

A Conversation with CBA Outstanding Young Lawyer of the Year Clarissa M. Collier

by Jessica A. Volz

Perhaps no success stories are more enthralling than those that are borne on the wings of humble beginnings. In the legal profession, we often hear of individuals who have harnessed the powers of persuasion, evidence, and the Rule of Law to achieve justice for those who have been wronged or who stand wrongly accused. Far rarer are stories of individuals who have also wielded superlative grit to turn their own lives right-side-up. My first encounter with Clarissa Collier confirmed that she, like a diamond, has earned her brilliance by withstanding unfathomable pressure. Our informal Q&A session rapidly gave way to a more fluid conversation as she recounted her journey to her present role as an associate at Holland & Hart.

Do No Harm and Be a Blessing

Clarissa Collier grew up in poverty. She came from a family of Italian and African-American heritage where people passed away too soon and too often. Her father and mother separated when she was 5 years old while they were living in Virginia. In 1988, she, her mother, and her two older brothers moved to Wyoming. They lived on welfare until she was 12 and her mother remarried. During this tumultuous period, they relied on the kindness of strangers for groceries, Christmas gifts, and clothes. Her mother instilled in her the virtues of patience and empathy; her father, who had endured the racial tensions that plagued South Carolina in the 1960s, taught her to be strong and to always work hard. Still living in poverty, Collier started working at age 15 as a way to escape poverty and as a temporary reprieve from her stepfather. Collier's tensions with her stepfather reached a boiling point at the beginning of her senior year in high school, and she left home at age 17. She was the first member of her family to attend college.

When prompted to identify what had inspired her recourse to a career in law, Collier paused, took a sip of coffee, and resumed, "The O.J. Simpson trial." Watching it had left an indelible mark on her imagination, prompting her to role play in a way that ultimately inspired her plan of action. "My two goals in life," she explained, "were to get out of poverty and to have an impact." Her father had encouraged her to "follow the cheese," which was essentially his way of reminding her that change is inevitable and that it is within our personal power to improve the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Public education—which continues to be close to her heart—enabled her to take the steps needed to translate her dreams into a reality. Then tragedy struck: Just after she graduated from the University of Wyoming College of Law in

2008 and one month after she started her career at Holland & Hart's Denver office, her mother died of cancer. Though physically absent, her mother lives on in the hearts and minds of her three children. Her mantra—"Do no harm and be a blessing"—has steered Collier's life in good times and in bad.

Taking the Lead

Today, Collier counsels U.S. and international clients on federal laws and regulations governing global trade and international business transactions, including the International Traffic in Arms Regulations, the Export Administration Regulations, and the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. She helps her clients navigate internal and civil investigations involving the Departments of State, Commerce, Justice, and Treasury. She also represents corporations, businesses, and individuals in a broad range of complex commercial litigation matters.

Her propensity for effective leadership has opened doors to other roles that have benefited from her unique blend of soft skills and hard-earned experience. She has served as a delegate to the American Bar Association House of Delegates and has held leadership positions on the Legal Aid Foundation of Colorado's Associates Advisory Board and the Ray of Hope Cancer Foundation's Board of Directors. She is also a member of the Faculty of Federal Advocates, the Colorado and Denver Bar Associations, and the Sam Cary Bar Association. In addition to her substantial contributions outside her firm, she has served on Holland & Hart's Recruitment Committee, Women's Forum Steering Committee, and Diversity Committee. She recently took the lead in organizing a panel for the Women's Forum Steering Committee titled, "Difficult Times: Living on the Edge without Falling Over." The event inspired a sense of community and provided resources to help attorneys at Holland & Hart through challenging chapters in their personal lives.



This article marks the second installment of *The Colorado Lawyer's* new "Profiles in Success" column, which celebrates those individuals, living and deceased, whose contributions to the practice of law lend themselves to inspiring narratives. To suggest an article, contact Jessica A. Volz, PhD, at jvolz@cobar.org. Volz is a communications and marketing strategist for the Colorado and Denver Bar Associations, as well as the editor of *The Docket*.

Clarissa Collier accepting the Gary McPherson Outstanding Young Lawyer of the Year Award at the Bar Fellows Dinner.



A Platform to Do Good

In retrospect, Collier attributes her altruistic involvement in the legal and broader communities to the pain she experienced while growing up in poverty. As she stressed when accepting the 2016 CBA Gary McPherson Outstanding Young Lawyer of the Year Award at the Bar Fellows Dinner in January, “People in poverty do not have a voice. Even those who are mentally and physically able to speak are not heard because society chooses not to listen.” When she became an attorney, her life took on a more comfortable aspect,



Collier with her husband, Joseph Raney.

financially and emotionally. She openly confesses that the acknowledgement, interest, and respect she receives when presenting herself as “Clarissa Collier, an attorney at Holland & Hart” is remarkably different from the condescending reaction she encountered when introducing herself as “Clarissa Collier, the housekeeper.”

Not one to tolerate such a disparity in treatment, she has turned the negative into a positive, using her disdain for injustice to fuel her pro bono efforts. Last year, she handled a pro bono case for Cowboy Up, a nonprofit organization that operates and produces rodeos in Kiowa, Colorado. Through her expertise, the case was settled on favorable terms, saving the organization from imminent bankruptcy. In another heart-wrenching pro bono case, she advised an indigent single-parent father of four who had been diagnosed with stage four cancer. Because his wife was estranged and a fugitive from the law, Collier mobilized a team of Holland & Hart attorneys to help him obtain a decree to invalidate the marriage and appoint guardians to care for his children. The client passed away in January, and Collier reflects that “he was just as much of a blessing to me as I was to him. It was absolutely beautiful to see the love he had for his four boys, and it reminded me of why I do what I do.”

Collier encourages the legal community to take a stand and show that all people deserve to be treated with the same level of dignity, regardless of their origins and current socioeconomic status. Attorneys have the power and the potential to give pro bono clients a voice and access to justice. “As attorneys, we have such an amazing platform for action,” she said. “We have access to resources, automatically have respect, and, for some reason, people listen to us.” In these uncertain times when civility and generosity appear to be losing ground, she hopes that attorneys will change the public’s perceptions of the legal community by using their platform to effect positive change in as many lives as possible. “Every case is a win whether we win or lose as long as we show people that we genuinely care.”

Over the Rainbow

Though the coffee that had fueled our candid conversation had vanished, Collier had one more parting anecdote to share: She is



Collier (second from left) and her brother, Will, at the 2016 Ray of Hope Cancer Foundation Wine Tasting and Auction.

an aficionada of *The Wizard of Oz*. I found this spontaneous disclosure of her favorite film uniquely telling. Though Collier's journey has involved a path more circuitous than the yellow brick road, she has made her way over the rainbow—out of poverty and into a bubble from which she is able to make the legal system available to those who need it most. She thanks her husband—her biggest

fan and best friend of 13 years—her family, her closest friends, and her colleagues at Holland & Hart for their unwavering support. In view of Clarissa Collier's achievements and indomitable work ethic, the CBA could not envision a more deserving recipient of its Gary McPherson Outstanding Young Lawyer of the Year Award. ■



Collier (bottom row, far left) with the 2016 Holland & Hart Make A Wish Colorado Kickball Team for which she has served as captain for the past four years.