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Leading ladies

Women-led law practice courts DeSoto growth

[Rob Robertson](#)

A casual glance at the [Austin Law Firm](#) might leave one with the distinct impression that this could be a reality television series waiting to happen.

Consider: A busy law firm in a bustling small Southern community filled entirely with women except for the patriarchal founder, William H. Austin Jr., a seventh-generation country lawyer known and respected by virtually everyone in the community.

Throw in the wrinkle that the firm's leading attorney, Mary Austin Monteith, is the founder's daughter and equally well-known and respected in her own right, with a feisty young son and a teenage daughter who aspires to be a movie star.

Finally there is the firm's third partner, Kelly Hagan Smith, another gifted attorney who, between closing real estate deals, handling personal injury cases and helping families with adoptions, is the proud mother of three daughters of her own -- including new twins.

It could work, except that it's doubtful a television crew could keep up with the leading characters. Monteith and Smith spend the bulk of their time closing commercial and residential real estate deals in one of the fastest-growing communities in the country.

Since 1995, more than 19,000 new homes have been built in DeSoto County, which is still growing at a rate of about seven families a day, according to county officials. Many -- if not most -- of those real estate deals have been closed by the three-attorney firm.

"If we're not the front runner (in real estate closings) we're probably as close to it as anybody else," says Smith, who joined the firm after finishing law school at Ole Miss six years ago. "For the most part, we've been very busy real estate-wise since I've been here."

Monteith, also an Ole Miss law school graduate, has been at the firm since 1985.

"This is my first and only job," she says. "My father has been the best teacher I ever had. It's been an honor and a privilege to work with him."

Austin founded the firm in 1977. While growing his practice, he has been intimately involved in helping chart his county's explosive growth.

Austin served 18 years as the attorney for the county's Board of Supervisors, including a stint as president of the DeSoto Economic Council. Now semi-retired from his legal practice, he is currently the executive director of the DeSoto County Regional Utility Authority.

Smith says simply being in the right place at the right time is not the primary reason the firm has remained successful.

"We handle a lot of related matters to the real estate work, including wills and estate planning," she says. "For a lot

of these new families moving into our county, we're their first contact with an attorney. We never take that for granted; we realize that if their experience with us is a good one, when they need something else, they'll come back to us."

It also helps that returning clients continue to see familiar faces. Turnover at the Austin Law Firm is very low, Monteith says, and contributes to the close-knit, family atmosphere that makes it a comfortable place for clients and employees.

The firm's all-female makeup also has advantages, and not just because the bulk of the firm's construction and commercial clients are men. The office is decorated with flowers that make it more like a home than an office. The kitchen is clean and easily accessible to clients and employees, and the working environment is professional, but decidedly informal.

"Most of the time it is extremely pleasant," Monteith says. "In a lot of ways we're just like sisters, and we have smooth sailing 99.9% time. We're all together too much to not get along."

Until 2001 the firm had two offices -- and two men. But when Austin went into semi-retirement, the partners in the Hernando office -- both male -- struck out on their own and took the Hernando office with them. Now the firm operates strictly from Southaven.

"We're very much like a family," Smith says. "With that said, we may sometimes fight like family, too -- but it's still family. We spend as much time with each other as we do our spouses, so we must get along. Mary is a best friend to me as much as she is my boss."

Monteith says the firm is currently looking for a new attorney, and she would not hesitate to hire a man provided that he knew ahead of time just what he would be getting himself into (besides a highly successful legal practice).

"We have an opening so we may have a guy in here at some point," she says, smiling. "I would try to warn him ahead of time, though; he may have trouble finding anyone around here to talk about the World Series with."

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