



Legal powerhouse

Meade started strong and kept going

JEAN KWON | STAFF WRITER

With her bubbly personality and easy charm it's easy to believe Nikelle Meade was voted "Friendliest Person" in high school.

But behind her disarming demeanor is a steely will and brainy talent.

As Meade points out, not as many people know she was also voted "Most Likely To Succeed."

"Nikelle exemplifies the old saying — 'dynamite comes in small packages,'" says Gaye Rothman, a fellow partner and mentor at law firm Brown McCarroll LLP. "While she may appear to be a really nice young lady only 5 [feet] 4 [inches] with a friendly smile, she is, in fact, a powerhouse who is one of the movers and shakers in town."

Meade is well-connected and integral to much of what happens in Central Texas, Rothman says.

"When Nikelle talks, people listen," he says, "not only because she has compelling things to say but also because she [is] positively the most engaging person I know."

Born and raised in Houston to a teacher mother and engineer father, Meade came to Austin to attend the University of Texas. She majored in English and psychology and went on to get a law degree.

During law school, Meade first delved into real estate law as an intern for Atlantic Richfield Oil Corp. in Midland, signing on to work there after graduation. A clerkship at Austin real estate firm Minter Joseph & Thornhill in her final year in law school led her otherwise. Meade was at the firm for three years, with stints as a judicial intern for Texas Supreme Court Justice Jack Hightower and as a legislative intern for State Rep. Dawna Dukes.

In 1998, she joined Brown McCarroll, becoming the youngest partner, at 32, in the firm's history. In a short period she amassed a client portfolio of more than \$1 million a year and numerous appointments — including the executive committee of the Real Estate Council of Austin and the board of directors of the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority — to become one of the city's most influential real estate lawyers.

Last year, she won an Austin Under 40 award, perhaps the best grown-up version of the "Most Likely to Succeed" distinction.

"Nikelle has managed to become one of the top attorneys in commercial real estate and commercial real estate development, two industries dominated by men," says Robert Werner, Brown McCarroll's managing partner. In Texas, 4 percent of lawyers

are African-American and 31 percent are female, Werner says.

"I don't think anyone can look at me and ignore the fact that I'm a woman or that I'm a minority," Meade says.

But she doesn't think that's hindered her significantly.

"I'm blessed and lucky to be in Austin," she says, "where most people I encounter value those differences and want that different perspective and unique outlook, and expect that as a woman and a minority you probably do have a different perspective, especially in a field that is very male- and very white male-dominated."

Nevertheless, she believes some people assume minorities are less educated, lack resources and can't perform as well.

"You've got to prove it to them," Meade says. "I don't know if we'll ever get over those people who have that bigoted mindset or if we'll ever find a way to get rid of that. But I think those people are dwindling in numbers."

That she's been able to transcend gender and race may be why Meade can appeal to such a cross-section of people.

"Nikelle develops friendships with persons from all walks of our community," Werner says. "Everyone I encounter describes Nikelle as a wonderful friend and delightful person."

"Nikelle has been a rising star from the moment she arrived on the Austin business scene," says Diana Zuniga, a real estate broker and president of Investors Alliance Inc. "Because of her great people skills, everyone wants to work with her."

And they trust her.

"Old-fashioned values like integrity, honesty and commitment mean something to Nikelle," says Kay Andrews, another partner and mentor at Brown McCarroll.

Through it all, Meade has been buoyed by extraordinary mentors.

"I've had a really strong base of women that I've encountered throughout my life, women who really care about other women," she says. "I like that they are not so involved or self-absorbed with what they are doing that they are able to reach out and say, 'We've got to stick together.'"

She believes one day such solidarity won't be as crucial. "It will be an equal playing field, and we'll be running all the companies."

As she becomes a permanent fixture in her field's highest reaches, Meade hopes she can guide future generations.

"I've had great mentors, and I hope that I'm a great mentor and will continue to be," she says.



NICK SIMONITE | A