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Bryson faces challenges and builds a successful career

by Olivia Clarke

Taking a moment to control the tears forming in her eyes and the sorrow choking her voice, Cheryl Blackwell Bryson describes how life unexpectedly changed for her.

Bryson, a partner at Duane Morris, lost her husband to cancer in 2000, and her oldest son less than a year later in a car accident. Between 2000 and 2003 she lost a total of seven loved ones.

She then became sick with a muscular skeletal condition that she attributes, in part, to the stress and heartbreak she experienced during that time.

“I got very sick, very sick,” she said. “The doctors said in 2003 that by 2005 I would be severely crippled and needing a scooter.

“I have defied them. I do have physical limitations, but I have learned to work with them. I’ve learned to manage the stress, and I have learned to accept it as a gift, because I take pride in being where I am today on my health journey.”

Even before she became sick, Bryson met many challenges as a black, female lawyer. But she said she tried to never let her race or gender hold her back from achieving her goals.

Besides her success as a lawyer, she’s also been active in the community through politics and political campaigns, fundraising, and mentoring. She believes she was one of the first black lawyers to head a practice group, and one of the first black women to be on the management committee of a major law firm.

“Yes, I have been treated



David Durochik

Duane Morris partner Cheryl Blackwell Bryson, who has been practicing since 1977, has experienced many challenges in both her profession and personal life, but she uses courage and inner strength to find success and happiness.

differently because I am a woman and because I am African-American,” said the 57-year-old Bryson. “You can’t, at least I couldn’t see how I could, be successful by focusing on the obstacles.”

Being herself

When Bryson started practicing law in 1977 at Friedman & Koven, she realized many female attorneys before her faced a tougher road in the legal community because they believed they couldn’t have children

and a career.

“There were a number of women whom I met who were a few years ahead of me who confessed, when they turned 50, that they felt they had to make the choice between their career and having kids,” she said.

She chose to raise her two boys, and also to build a career. She worked part-time on and off throughout her career, depending on her family’s needs.

While practicing at what is today Katten Muchin Rosenman, she took

a three-month maternity leave and then worked part-time for several more months — something she did with each of her children. She considers herself a pioneer who helped define the maternity leave and part-time work policy for women.

“I like to say I helped develop the maternity leave policy, one of my contributions to women’s rights,” she said. “I could be wrong, but I believe I was the first who had the three months off, and then worked part-time and got paid.”

Bryson always encourages female lawyers she works with to figure out what is right for them in terms of blending family and work.

“If the men can take time in the middle of the day to get their haircut, their shoes shined, and their nails done, why can’t I leave for playgroup?” she said.

“I used to participate in carpool and in playgroup when my kids were young and I scheduled meetings so I could do that. I didn’t tell them in those days. You couldn’t tell someone in those days that you were going out to playgroup. You always had to have a standing meeting.”

When she began her career, Bryson said, a pattern existed in many firms where black lawyers were hired, but they were not always assigned enough work to satisfy the hours requirements, and the work they were assigned was not the more challenging work. Many black lawyers feared they would be fired because they didn’t have enough hours, she said.

Her instincts told her to constantly develop client relationships and additional work with these clients. When she was assigned a case and had the opportunity to talk to a client, she tried to figure out if there were other legal needs the client had. She then reported back to the partner, and saw where she could assist with that other business.

Bryson said a club-like atmosphere existed in some firms because most lawyers went to the same schools or lived in the same neighborhoods. Because she grew

up in Baltimore and attended The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law, she was, in some ways, an outsider.

As a defense mechanism, she tried to not believe that her race was a reason why she, for example, wasn’t invited to a partner’s party at his home. But as she developed her practice, she started to acknowledge that discrimination existed.

Today she doesn’t pay attention to these types of attitudes. But she said they probably do not occur as much as they did in those days because more diversity exists in today’s firms.

Rachel Lutner, an associate at

Bryson: “From the first day I

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Robbins, Schwartz, Nicholas, Lifton & Taylor, worked for Bryson at Holleb & Coff and Duane Morris. Lutner said she respects Bryson as a lawyer, and for overcoming discrimination.

She said a firm once told Bryson that it wanted to make her partner, but it couldn’t make two black female lawyers partner in the same year because it wouldn’t look good.

And several Ohio firms told Bryson they could not hire her because people would not be able to tell her apart from the cleaning staff because of the color of her skin, she said.

But discrimination did not prevent her from being a good lawyer. Lutner describes Bryson as a tough litigator who works hard to get the results her clients want. Bryson taught her how to hone her writing skills, and size up a case.

“She can be very tough, but very fair,” Lutner said. “I don’t think

there are that many people these days who have overcome as much.”

Becoming a rainmaker

Bryson learned early in her career that labor and employment law suited her.

As a summer associate she discovered that “labor and employment lawyers talked to clients. They went out to client meetings. They had hearings. There was a lot more variety. ... I remember sitting in the library as a summer associate doing research and when I got employment law the cases were always something I could relate to.”

While at Katten she evaluated whether she wanted to continue working at a law firm. She took a leave of absence in 1986 to be deputy corporation counsel for the City of Chicago for three years. She also considered teaching.

She decided to join Bell, Boyd & Lloyd in 1989 to become a rainmaker.

“I wanted to go after what was in my heart,” she said. “And from the first day I walked into a law firm I knew the person I wanted to be was a rainmaker.

“It looked to me like it was fun to work with people and figure out how you could help them in the context of the law, and then do it and make money at it.”

She said she always possessed a sales personality.

When Bryson was a child, she and her sister were known as the entrepreneurs of the neighborhood. While their parents were at the market on Saturdays, they would do things like set up lemonade stands, sell pictures, or pretend to run a church and pass around the collection plate.

“We didn’t get allowances,” she said. “We were always trying to figure out how to get the other kids to spend their money on products we made.”

When she went to Bell Boyd to start building a practice, it became clear that she would need to bring in new business. She tenaciously went to people she knew, made regular phone calls and visited

people to explain how she and her firm could add value to their businesses. She let them know what kind of work they could do for them, she said.

At the beginning, Bryson said, she didn't understand firm politics and why she didn't always receive the credit she thought she deserved for the business she brought in. A reason might have existed, but the situation didn't sit well with her, she said.

"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,'" she said.

"How can you justify giving him more than you're giving me?" I never got an answer. I kind of think it goes with the reality of being a man. Men subconsciously think men deserve more than women when it comes to compensation."

She went to Rivkin, Radler and Kremer in 1992, which she believes had about 30 lawyers, and headed a practice for the first time.

"When I left Bell Boyd I was tired of big firms," she said. "I wanted to go some place where I could bring in business, manage my business, and get credit. I didn't want to fight for getting credit for what I brought in."

Taking a stand

Holleb & Coff hired her in 1995 to build its labor and employment practice. She began cross-selling, and produced enough business to keep the department busy, and the work was collected at a substantial rate.

"But I had to fight to get paid, and I think women and blacks have that issue," she said. "I felt that I was underpaid and I challenged them and really threatened to leave and take my whole group, and then they paid me."

Bryson said she tells women that if they do not receive the recognition and pay for the business they bring in — something she experienced at

some firms — they must confront the situation.

"I had to learn to stand up for myself when it came to compensation," she said. "That was one of the tough things — to recognize that I was doing a good job and that I should be paid for it."

Duane Morris partner Jon Zimring met Bryson in 1992 when they were at Rivkin Radler, and went with her to Holleb & Coff in 1995 to help build a practice group. They were both hired in 1999 as a part of a group that started the Chicago office of Duane Morris.

He describes Bryson as extremely energetic, dynamic, and intuitive. She is a perfectionist who is fair-minded but also very demanding because she wants to ensure that all aspects of a particular issue have been dealt with, Zimring said.

"I know of very few people in life who are able to work the dynamics of any particular room like Cheryl," he said. "That is something difficult, if not impossible, to teach. That is a skill and she's got it. You can only learn that by seeing a master at work, and she's a master at work."

Chief Cook County Judge Timothy C. Evans said Bryson worked with the court to help build a stronger relationship with the Cook County court reporters after they unionized. Evans said she was always very professional, and possessed innovative approaches.

"She's a marvelous person who is very talented and capable," Evans said. "I have enormous respect for her ability."

Starting a new life

When Bryson looked back in her journal she realized that patterns existed in 1999 related to her health. For example, stress could wipe her out for days and cause her to not function properly.

But she ignored the signs, until her body finally shut down.

Doctors diagnosed Bryson in 2003 with scoliosis, an abnormal curve of the spine; spondylolisthesis, a condition where a bone in the lower part of the spine slips

forward and onto a bone below it; lumbar spine stenosis, a narrowing of the spinal canal in the lower back; and two degenerated disks.

Each condition causes pain on its own, but together that pain can reach excruciating levels, she said. She took Tylenol around the clock. She eventually couldn't walk, chew or turn her head without feeling extraordinary pain.

"I was on a walker for four days," she said. "I was unable to sit, stand, or walk with any normalcy."

The pain pills she took made her ill, and some doctors wanted her to have major surgery. But one doctor

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suggested she look into everything before turning to surgery.

She began trying alternative therapies. She started with things like acupuncture, therapeutic deep tissue massages and yoga, but she then tried more unusual methods, such as energy medicine, reiki, and live cell analysis. She drastically changed her diet and eliminated as much sugar and glutens as possible.

She also reduced her caseload and went part-time in 2005. She pays attention now to what she cannot do. And while she can walk, she still does regular physical therapy exercises.

"I think what I am finding out is I had a lot of trauma at the same time, a rapid series of losses at the same time, and the market was changing, and the firm was changing," she said. "I had major stresses in my family and my career, in two major parts of my life over a short period of time."

Bryson said doctors did not see a

connection between her illness and her emotional pain.

“I thought what was sick was my spirit,” she said. “No doctor was going to say your spirit is sick. ... Last week I saw a medical doctor who said, ‘now we realize there is an emotional component to the pain.’ Now I’m glad I’m my own number-one resource for my body and health.”

She wrote a magazine article about healing from trauma, and is working on a book about her journey to recover from pain.

“They call me a miracle, but I explain my miracle by saying I have been resourceful,” she said. “I’ve been as resourceful and tenacious in taking care of my body as I was in building a practice. Some of the things that were important to me early in my career are less important because I have such a strong physical challenge.”

Bryson said she also has a strong faith in God, and she’s learned the importance of finding reasons to be happy every day.

Duane Morris, she said, has been a great firm for her during a time when she must focus on her health. The firm produces good work, she said, and also places value on being a decent person.

“My losses really were just a part of who I needed to become,” she said. “I think that the losses and illnesses came into my life to lead me to where I am today, to my own recovery.”

Creating new priorities

Besides revamping her health regime, she’s also changed what social causes she supports.

She said so many factors exist today that can hurt the survival of black men, and she is searching for the right avenues to help this group of people.

Bryson wants to continue mentoring all types of people, and she participates in a mentoring program through the Black Women Lawyers’ Association of Greater Chicago, Inc.

This summer she traveled on a 17-day humanitarian effort to Kenya and Tanzania with the Global Alliance for Africa to work with orphaned children. She participated in an art camp that connects the local children to the indigenous artists of their community.

She also donated money to send 10 children from Ghana to school, and she and her friends are raising money with the hope of sending 1,000 of these children to school.

Bryson said she knows how to encourage people to give money to charity, and is looking for new avenues to support.

“I basically believe people want the opportunity to give to good causes, but sometimes they get so busy they just can’t get it together,” she said. “I don’t mind creating the opportunities to give, and reminding them how to do it.”

Antoinette Wright, president and CEO of the DuSable Museum of African-American History, describes Bryson as a visionary and philanthropist who supports ideas that will have a lasting effect on the community.

They met informally in 1998 when Bryson was assisting with the donation of an artifact to the

museum.

She was later recommended by the museum’s attorney to be a negotiator for the museum’s first union contract. She has a strong ability to interpret the law and explain it in a way that a non-lawyer can understand, Wright said. After her work as a negotiator, Bryson became a museum board member.

“She’s a wonderful mother,” she said. “As she was healing herself, she assisted [her living son] in his healing. She was always strong. ... People never expect that they will outlive their children. They were such a close-knit family.”

Judge Ann Claire Williams, of the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, met Bryson 30 years ago when they participated in Minority Legal Education Resources, Inc.’s supplemental commercial bar preparation program. Williams was Bryson’s team leader, and her first mentor.

Williams describes Bryson as a wonderful person who is dedicated to public interest causes. She’s an inspiration to young lawyers, and passes along what she’s learned to others, she said.

“I’ve followed her career,” Williams said. “I knew when she was in that class that she was going to be a star and she hasn’t disappointed me. She’s exceeded my expectations.”

Bryson said she tries to be a good person who treats others as she would like to be treated.

“I never lost my principles, no matter what happened, no matter how badly I thought I was treated,” she said. “I always tried to operate with integrity.”★

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