

SPECIAL SECTION: **WOMEN IN BUSINESS & LAW**

MCC INTERVIEW: M. Melissa Glassman / McGuireWoods LLP

Finding a Way to Make It All Work

A law firm leader and litigator looks back on her long career

Not every woman starts law school shortly after she starts a family. And of those who do, not all of them decide to go to work at a large firm as a litigator – and somehow survive to tell the tale. But M. Melissa Glassman is not every woman. And Glassman, now a deputy managing partner at McGuireWoods LLP, did a lot more than survive. But she insists she never aspired to be Superwoman. The interview has been edited for style and length.

MCC: *Let's go way back. What did you do after you graduated from college, before you decided to go to law school?*

Glassman: I graduated from the University of Texas in three years, and at the time I graduated, I had been admitted to law school. But frankly I was tired of school. If I had to do it all over again, I would've taken a full four years at UT, because it was so much fun. Anyway, I decided instead to go to Washington, D.C., and work for a congressman from Texas. It was a terrific experience. I think it's a great first job for anybody. You learn a lot about the government, and you're given a lot of authority early on. After I did that for a couple of years, I worked as a lobbyist for a company that manufactured pollution control devices. I did that until I got married and had my first child.

MCC: *You did all those things before law school?*

Glassman: Yes. I had two children, back to back, two boys. When they were two and three years old, I decided I probably needed to be with some grown-ups. My husband agreed with me, because I was going a little stir crazy. What I did, at that point, was apply to law school. My husband is also an attorney. I went to law school at night, and did that for four years. When I graduated, I started working for McGuireWoods.



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MCC: *Where did you think law school was going to take you? What were your aspirations as you started?*

Glassman: When I started law school, of course, I had the two young children. And I thought, "Maybe when I graduate, I'll go back and work on the Hill again, since I really enjoyed that experience. Do some type of public policy work, maybe work with the government." My husband, Jeremiah Glassman, at that time was the leader of the Civil Rights Section at the Department of Justice. That always seemed very interesting. While I didn't think I'd do civil rights, I thought, "Well, you know, the Department of Justice is a wonderful place to work." I really gave it no more thought than maybe the Hill, maybe the government, and frankly, didn't really think about big firm life at that time.

MCC: *At what point did litigation enter the picture for you?*

Glassman: I have a very vivid memory of when I decided that maybe I would go into big firm life. I was sitting in the library at the law school, and I heard two upperclassmen

talking, and saying, "Firm so-and-so is offering \$30,000 a year to brand-new associates." I remember just having this electrifying moment, going, "Wow, \$30,000 a year! If I could ever make \$30,000 a year, I'd be the happiest person in the world!" At that point, I thought maybe I'd start looking at big firms. It wasn't only a monetary decision. I think, at that point, I decided having one person in the government was more than enough. And I thought I might enjoy doing litigation.

MCC: *Was litigation something that you were thinking about at law school, in addition to just overhearing that conversation?*

Glassman: After you get through your core courses at law school, you start taking classes like trial advocacy and appellate advocacy. That's what really got me interested in it. I had some really good professors. They led me in the right direction, where my strengths lie.

MCC: *When I think of litigators, two things I think about right away are the time commitment and the travel commitment. Your children were still pretty young at the time you graduated from law school. Was that something that concerned you?*

Glassman: When I started at McGuireWoods, my children were in the first and second grades. If I'd have thought about it longer, I would've been worried. But, frankly, when you're young, you think you're invincible. You can do anything. I just knew that's what I wanted to do. I also have a very supportive husband. He was able to, in many instances,

pick up the slack, because I went from full-time, stay-at-home mother to a full-time litigator. With the help of a couple of good nannies, and a great husband, and a very supportive firm, we were all able to make it work. I should also say that I think my kids were very supportive, and proud, too.

MCC: Tell me about how things went at McGuireWoods, back when you started. You've been there for how many years now?

Glassman: It'll be 30 years in September, the day after Labor Day. I was a 32-year-old first-year associate, which, frankly, I think was a good thing, because it gave me a little bit more maturity, and it gave me a little bit more perspective on how important this opportunity was. I think the firm repaid me in kind with a lot of early responsibility, and recognized that I was a little bit different. Because I'd had a career before I went to law school, I got opportunities that I think were invaluable. I had early exposure to clients, and early exposure to interesting cases, and that's what really kept my interest in the firm and allowed me to succeed.

MCC: Were they unusual opportunities for a woman lawyer, 29 years ago?

Glassman: Probably, but we did have some very successful women at the firm at that time who were terrific role models. One woman in particular, Anne Whittemore, was a fantastic litigator, and she was very involved in firm management 30 years ago. Just watching her progress through her career, and all the things she'd done, I knew that there were opportunities for me and other women who were coming up with me. Anne was a great inspiration then and remains an outstanding lawyer and role model to this day. When I started, the class at McGuireWoods was about 45 associates, and my recollection is that at least a third of them were women. That was a pretty large class at that time.

MCC: Tell me about some of the challenges that you had to navigate in your early days. Everybody has some bumps along the way.

Glassman: Absolutely, absolutely, and for me, it was finding the balance. As I said, I went from being a full-time mother to a full-time litigation attorney. I never wanted to have any regrets that I wasn't the best mother that I could be. I remember going through the interview process, and I interviewed at a lot of big firms. I had one fella – not at our firm – who pointed to a picture of his family, saying, "You

see them?" I said, "Yeah. Beautiful family." And he said, "I never get to see 'em. That's my one regret." I thought to myself, "That is a horrible thing to say. God forbid I should ever say that."

I tell young people this story, and I say, "You never want to say that, because your first obligation, I believe, is to your family and to your kids." I was lucky, because I worked with people who understood that. I happened to work for two men when I first started out. Both of them, by the way, became judges. Great family men, great lawyers who seemed to find that balance.

We didn't have the technology back then. We didn't even use desktop computers until a long time after I was an attorney. You couldn't work from home, or be connected, but I made sure that I was at every baseball game. I was always a room mother, and I baked the cupcakes. Not because I was trying to be Superwoman, but because that made me happy. In those days, everybody used to come in on Saturday, because you didn't have the opportunity to work from home. We'd come in, and make up those hours, or do those tasks that you didn't do because you left at 3:00 to go to the baseball game. Nobody kept score about who's doing what. I always seemed to make my hours, and always seemed to show up at those important client events: depositions, trials, whatever. They gave me the flexibility I needed when my kids were young to make that work.

MCC: When that man at that unnamed law firm pointed to the picture of his family, did you think he was speaking about his own personal regrets, or did it also seem to you that he was telling you something about the firm that you chose not to go work for?

Glassman: You know, I've thought about that since then, and I think it was a combination of both. I think he had personal regrets, but he also wanted to say, "And you will, too, if you choose this life at this place."

MCC: It occurred to me that he may have been doing you a tremendous favor.

Glassman: Yeah. I'll tell you another interesting story, and again, this is in the interview process. I talked to one fellow at another well-known large Virginia law firm, and it's not my law firm. This fellow said to me, "Ugh, you're interested in *that* firm? They'll never make you a partner, not in a million years. You didn't go to UVA." I thought to myself, "Maybe, but I'll tell you what, I'm not coming to work for you if that's your attitude." Funny what people say to

you, 31 years ago, that you remember and that helped formulate your life choices.

MCC: Was the firm he was pointing to McGuireWoods?

Glassman: Well, he was saying that about McGuireWoods, but it wasn't true. I thought it was more telling of him, frankly.

MCC: Tell me about your accomplishments. Bring me through the milestones of what you've managed to achieve at the firm, what you're most proud of.

Glassman: I'm proud of being able to have early client contact, and to be able to do some marketing. I'm proud of my ability to do some business development, and the ability to generate one of our largest clients for the firm. Because of the opportunities I got early on, I had some management responsibilities that the firm gave me. I always tried to do my best, because I really wanted to be involved in management.

MCC: What were your early management responsibilities, specifically?

Glassman: My first was being on what we call the associate committee, and despite its name, there are no associates on the committee. It is a committee that's responsible for hiring associates, for setting compensation and making decisions about, or making recommendations to our board, as to who should become a non-equity partner. I served on the committee for a number of years, and the people I served with are now very involved in management. It gave me an opportunity to meet folks outside my office, outside my practice group, and to make strong bonds with partners that have continued to this day. Many of us are serving on other firm management committees.

I was the first woman to be an office managing partner. I was then selected to be a department chair for the commercial litigation department, which I really loved. I think, at that point, I was the first woman to be a litigation department chair. From there, they put me on the board of partners, and then also the executive committee for the firm.

We had a very important strategic plan in 2006, and the plan called for the development of what we called industry teams – cross-departmental teams of lawyers with experience in certain industries. The focus of these teams was to market, cross-sell, and develop new business from existing and new clients. They asked me to take that on, so I became deputy managing partner for the firm in charge of industry teams, reporting

directly to our managing partner. That's what I'm doing right now. I sit ex officio on the board, and also on the executive committee, along with the other deputies.

MCC: *Let's talk about the opportunities women had in the early years, and what changes have occurred since you first joined the firm.*

Glassman: In the early years, the way women thought that we had to be successful in the law was really to act like men. I laugh now, because I remember how we used to dress. I went out and bought myself five suits from Brooks Brothers that could've been men's suits, with the exception they came with a skirt instead of a pair of pants.

What's been nice, and what's evolved over the years, is a recognition by the women and the men in our firm that we have different strengths and bring different things to work with us and to the table, as far as going out and getting clients, and then representing clients. It's given women a lot of freedom to work to their strengths. I think women are great team builders. We have a lot of women team builders on our industry teams for that very reason. I think they're terrific collaborators.

We are a better firm when we have more women and have diversity, just because everybody has a unique viewpoint on things. When you collaborate with those viewpoints, it's a great thing to watch, and the clients are better served. I started the Women Lawyers Network. We started it 20 years ago. I looked around and said, "Gosh, you know, men go out and play golf together, and they can hunt." It's not that we weren't invited, but it wasn't really most of our cups of tea. Now, believe me, there are some great women golfers out there, and some great women hunters, but for somebody like me, that's not how I wanted to spend my time, and not a lot of clients want to do that either.

We decided it would be fun to have an all-women's event. It was a women's wine-tasting event. When we started that, we invited

women clients to the firm – and it wasn't just women's clients, it was our men's clients who happened to be women. I think maybe at that first event, we probably had 25 women there. But it was a lot of fun, and it immediately took hold. We've done it every year since. Now we have 200 people that show up, and it's become something that everybody looks forward to. It was done, strictly, at that point, for social reasons – a way to entertain our women clients.

We went from providing women social opportunities to be with clients to also providing training and mentoring about how to develop business, how to navigate the firm and how a law firm works. I think it's very important for anyone coming up, any young people, to really understand the business side of how a law firm works. One of the most valuable things that we offer through the leadership forum is the opportunity to say, "All right, these are why we make the decisions that we make. Here's how the firm financials work. Here's how you can understand our balance sheet. Here's what profits per partner means, here's what revenue per partner means." We do a series of these meetings with our senior folks on the non-law side.

Every time I listen to one of those presentations, even though I've been with the firm 30 years, and been involved in making a lot of those types of decisions, I learn something. I frankly think that those kinds of information sessions that we provide now to our women lawyers are just as important as the social opportunities, the networking opportunities and the business development opportunities.

M. Melissa Glassman is deputy managing partner for McGuireWoods' industry teams. She previously served as a member of the firm's executive committee and board of partners, and she is a former chairman of McGuireWoods' commercial litigation department and a former Tysons office managing partner. She focuses her practice on litigating complex commercial cases, including shareholder matters, lender/borrower relationships, energy, construction, commercial leasing, real estate, land use, zoning and general business disputes. She can be reached at mglassman@mcguirewoods.com.

MCC: *Was that your idea?*

Glassman: That was my idea.

MCC: *Have you been involved in the committee ever since?*

Glassman: Yes, but we have some wonderful up-and-coming women who've done a really great job expanding the program, and making it vibrant, and important and relevant to our new women and the challenges they face. I have definitely stayed involved, because I am a reminder that, "Look, I came here. I had two young children, and I was able to find a way. And we're going to help you find a way through the challenging times."

MCC: *Are there challenges and obstacles that remain, or have you won?*

Glassman: There are always challenges. There are always going to be challenges. I don't think they necessarily have to do with just being a woman. I think it's just because it's always going to be a balancing act between working very hard, and doing the right thing by your family. I think technologies have eased the burden, somewhat, and helped all of us do more critical work, if on an airplane, or at home or wherever we need to be. But it's always going to be a tug-of-war. When you're at home, you think you should be at work. When you're at work, you probably think you should be at home. It's just the way it is. We all recognize it's a challenge, and we all have to do our best to try to make it work for the firm and for the individuals.