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Austin Energy

Leslie Ritchie Robnett
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legacy in her oil-and-gas
regulation practice

BY MICHAEL CORCORAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FELIX SANCHEZ

WHEN LESLIE RITCHIE ROBNETT WAS A LITTLE girl, instead of bedtime stories, her father would tell her about the criminal cases he was studying in law school.

"I'd have to guess who won," says Robnett. "I was almost always right, which is funny, because criminal law was my weakest area in law school."

Her strengths—which include business litigation and energy regulation law—get put to good use in her regulatory and appellate practice at Gardere Wynne Sewell's downtown Austin office. While the tall, stylish attorney's looks come from Texas football royalty—her father was a college quarterback who went 39-0 as a starter and her mother was a University of Texas cheerleader named to the 1978 All-American squad—she's got law in her blood.

LESLIE RITCHIE ROBNETT

- GARDERE WYNNE SEWELL
- BUSINESS LITIGATION
- TEXAS RISING STARS: 2012–2013



Leslie Ritchie Robnett rides in a local parade with her grandfather (center), Mineral Wells attorney John Ritchie; and her father, Mineral Wells attorney and college football Hall-of-Famer Richard Ritchie.

Robnett, 30, has a legal legacy going back six generations to her great-great-great grandfather, John Preston White (1832–1905), a charter judge of the Texas Court of Appeals in 1876 who later became chief judge. His photo still hangs above the bench of the old Texas Supreme Courthouse.

A wall of her 30th-floor office is decorated with framed photos of the Ritchie men who were her earliest role models. Her grandfather, John Ritchie, still practices oil and gas law in Mineral Wells at age 84.

Her father, college football Hall-of-Famer Richard Ritchie (inducted in 1998) became an attorney after a short career as a coach with the Texas Tech Red Raiders. He left his football career in Lubbock to go to law school in San Antonio when Leslie was about 8 and her younger sister, Lacie, was 3.

Robnett says she always wanted to be a lawyer; she's the first Ritchie woman to do so. Early on, she says, "I did get some of that 'Why do you want to go off and be a lawyer?' ... But my grandfather, who's not traditionally the warm and fuzzy type, wrote me a beautiful letter about how proud he was that I was carrying on the lineage. And he encouraged me to also follow my dream of becoming a mother."

Time for that later. For now, she and her husband, Kevin, are focused on their legal careers, though Kevin had a seven-month "break" in 2012 when he was deployed to Afghanistan as an intelligence officer for the Navy Reserves.

Robnett and Kevin were both undergraduates at the University of Texas, but they met while working as legislative aides at the Texas Capitol. "I worked for [Rep.] Phil King and he worked for [Rep.] Geanie Morrison, and there was some matchmaking going on by our bosses," Robnett says with a laugh.

At age 21, she became chief of staff for King, who was chairman of the House Committee on Regulated Industries at a time when telecommunications and public utilities were particularly hot issues in the Legislature. Robnett soon realized there was a downside to being young. Many times when someone had requested a meeting with King, she recalls, "I would show up instead, and you could see the look on their faces, like they thought Phil King was blowing them off. He wasn't—I was his chief of staff—but they'd see this perky 21-year-old. I recognized very early that I had to be super-prepared. I had to prove myself right away."

Fortunately, says King, that was no problem for Robnett. "If you spent any amount of time with Leslie, you saw that she was 20 going on 40," he says. "The office just hummed when she was running it." Once Robnett fired an employee without consulting King first and she was called into his office. "Not that I disagreed with her decision," King admits with a laugh.

A passionate student of Texas judicial history, Robnett got a taste of appellate law while working on the Judicial Pay Bill.

She was disappointed to find out that state appellate judges earned far less than some lawyers who'd just passed the bar. The bill passed. Later, as a first-year law student, Robnett wanted a summer internship with the Fifth Court of Appeals in Dallas. She called Chief Justice Linda B. Thomas and began her pitch with: "Do you remember when I helped y'all get a raise?"

Robnett throws her head back with a laugh as she recalls her youthful self-assurance. She got the internship: "The chief justice loves to tell that story every time she introduces me to someone."

But law school did not come as soon as Robnett had hoped. A straight-A student as an undergraduate at the University of Texas, Robnett says she was devastated when her application for UT law school was initially denied. She appealed the decision on the basis of special experience—her service as a chief of staff—and was able to enroll the next year, after working another legislative session.

"Working for the committee that oversaw utility deregulation prepared me for a regulatory energy practice in ways that few practicing attorneys had seen," she notes. She quickly distinguished herself at UT Law by co-founding the *Texas Journal of Oil, Gas and Energy Law*.

Robnett also served a clerkship with Justice Paul W. Green on the Texas Supreme Court.

"Leslie is one of the most transparently likeable people you will ever meet," says Green. "She is genuine in every way and lights up every room she walks into. On the job, she was very focused and took great pride in her work. When she arrived at my chambers for her first day on the job, she announced she would be my 'best law clerk ever!' And after her tenure here, that's hard to challenge."

When Robnett joined Gardere in 2010, she was excited to discover that the firm hosts a biennial pheasant hunt. The Robnetts are avid outdoorsmen and own two hunting dogs. But after she signed up and saw that she was the only woman, she called her father to check on the protocol. "He said I would be absolutely welcome—as long as I remembered to keep my gun barrel up and not shoot any clients," she says.

Her shooting skills and frontier attitude quickly won the group over. "I asked them,

"Were you surprised that a woman came to the hunt?" she says, laughing before the punch line, "and they said, 'No, we were more surprised that an associate did.'"

Robnett is also a straight shooter in the courtroom, where she often handles cases involving oil and gas law. That, too, runs in the family. Her great-great-grandfather, E.B. Ritchie, was an energy attorney back when coal was the prevalent form of fuel and made the transition to oil after the discovery of "black gold" in Texas in 1901.

Spending her early years on the Ritchie Ranch—which E.B. earned as a legal fee—in Palo Pinto County, just west of Fort Worth, Robnett rode tractors and bulldozers and climbed oil rigs. This experience was an asset years later, when she defended Stallion Oilfield Services Inc. on appeal in 2010. A well operator charged that a bulldozer owned by Stallion had damaged one of its wellheads, causing a leak that led to a blowout. Familiar with oil rigs and bulldozer operations, Robnett laid out all the evidence before the court and won the case.

KIM YELKIN, EXECUTIVE PARTNER AT

the Austin office, pokes her head into the conference room and spots Robnett.

"Isn't she a rock star?" Yelkin asks. Indeed, wearing a silk Italian scarf wrapped around a white Kay Unger dress, Robnett looks like she might belong in an entertainment law group.

"I run across a lot of young lawyers, and not only does she have a passion for the law," says Yelkin, "[but Leslie] is willing to put in the long hours and the commitment it's going to take to be a successful law partner in the future."

In fact, Robnett likes to bring her work home, sitting for hours with her Pomeranian, Belle, on her lap as she pores through papers. "I got that from my grandfather," she says of her predilection for legal documents.

All the reading makes her that much more prepared for what she loves: arguing the unanswered questions, "facing a nuance that isn't answered by a statute or hasn't been decided by a court before," she says. "The appellate practice allows me to play in that uncertain space." ■

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