miracle."