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Holly Hempel

Litigator of the Month

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Holly Hempel

TAKING UP *the Torch*

By Jan Jaben-Eilon

The most challenging situation that attorney Holly Hempel ever faced in her career was speaking at the funeral of her mentor, Sara S. Turnipseed. “It was tough,” she recalls, “but not for lack of words.”

Indeed, since Turnipseed, senior partner at Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough LLP and the only woman then on the firm’s Atlanta executive committee, died in November 2013, there have been no lack of accolades awarded to Turnipseed.

“As one of Georgia’s best known and most successful litigation attorneys, Sara could have easily sat back and concentrated on her own practice,” said James K. Lehman, managing partner of Nelson Mullins. “But, remembering the obstacles she overcame as a female attorney, she continued as a consistent and effective advocate for other women lawyers and all female staff.”

Hempel, a partner at Nelson Mullins who succeeded Turnipseed as leader of Turnipseed’s Atlanta litigation team, took a creative approach to the eulogy. “I asked all the women in the firm to give one word to describe Sara. There were so many great words,” she recalls.

Hempel is sensitive to the pictures that words portray. The team had been named the Turnipseed team, until its leader died. It was renamed the Hempel team, until Hempel herself suggested the more generic name of the national litigation management team.

At 41, Hempel handles Georgia litigation and also practices and nationally manages civil litigation throughout the country. She

represents U.S. corporations, and foreign companies with U.S. operations, in wrongful death and personal injury cases involving accommodation and travel-related liability as well as premises and products liability.

The travel-related liability cases usually involve adventure travel, such as a cruise involving adventure excursions, in which Hempel represents the tour operator or organizer. Premises liability cases typically involve third party criminal activity on property, such as a hotel, owned or operated by Hempel’s clients. Hempel’s product

lied.” The reform is a key issue in many of Hempel’s Georgia cases.

Hempel grew up north of Pittsburgh, attended college in New Jersey and graduated from Wake Forest University School of Law. She has practiced law since 1999 and joined Nelson Mullins in 2001. “The practice has been what I expected,” she says, having worked summer jobs in criminal prosecution in Maryland and in the civil division of the U.S. Attorneys Office in Georgia. “These gave me an inside peek at the types of legal issues I would be handling, especially the premises cases involving third party crime,” she reflects.

Turnipseed had groomed Hempel to take over leadership of the Atlanta-based national litigation team which includes five female and two male attorneys. “She helped promote me and provided me with many opportunities. She was always there for me. I would not be here without her. She was someone who could help people develop their skills.”

“When Sara passed away, I was nervous about her team because Sara was a force of nature and a great leader and mentor for this group,” says Michael Hollingsworth, managing partner of the Atlanta office. “I should not have been worried. Holly and the other team members rolled up their sleeves, reached out to clients to assure them that the transition would be seamless and kept forging ahead. They have even expanded their client base and team members in the last 16 months. Sara would be very proud of Holly and the rest of the team.”

In the past couple of years, the team has made transitions and added an attorney who focuses on commercial and regional

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liability cases vary, involving defense of international manufacturers of heavy equipment and U.S. defendants who once used asbestos or asbestos-containing products in their products or on their premises. Rarely is just one defendant sued in her cases, which means “we must cooperate with co-counsel. “I try to work with my client. My goal is to get to the bottom line as quickly as I can. The best case scenario is to win a dispositive motion before a case goes to trial. This takes pressure off the client. We win a lot of cases on summary judgment.”

In Georgia, apportionment of fault law has changed since 2005 when there was tort reform in Georgia, Hempel notes. “Many cases have gone to the court of appeals and Georgia Supreme Court to help determine what the reformed law is and how it is ap-

financial litigation, but part of the team has a very niche mass tort practice. “I like the idea of building what we have and also diversifying more. I want to add to the team, and we have a first year female associate starting in the fall,” she says. “Sara would be proud and happy with our team’s current status and progress.”

The Atlanta office, with close to 120 attorneys, is one of Nelson Mullins’ 15 offices around the country, including a new New York City office. Recently, legal directory publisher Chambers and Partners recognized Nelson Mullins in its national category for the firm’s product liability and mass torts litigation. The firm, launched in 1897, has more than 40 diversified practice areas.

Although there have been some changes in the litigation team since Hempel took over her leadership role, “the collaborative nature has stayed the same. We are friends. We have kept up the culture of acceptance and support for each other.” As partner Melinda Moseley on the team states, “Although each member has a specific focus, we share a lot of information to try to keep everyone up to speed on latest developments in cases, with the clients, in the relevant law and there is also a personal element – we know each other, families, hobbies.”

Lee Ann Anand, another female partner on the team, echoes this, “I think the best thing about our team is that it is collaborative versus competitive internally.” Hempel and the team note, “Sara never had a strict separation between work and personal life. We’ve kept that up. I think that’s important.” Speaking of the attorneys in the national

litigation management team, she notes, “We work seamlessly together and with clients.”

As a former chair of the firm’s women’s affinity group, Hempel recently won the first Sara Turnipseed Woman on the Go Award, which she says was “another tear jerker.” Hempel has repeatedly been named Rising Star by Georgia Super Lawyers, and among the Top Women Attorneys in Georgia as a Super Lawyers Rising Star. She’s also a recipient of the Kerry Harike Joedecke Atlanta Young Lawyer of the Year Award.

Hempel is also the former president of the Atlanta Council of Younger Lawyers and a former member of the Atlanta Bar Association executive board and the Atlanta Volunteer Legal Foundation board of directors.

Married with two dogs, Hempel says she thrives on working with talented, driven and motivated clients and attorneys. “I’m competitive, so winning is important, but being creative and developing strategies with clients and thinking outside the box is also a joy,” she says. “It keeps it interesting. There’s never a dull moment.” Outside of work, Hempel is creative; she enjoys interior design, made her own wedding cake and has artwork published. She laughs and admits, “it isn’t that good – I recently saw one of the prints on sale online...”

When people ask her how she balances her life and work, she says she pictures the scales of justice. “I don’t think a life/work balance really exists. I think doing whatever it takes to make you happy is what counts.” She points to the idea of working long hours for a few days to enable her to take a long weekend, as an example.

Reflecting about Turnipseed’s choice of Hempel as her successor, Hempel notes, “I always feel like I’m up for a challenge.” No kidding. Hempel hasn’t ridden on a bicycle for years, yet in a few months, she has agreed to participate with her husband and friends on a charity bicycle ride from London to Paris. The route is 400 kilometers and will take three days. (She doesn’t yet know how they plan to cross the channel between the two countries.)

Hempel acknowledges that she must have a certain sense of confidence to take on such a challenge. But she is more focused on the great memories the adventure will afford her, the beautiful scenery and the fact that it ends with a feast in Versailles.

Having studied abroad for a year during college, Hempel is familiar with England and France, “but I have never ridden a bike there. I thrive on these challenges. I put myself out there doing things that people might see as being on the edge or just plain crazy.”

“Sara always told us that whatever we did, it would be okay. I think of that often,” Hempel recalls. “I never take on something that I don’t think I could do. The concept of failure is terrifying to me.”

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