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By: Robert Lee Long, Community Editor

Nearly all the legal eagles are ladies at Austin Law Firm

SOUTHAVEN – At the top of the high-powered world of DeSoto County real estate law stands an almost all-female firm.

Technically, there's a male at the top. Bill Austin, the senior member of the Austin Law Firm, is semi-retired but stops in every now and then to check how his daughter Mary Austin Monteith and her all-female staff are doing.

“It's turned out to be a little bit of a social oddity, but it just so happened that way,” he said of the 10 women employed at the firm in various capacities, ranging from the three lead attorneys to a team of paralegals and assistants. “We get these builders in there in their blue jeans and muddy boots, and I think they are a bit mesmerized when they walk in.”

There are a lot of them, too. Mississippi Valley Title insurance company said Austin Law Firm is one of the highest volume law firms in the entire Southeast.

“It's daddy and all the girls in his harm,” jokes Monteith, who came to work for her father in 1985 after finishing law school. Monteith, Shannon H. Williams and Kelly Hagan Smith are the tree principals in the law firm. Legal assistants include Candace Corder, Martha Huggins, Teresa Alexander, Christa Casey, and Deanna Bicknell.

Monteith said builders who depend upon Monteith, Williams and Smith and their team of legal assistants even have a standing invitation to help themselves to the law firm's refrigerator.

In addition to assisting in the closing of real estate deals, legal assistant Mary Huggins makes birthday cakes for all the ladies and treats for clients.

Yet, it's the professionalism of the staff that brings them in the door, said Monteith, “It all goes back to the quality of our work,” Monteith said. “If the work wasn't good, now matter how cute and happy we are, we would not get the clients.”

Monteith said she has only had one client who said he would rather be represented by a man.

“He eventually closed here with a woman attorney,” she said. “I've had a lot of calls from men who say they want to be represented by a woman.”

In the same breath, Austin said female clients flock to her firm as well.

“We can all relate to working, raising children and the everyday stresses that mothers and fathers have,” said Monteith, who has two children of her own.

Still, the perception that the law profession is an all-male domain is hard to change.

“I’ve walked in many a closing and they’ve asked me when the lawyer was going to get there,” Monteith said. “Then I ask them what a lawyer is supposed to look like. Do I need a three-piece suite and a cigar?” she asked tongue-in-cheek. “Women have to walk a fine line, not giving up their femininity while being assertive.”

Kelly Hagan Smith also grew up as the daughter of an attorney, William Hagan of Hernando. Her daughter Meghan, 5, is following in her mother’s footsteps. “She has been to the courtroom before and she enjoyed it.”

It was actually Monteith’s father, Bill Austin who hired Smith. “When we thought Mary needed some additional support, it just so happened that the best person that we could find turned out to be female (Smith),” Austin said.

“We felt fortunate to see those lawyer genes continue,” Austin said with a chuckle.

Monteith said her team goes the extra mile to be understanding for her clients. “We have some people going through custody battles and they come in here nervous and upset. But they walk in and they feel like they are in our living room. I hope it makes them feel at ease. I know that when my builders come in for their closings, they go straight to the kitchen. There’s some kind of nesting going on.”

Teresa Tedford has worked for the Austin Law Firm for the past 25 years. She began working for Bill Austin right out of high school and has stayed with the firm all these years.

“I was 17 years old and needed a job,” Tedford said. “I stayed here because I really liked what I do.”