

MARCH 2015

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Natalie Spears

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Intellect, Optimism
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A portrait of Natalie Spears, a woman with long brown hair and blue eyes, smiling. She is wearing a grey blazer over a black top and a gold necklace with a cross pendant. Her hands are clasped in front of her.

Natalie Spears

Her Fun, Energized Approach to Life Yields Winning Ideas in Court

by Jack Silverstein

There's no such thing as work-life balance. Well, says Natalie J. Spears, not exactly.

"That's a myth," says Spears of **Dentons**. "Everything is imbalanced in everybody's life all the time. But in order to have the most satisfaction and be in the happiest place for yourself, you have to do what gives you energy and weed things out of your life that don't."

Spears, 44, is a litigator who has won cases for the Chicago Cubs, Chicago Tribune, Sears Holdings Corporation and the St. Louis Rams. She is a partner and head of her firm's global Technology, Media and Telecommunications sector.

She has been president of the Chicago Bar Foundation, president of the Chicago Inn of Court, a co-chair of the Leadership Council of the National Immigrant Justice Center, a board member for the national governing committee of the ABA Forum on Communications Law and a board member for the Black Ensemble Theater. And she is a married mother of two boys.

"When you're trying to get close to balance in an imbalanced world, whether you're a man or a woman, you really have to think about what made you the happiest during the last week or month, and do more of that and less of the things that drained your energy," she says.

"That's what I try to do. It's not about carving out the time. It's about spending time on things that actually energize you."

Reaction Time

There's a reason third base is called the hot corner.

While shortstop is the more ballyhooed position, baseball players at third base have arguably the more difficult job. There's a challenge of reflex: Someone at third lines up only about 90 feet from home plate, and a baseball can fly off a bat at more than 100 miles per hour. A line drive arrives at third about one second after the pitcher releases the ball.

Batted balls may not have reached

that speed during girls softball games at Glenbard North High School in Carol Stream, but as Spears learned, they still arrived quickly.

“I liked playing third because the balls are hit the hardest there, and the throw to first is the farthest,” says Spears, who played the sport at the varsity level in high school. “I like to be where the action is. I think that’s why I chose to be a litigator.”

Spears took an interest in the practice of law as a teen. She possessed what she calls a “romantic notion” of the profession: It was noble and revered, and it enabled its practitioners to help others and do good.

It could also be heroic. Transactional work never entered her equation. She wanted, she says, “to be in the spotlight arguing cases, leading a team, solving the problem, saving the day.”

With no lawyers in her family, Spears’ first model for the profession was public defender Joyce Davenport, the character portrayed by Veronica Hamel on the NBC drama *Hill Street Blues*.

Spears was a bit young for the show — it debuted in January 1981, one month after she turned 10, and was off the air before she finished high school. Still, she remembers watching Hamel and thinking, “She’s cool.”

After graduating in 1992 from the University of Iowa with a degree in business, Spears attended the University of Michigan Law School, earning her J.D. in 1995.

“I had sort of a work-hard-play-hard mentality,” Spears says. She was a straight-A student at Iowa who was also “extremely social.”

“I thoroughly enjoyed college,” she says. “I wasn’t just holed up in a corner working hard. I was enjoying the experience.”

The hard work, of course, is vital to that experience. It’s difficult to enjoy yourself when you’re failing. That emphasis on diligence and work ethic was even more important at Michigan.

“At that level, everybody is smart,” she says. “Rolling up your sleeves and actually doing the work, no matter how smart you are, is super important.”

Hard work has paid off for Spears. After clerking a year for then-Chief Judge Michael Melloy of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Iowa, she joined the firm of Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal LLP in the fall of 1996.

She impressed firm leaders with her intelligence, tenacity and social abilities.

“She was confident,” says partner James A. Klenk, who met Spears when she was a first-year associate. “She was personality plus. And she had great sensitivity about what was going on in the room — whether it’s a courtroom, a conference room or a social gathering.”



Spears and other board members cut the ribbon for Black Ensemble Theater’s grand opening.



Interviewing Ron Bell, general counsel of Yahoo!, at a Dentons summit in Silicon Valley in 2013.

Klenk is one of many people who appreciates Spears’ personality and sense of humor. Colleagues describe her as someone who can tell jokes and laugh at herself. It’s more than just yucks.

“For women, I think humor is a great equalizer and a great defuser,” Spears says. “You need sometimes to have a little tougher skin when you are different in some way. I think for me — and I’ve seen it work for other people — having a sense of humor and being able to use that in your arsenal of weapons is helpful.”

Karen Flax, deputy counsel at Tribune Publishing Company, met Spears when the two were at Sonnenschein.

“Natalie is the total package,” Flax says. “She’s got the intellect, the social skills. She would anticipate what you needed before you knew you needed it.”

Defending Media-Related Matters

Spears spends a large portion of her practice defending media companies, such as ensuring the public’s knowledge of the jury on Gov. Rod Blagojevich’s trial or obtaining summary judgment for Tribune Company in a trademark suit regarding the Chicago Tribune’s headline “The Joy of Six” following the Chicago Bulls’ sixth NBA championship in 1998.

In October, Spears successfully defended Redbox Automated Retail LLC in the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals against an alleged class action claim that Redbox violated the Video Privacy Protection Act, 18 U.S.C. § 2710, by disclosing customer information to its customer service vendor.

Along with Tribune, Spears has current litigation with other media entities such as NBC Universal, Dow Jones & Company

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and AMC Networks. As outside counsel for the newspaper, she has lots of opportunities to show off the reaction time she employed at third base.

“Natalie is my primary outside lawyer for newsroom work,” Flax says. “We have a reporter who was served with a subpoena, we want access to a courtroom, there’s an anonymous jury and we think it’s appropriate for the jury to be public — Natalie goes in for me.”

These cases are often time-sensitive. After all, if a reporter gets locked out of a courtroom, a scoop can quickly vanish.

“Sometimes I’ll need her literally in five minutes,” Flax says. “Someone will call me and say ‘The judge has closed the courtroom. I’m standing outside. What should I do?’ I’ll call her and say, ‘Natalie, you need to go to court right now.’”

Her staff — who Flax says Spears has trained “the right way” — has fast reflexes too.

“If I call her and her assistant answers, she’ll say, ‘Is this urgent? Do I need to find her right now?’” Flax says. “If a reporter is standing on the outside of a courtroom, the answer is ‘yes.’ And she will find her. And Natalie will call me right back.”

Robyn Alexander, general counsel of the real estate portfolio at Sears, also values communication with Spears. Alexander has her on speed dial.

She first noticed the breadth of Spears’ talents following the Sears-Kmart merger in the fall of 2004, when Spears organized a “volume” of real estate matters.

“When I say ‘volume,’ there was an unending stack of matters to deal with,” Alexander says. “And Natalie, even though she’s a litigator, a lot of our matters had pre-litigation components. So Natalie dug in with us and quickly became a trusted adviser.”

Kevin Demoff, executive vice president of football operations and chief operating officer of the St. Louis Rams, worked with Spears last year when she was part of the team that helped the Rams win stadium arbitration.

“When you watch her work, there’s a comfort level while you still respect the ability of her intellect and the power of it,” Demoff says.

“You get this warmth that helps bring you in, but there’s still this intellectual tenacity that impresses you. She grabs your attention, she brings you in, she makes you feel close, and then she impresses you with her ability to deliver once you’re captivated.”

The Winning Idea

Andrea Zopp remembers the first time she realized Spears had game.

Zopp, CEO of the Chicago Urban League, has crossed paths with Spears on a number of occasions. They are fellow board

members at Black Ensemble Theater, and Zopp is one of Spears’ former clients from her days as general counsel at Sears.

They first met in 1997, when Zopp lateraled to Sonnenschein as a partner.

Shortly after Zopp’s arrival, she had a large corporate client that was facing a class action. Zopp asked Spears to do an assessment of the law around the suit’s claims to help the client understand its potential exposure.

“She did it very quickly,” Zopp says. “A lot of times you do that with an associate and you get a 30-page compendium on every case, every ruling, on a particular area of law. It’s hard for new lawyers to narrow in on what the real issues are on the case, and Natalie gave me a concise, well-put together and accurate summary. For someone who was at the time a very young associate, it was impressive.”

What Zopp learned that day is something many others have since seen in Spears: She understands how to simplify the complex and find, as she calls it, the winning idea.

“Whether you’re trying the case in front of a jury or a judge, it doesn’t matter,” Spears says, comparing her approach to an elevator pitch. “Trials go on for weeks, briefs go on for pages. But if you don’t have that central theme down, I think it’s very difficult to win.”

One of Klenk’s favorite examples of Spears identifying the winning idea came during their representation of Salton Inc., a company that sold, among other items, the Juiceman Juicer. In 1999, the product’s longtime pitchman and his wife, Jay and Linda Kordich, sued Salton’s, claiming that the company withheld royalties and violated their trademark rights.

Among Spears’ responsibilities at the arbitration was to cross-examine Linda Kordich who, Klenk says, had made several contradictory statements under oath.

“The theme of the case was that they were not telling the truth,” Klenk says.

To make this point, Spears repeated each of Linda Kordich’s statements, wrote

each one on a sheet of paper and, over the course of a half an hour, taped the sheets to the wall.

“This is in the most polite way,” Klenk says. “And after the fifth or sixth time, Mrs. Kordich said, ‘Please don’t put me on the wall again.’ Natalie knew then that she should stop, because she had made her point — very dramatically. It was very good.”

In 2003, Spears and Klenk successfully defended the Chicago Cubs against charges of ticket scalping. The team was selling tickets to a ticket broker owned by Tribune Company — the then-owners of the Cubs. A lawsuit claimed that this action violated the Illinois Ticket Scalping Act.

There were two winning ideas in that trial. The first, Spears says, was proving that the Cubs and the ticket broker — Wrigley Field Premium Ticket Services — were separate companies meaning that the deal did not violate ticket scalping laws, a fact about which Cook County Circuit

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Delivering a luncheon speech on access to justice issues at the Chicago Bar Foundation in 2012.



Spears at the 2014 Black Ensemble Theater “Soul of a Powerful Woman” Fundraiser Performance.

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Judge Sophia Hall was unequivocal in her ruling. The second was that Cubs fans were actually benefiting from the resold tickets because those tickets drove down prices on other resold tickets.

But perhaps the best example of Spears' talent in simplifying complex ideas was when she, Klenk and two others represented the St. Louis Rams in the team's stadium arbitration. This time, she drew from children's literature.

The crux of the matter was the Rams' stadium lease with St. Louis' Regional Convention and Visitors Center ("The CVC"). It called for the stadium to be in the NFL's "top tier" by 2015, meaning among the league's best eight stadiums. The case was complicated. Among other tasks, the attorneys had to establish a measuring system for comparing facilities.

As Spears and Klenk discussed the case, she realized the CVC was including the space beneath the dome's high ceiling as part of its square footage to claim that the dome had more usable space than it actually had.

"That's Peter Pan and Tinker Bell space," Spears joked with her colleagues, as if only people who could fly could use that space. Everyone laughed, but they soon realized Spears had identified an effective device for both visualization and comprehension.

"So we used it," Spears says. "It had the added advantage of implying that it was a fairytale, or false or fake."

Spears and Klenk used the phrase during trial, realizing that it added humor to the proceedings while also "drilling right to the heart of it," Spears says.

The arbitrators liked it too, siding with the Rams and the team's proposal of a \$734 million stadium improvement and granting attorney fees.

"In sum, it is difficult to envision that the Rams could have obtained better representation for the arbitration," the arbitrators wrote.

The idea of "Peter Pan Space" didn't win the case alone. Spears and Klenk presented a litany of arguments that proved the Rams' case. Still, none stuck with arbitrators like the reference to the famous characters.

"You didn't have to show all the numbers," Spears says. "Once you call it 'Tinker Bell space' or 'Peter Pan space,' we didn't have to explain it again."

Make It Fun

Peter Pan was a man of extremes — he refused to grow up. Natalie Spears is a woman of pragmatism — she knows the importance of maintaining a child's delight.

"Try to have fun," Spears says. "That's a big motto I would say, too. To be a lawyer at the highest levels of the profession where you have your own clients and you are leading

big teams and you are jousting with the likes of the intellects on the Seventh Circuit and the courts of appeals across this country, you really have to understand people. If you don't have a high EQ as well as IQ and the work ethic, you top off at a certain point."

In the 2000s, Spears' parents introduced her to an arts institution near her home: the Black Ensemble Theater in Uptown. She saw "The Jackie Wilson Show" and was immediately taken by the theater's spark and verve. Her friendship with Zopp led her to its founder, Jackie Taylor, and to the theater's board in 2009.

"Upon that first meeting, I knew I wanted her on the board at the Black Ensemble Theater," Taylor says of Spears, who will soon take over as board chair. "She was absolutely dynamic."

Evidence of Spears' talents, Taylor says, were "her energy, her commitment, her dedication, her knowledge of the corporate world, her strength, her sassiness. She's not afraid of anybody or anything, and she will fight to the death if she believes in it."

Spears has been instrumental in assisting the organization with civil legal matters as well as fundraising efforts that have, among other things, helped build the \$20 million Black Ensemble Theater Cultural Center that opened in 2011 at 4450 N. Clark Street.

Like the Tribune's Flax, Taylor has seen Spears take control of situations without being told.

In October at the theater's national gala at the downtown Hilton, Spears arrived about an hour before guests and immediately noticed that some of the tables included seats with a poor stage view.

"She immediately went in and said, 'No, you must change it, and you must change it now,'" Taylor says. "She just came in, saw it and took care of it."

Over at the Chicago Bar Foundation, Spears was president of its board of directors from 2012 to 2013 and has been a member since 2005. Her work focused on the CBF's mission to support access to justice.

"At the time, she was younger than a lot of people we see in those roles," said Robert Graves, executive director of the CBF. "But she didn't come off that way at all. She just had that natural presence."

Graves recalls a meeting in the spring of 2007 in which the CBF was in "the formative stages of what has become our annual Investing in Justice Campaign," Graves says. Since its inception, the campaign has raised and distributed more than \$10 million in grants.

Involved in those initial efforts were Kimball Anderson, Tina Tchen, Steve Patton, Tony Valukas, Bill Von Hoene and Dan Webb.

"That was a pretty good group to have in the room," Graves says. "But they identified

Natalie as someone to engage in the effort."

Spears gets "a huge rush" from being involved in community activities. She credits her husband Thomas Pace — a writer, musician and stay-at-home dad — for helping her succeed.

"Without his support at home," she says, "I would definitely fall off the proverbial wire."

Make It Happen

When Spears arrived at Sonnenschein, her softball talents once again took center stage.

The firm had a team, and at her first game, she was nervous — though not about her skills on the diamond. The game represented her first extended interaction with partners and older associates. Her opposition figured her issue was the former.

"Hit it to center field!" they shouted, singling out Spears as one of the few women on the Sonnenschein team and the one playing the most important position between them. Two players hit to center. Spears caught both balls.

"Don't hit it to center!" the opposition began shouting. The game and the sudden change in attitude that day were fun, Spears says.

Being underestimated because of her gender is an experience that reveals itself far too often in litigation. While she lauds Dentons for supporting her and other women, its opposing counsel often assumes women will not perform to the standard of men, she says.

"I think being underestimated because of gender happens more often than people would think," she says.

Success for Spears is influenced by her own winning idea: "Make it happen." She also has advice for younger women pursuing legal careers.

"Don't leave your personality at the door," she says. "Walk right in with it."

That means being yourself and trusting the trajectory of your path.

"If you're a little quirky, be quirky," she says. "If you're funny, inject humor. If you love sports, talk sports. If you are true to who you are and what energizes you in life, you'll be more persuasive and successful."

On the subject of fictional female lawyers — such as Joyce Davenport on *Hill Street Blues* — Spears is disappointed that Hollywood rarely if ever delivers movies with strong female lawyers as stars.

Her favorite fictional lawyer is Daniel Kaffé, Tom Cruise's character in *A Few Good Men*. She enjoys the famous "You can't handle the truth!" scene, not because of Jack Nicholson's fireworks but for the moment Kaffé decides to proceed with his line of questioning leading to Nicholson's famous line of dialogue.

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SPEARS

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“I thought it was well played,” Spears says. “A lot of times when you’re doing a cross-examination you don’t want to ask one question too many.”

You also, she says, don’t want to ask a question you don’t know the answer to. “But it’s very tempting sometimes,” she says.

Her favorite “legal” character is Marge Gunderson, the police chief in *Fargo* played by Frances McDormand. Though not a lawyer, Marge “uses her intellect, wit and doggedness to solve the crime.”

While the dearth of heroic fictional female attorneys disappoints Spears, she does not need to look to the silver screen for her heroines. Her great-grandmother, Nancy Ambrosino, arrived in Chicago with her husband at age 18. She raised four daughters as a single mother and a seamstress during the Depression after her husband died.

Ambrosino was more than a mythic ancestor for Spears. She lived to be 100, dying when Spears was 20.

“She and each of her daughters — my grandmother and her sisters — were forces of nature: strong, independent, demanding, funny and irreverent,” she says. “Some of that grit rubbed off on me and my two sisters.”

Joseph Andrew has seen it. Andrew, Denton’s global chair, led a team in October 2012 from what was then SNR Dentons to Paris to meet with senior partners at Salans LLP. Andrew hoped to persuade the firm to join SNR Dentons and become a global power.

“We know you are a great law firm today,” a partner said to Andrew. “But how can you convince me you will be a great law firm a decade from now?”

“I would like you to have lunch with Natalie Spears,” Andrew said. “That’s my answer.”

The partner looked at Andrew, confused. Andrew calmly restated that the Salans team should meet Spears.

“The senior partner came back and said, ‘You were right. I am convinced,’” Andrew says. “All she did was tell them about herself and tell them about the firm, and in doing so I think she convinced this senior partner that this was a great firm, because anyone who had a partner like Natalie Spears was going to be great in the future.”

The firms merged in 2013, turning the world’s 178th largest firm (SNR Dentons) into the 8th largest. And Dentons is not done growing, according to January 2015 reports that it and Beijing’s Dacheng Law Office agreed to form the world’s largest law firm, nearly half again the size of Baker & McKenzie.

The future of Dentons and Natalie Spears looks great, indeed. ■