

Bar Talk

PEOPLE AND PRACTICES

Unconventional path to bench

A Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton partner in San Diego is ending her career with a conventional benchmark: a judgeship. But Laura Taylor's path has been anything but straightforward.

During her decades-long stint at Sheppard, Taylor was an associate, a part-time associate, a partner, a special counsel and, finally, a partner again before her recent appointment to a bankruptcy judgeship in the Southern District of California.

Taylor started at Sheppard's L.A. office as an associate in 1983, and moved to the San Diego office when it opened a few years later with her future husband, who was also a Sheppard associate at the time.

She took maternity leave and came back part time for two years, after which the firm generally asks lawyers to return to a full-time position. But, around that time, Taylor's child developed late-onset autism, which created a serious barrier to being a full-time working mom.

"The firm had every right to tell me, 'We need you back full time — that's the deal,'" Taylor said.

But, aware of her family situation, the firm agreed to let her stay on as a part-time associate.

When the time arrived for her to come up for partnership in the early '90s, she accepted that they might not offer it to her, because she hadn't been full-time since she was a third-year associate.

"Instead, they asked me when I wanted to be put up for partnership and what hours I wanted to work as a partner," she said. "I would have had nothing negative to say if they hadn't afforded me those opportunities, because it wasn't the market. It wasn't normal." It helped that she had client support, which allowed her to build up a strong bankruptcy practice despite working part time.

Shortly after making partner, Taylor had a second child, and decided to take time off from practice. She resigned from the partnership, spent time with her children and founded the San Diego Volunteer Lawyer Program's Special Education Project.

In 1998, she came back to the firm as a special counsel, and began the arduous

work of rebuilding a practice. She reconnected with clients, and made new contacts with other firm clients.

"There was a lot of legwork involved," Taylor said. "But I am a people person, so I viewed it as an opportunity, not drudgery."

In 2003, she walked into the managing partner's office and announced her desire to become a partner again. And, after she came up with a business plan, the partnership accepted her back.

Eventually, Taylor became managing partner of the San Diego office, and this year, she was offered the bankruptcy judgeship, subject to an FBI background investigation that is currently in process. If all goes according to plan, in 2008 Taylor will join the judicial ranks that already include her husband, Timothy Taylor, a San Diego County Superior Court judge.

"I can't think of a better way to end a legal career," she said. "I think if I had not been at a firm like Sheppard, I wouldn't have a legal career at all."

— Kellie Schmitt