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Dallas' Jerry Clements is one of the few women leading a top 100 law firm

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Jerry Clements exudes a welcoming confidence as she ushers me into the executive conference room of Locke Lord Bissell & Liddell LLP in downtown Dallas.

She's been running the show at Locke Lord since spearheading the merger of Texas-based Locke Liddell & Sapp with century-old, Chicago-based Lord Bissell & Brook. The complicated deal, which included 10 domestic offices and one in London, was completed last October, with the firm's nerve center in the Chase Tower.



KYE R. LEE/DMN

The *National Law Journal* says Jerry Clements, executive director of Locke Lord Bissell & Liddell LLP, ranks among the most influential women in U.S. law.

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"There are days when I wake up and wonder if I am dreaming," says the 54-year-old Ms. Clements, who keeps offices in Dallas and Austin but travels constantly to the other posts. Colleagues, friends and even courtroom competitors say there's no delusion. She's the real deal.

"She's amazing," says Carl Leonard, director of the Hildebrandt Institute in California, who coaches law firm execs across the country and counts her as one of only four women at the helm of a top 100 law firm. "She's so high-energy. The one thing I counsel her on is that this sometimes gets her in trouble because people around her can't keep up with her."

What does Ms. Clements think is her key to success?

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She plays nice, but with a competitive edge.

"It's always a challenge for any woman in a high-level management position to walk that fine line between being considered bitchy and being considered tough in a good way," Ms. Clements says. "Along the way, I've tried to be somebody who communicated well with people and kept in touch ... not only with our lawyers, but with our staff."

Ms. Clements is a consensus builder. Ironically, the toughest sticking point in the merger was the name.

She wanted to keep it clean and simple: Locke Lord.

But the Chicagoans felt if Locke got first billing, they deserved two names. Then the folks in Houston felt Liddell was being slighted.

Happily, she says, the issue with name is becoming moot.

"Most people call us Locke Lord," she says. "Frankly, no one can remember all of it on a good day. And after a glass of wine, forget about it."

World ambition

Now that the team is in place, Ms. Clements is intent on extending the firm's global reach.

"We've got international clients," she says. "We've got to meet their needs. Every partner here understands this."

It was Ms. Clements' plans that drew former White House counsel Harriet Miers back to for Locke Lord following her ill-fated Supreme Court justice nomination.

"Jerry shared with me the plan for the combination, and I thought it was a very constructive step," says Ms. Miers, who now splits her litigation practice between Dallas and Washington, D.C.

Ms. Clements, a Fort Worth native, is a female version of a metrosexual: a former Miss Majorette of Texas, an avid 16-handicap golfer and a masterful blackjack player. She's equally happy bowling (with a respectable 148 average) or getting pampered at the spa; she's an aficionado of California reds who loves Coors Light. Stilton blue for dessert is her idea of a slice of heaven.

She somehow manages family, work and friendship.

In 1995, she married another lawyer, Mark Clements, who is retired from his own law firm.

He and his four children (now grown) proposed en masse at the Outback Steak House in Addison.

"I get there and he's there with all the kids, and he asks, 'Will you marry us?' "

Ms. Clements has a special group of five girlfriends who spend long weekends celebrating significant birthdays together at such locations as Las Vegas, Napa Valley and Cabo San Lucas.

For Ms. Clements' 50th, they went to New York, where one outing was a predawn, subzero trek to Rockefeller Plaza. They presented her with a baton, held up silly signs and ordered her to start twirling

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for the *Today* show cameras. She readily obliged.

"There's nothing shy about us," says Susan Soussan, a mediator and former judge in Houston. "Everyone's a lawyer, and we're all super busy. But absolutely nothing stands in the way of our weekends."

Explaining 'Jerry'

You might say homemaker Billye and traveling salesman Gene Thornton were prescient when they named their younger of two daughters Jerry Kay.

"I've spent my whole life explaining why I'm not a guy," says Ms. Clements, adding that her mom's best friend was Geraldine, a.k.a. Gerry. "I'm not sure how that was translated to Jerry, but thankfully they thought better than to name me Geraldine."

In 1981, she showed up for her first day on the job at Rain Harrell Emery Young & Doke (which later merged with Locke) without going through a personal interview.

The partner who came out to retrieve her in the lobby was nonplussed to see that Jerry with a "J" was a woman.

But gender was of no consequence to the legendary Morris Harrell, her mentor.

"He took up for me when his clients asked if he was sure that he wanted a woman on the trial team," Ms. Clements says.

Eager to get in the courtroom, she volunteered for cases nobody wanted – including defending a taxicab client in its never-ending stream of strange personal injury suits.

"You don't start out with Exxon vs. Pennzoil," she shrugs.

Ms. Clements credits her first career – as a special ed teacher in Arlington public schools – with helping her win over juries in the courtroom.

"Being a schoolteacher taught me how to break down complex issues in a way that people who weren't familiar with the concepts could understand them," she said.

After four years of the emotionally draining work, though, she took the LSAT and enrolled at Baylor University School of Law.

Her most personally rewarding case (also one that no one wanted) involved a major defense company client.

An employee had been stripped of his top secret security clearance after admitting in a security update that he was a recovering alcoholic attending Alcoholic Anonymous meetings. Oddly, the government hadn't deemed him a security threat when he was a drunk.

For two days, Ms. Clements faced down a high-powered U.S. attorney brought from Washington by the Department of Defense.

"I did overkill and acted like this is was the biggest case in the history of the country," she says. "For this guy and me, it was."

The judge wrote a 30-page opinion raking the government over the coals.

"I'm going to sound corny, but I remember thinking, 'I can actually make a difference. I can do something that's meaningful,' " she says.

Friendly competitor Dick Sayles of the Dallas firm Sayles Werbner has known Ms. Clements for more than a decade and calls her "dynamic and an obvious leader."

"If I were in that firm, I would have a difficult time deciding whether I wanted to deploy her as a trial lawyer ... or deploy her as a managing partner running the business of the law firm," he says.

The chair

As chair (there's specifically no gender attached to her title) of Locke Lord, Ms. Clements is undoubtedly one of the highest-paid attorneys in town, but she's not saying.

Those knowledgeable about such things estimate her salary at \$1 million or more, saying that her job is rife with headaches and that no one of her caliber would do it for less.

"It's not for the faint of heart," Ms. Clements admits. "Look, most of these folks are brilliant, and it's a challenge to keep everybody happy. Sometimes it just takes understanding human nature."

One of the most revealing stories Ms. Clements tells about herself is why she took up golf.

In 1995, she was picked as Locke's representative of the Business Counsel Inc., a national referral network of attorneys.

"I learned at my first meeting in La Costa that this was a total guy-golf thing," she recalls.

Because she didn't play, she was relegated to "a lovely weekend shopping with the wives of the other lawyers."

That was in May.

Upon her return to Texas, Ms. Clements spent nearly every evening of June, July and September sweltering at a Plano driving range.

"More than half of my swings would be total whiffs," she says. "My hands would be bloodied, and I'd hardly be able to move the next day."

By the next meeting in Cape Cod in October, she traded in her shopping totes for a Callaway golf bag.

Playing golf has enabled her to bond with the big corporate boys and netted her \$15 million in new business for the firm.

"I particularly tell our women, if you want to stand out in the world of business development, learn to play golf and be reasonably good at it," she says. "Clients assume that if you play golf well, you must be a pretty good lawyer. It's a strange thing."

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Fate and a girl's yellow rose for JFK

12:00 AM CDT on Sunday, September 7, 2008

Cheryl Hall

Nov. 22, 1963, was both the best *and* worst day of Jerry Kay Clements' life.

Her mother let her skip school to see President Kennedy, who was to appear in public after a fundraising breakfast in Fort Worth.

As they left their house, her mother cut a yellow rose from the garden, figuring the fourth-grader could present it to Mr. Kennedy if she got to speak to him.

Tall for her age and not the least bit reserved, the 9-year-old left her mom in the back of the crowd and worked her way to the front.

"Nobody seemed to mind because it was a school day, and I was about the only kid there," she says.

After his five-minute speech about the importance of Fort Worth and General Dynamics, Mr. Kennedy walked the line of the crowd, doing a double-take when he got to Jerry Kay.

The president asked her name, why she was there and what she wanted to be when she grew up, she says.

" 'I think I'd like to be president of the United States,' " Ms. Clements says she responded. "He didn't laugh or say, 'Silly girl.' He said, 'You should be whatever you'd like to be.' "

She remembered the rose and presented it to him. He slipped it into his lapel, thanked her and shook her hand again.

"I was ecstatic. I ran back to my mom yelling, 'He took my rose. I talked to him.' "

Her mom took Jerry Kay into school and explained her truancy.

Instead of punishment, the principal put Jerry Kay on the P.A. system to tell her triumphant tale.

Within 30 minutes, her joy turned to sorrow.

"Later in the coverage, we were listening to the radio, I think it was WBAP, and we actually heard a reporter say that the president died with a yellow rose in his pocket," she says, though she has no further evidence to substantiate what she feels is true. "I just always knew that was my yellow rose."

Cheryl Hall

When she was 9, Jerry Kay Clements (to the right of the police officer) waited to see President Kennedy in Fort Worth. He stopped and took a yellow rose from her. Hours later, he was dead.

