





the FIVE-TOOL PLAYER

Inspired by an injustice, bored by the CIA,
business litigator Michelle J. Correll keeps moving

BY JESSICA OGILVIE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DUSTIN SNIPES

MICHELLE J. CORRELL REMEMBERS THE DAY HER FATHER came home from court after his final divorce hearing. She was 16.

"He sat down," she says. "And he was in tears."

Correll, an only child, had been living with her parents in Lake Jackson, Texas, a small town south of Houston, since she was small. Her father had wanted to leave her mother, whom Correll describes as "verbally abusive, psychologically abusive and physically abusive." But after consulting with attorneys, he feared that Correll's mother would receive sole custody, as was often the case in Texas, so her father waited to pursue the divorce until Correll was old enough to decide for herself where to live.

Per state law, the split of assets was expected to be 50-50. Instead, that day, after a year of legal wrangling, the judge told him the split would be 90-10. He would be the 10.

It felt like a body blow to him; it felt like something else to Correll.

"I was like, 'Well then, we just have to appeal!'" says Correll, now 38, perched on a swivel chair behind her massive oak desk. But her father couldn't go on with the case. "I just can't afford to continue to fight," she remembers him saying.

An all-state oboist, Correll had toyed with the idea of either going to Juilliard to pursue a professional career in music or becoming a lawyer. At that moment, her choice was cemented in her mind.

"I remember thinking, 'Whoever can afford to fight the longest, that's who ultimately wins,'" she says. "I felt it was important to become a lawyer so I could protect myself and my family."

MICHELLE J. CORRELL

- CO-FOUNDER, SMITH CORRELL
- BUSINESS LITIGATION,
ESTATE & TRUST LITIGATION
- SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
RISING STARS: 2013-2015;
UP-AND-COMING 100: 2015



Correll, 19, with her father, upon his retirement from Dow Chemical. His divorce from her mother—and the injustice therein—first led Correll to consider the law.

Correll stands no more than 5-foot-3. With thick black hair and delicate features, she could easily be mistaken for an actress. Striding into the expansive, modernist waiting room of her solo firm, where she practices business litigation and estate and trust litigation, she exudes strength and certainty. Her office is as purposeful as her gait. A large painting hangs on the wall in her direct eyeline, and a neatly curated bookcase sits next to her desk. The only flairs of whimsy on display are three bobbleheads placed in a careful row facing visitors: two are Supreme Court justices—Antonin Scalia and Anthony Kennedy—and the third, wearing a Bluetooth earpiece, is “Better Call Saul” Goodman from *Breaking Bad*.

“I just love Saul,” says Correll. “He’s just such a terrible, evil lawyer. [My fiancé] got that one for me. He’s like, ‘You’ve got to have a sense of humor about the law practice.’”

Correll started out at Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan, then went to Latham & Watkins. “Michelle was very successful in big firms,” says Mark L. Smith, a former operations partner at Hickey Smith, who has worked with Correll on multiple cases. “She could have stayed in big firms her entire career.” Instead, at age 34, she made another big decision and hung a shingle.

“It was scary,” she says, “But it got me back to why I got into this business in the first place.”

GROWING UP WITH A CHINESE MOTHER

and an American father in a small town dominated by the chemical industry, she was one of only a handful of non-white kids in her elementary school. She guesses there was just one black student and she was the only Asian student in her entire grade.

While her father held down a steady job as an engineer, her mother became abusive when Michelle was 5. “I got the crap beaten out of me every day growing up,” she says matter-of-factly. “I thought the woman was going to kill me.”

To escape, Correll turned her focus to school and extracurricular activities. Along with playing the oboe, she did gymnastics, always with an eye toward leaving town.

She did. Rice University is an hour from Lake Jackson, but it provided the emotional distance she needed. At first, Correll considered liberal arts but got vetoed. “My dad’s viewpoint was, ‘If I’m paying for college, I want you to have something marketable so you can go out and get a job,’” she says.

Correll went her father’s route—engineering—and enjoyed the challenge. But as classes became more technical, Correll began to question her choice. “I’m good at math, but gosh, the whole thing about circuits,” she says. “To this day, I still don’t know how I managed to get through that.”

Wondering what to do after graduation, she found the answer while ambling

around a career fair. “The CIA had a booth set up,” she says. “I thought, if I’m going to test this engineering degree, the CIA sounds like an interesting place to do it.”

Correll worked in the organization’s Directorate of Science and Technology, which is responsible for developing gadgets for operatives. Correll can’t reveal her job title, nor anything about the gadgets, but she admits, “The role of the directorate is like Q from James Bond.” She knows it sounds sexy, but she found the job to be little more than seat-filling and decided to keep moving. In her downtime, Correll studied for the LSAT, and got accepted to Georgetown University Law Center. Near graduation, she was wooed by Quinn Emanuel, a firm that appealed to her, she says, because of its litigation focus and its laid-back attitude.

“It was young associates who were casually dressed. They said, ‘Hey, at our firm we think to be a good lawyer you don’t have to wear a suit,’” she says. “They prided themselves on giving young associates trial experience.”

Christopher Tayback, a partner at Quinn Emanuel, was among Correll’s first mentors. “Michelle is exactly the kind of lawyer we hope to attract,” he says. “She’s very self-motivated and willing to take on new cases. When you’re a new lawyer, I think it’s easy to be intimidated by subject matter you don’t know. Michelle not only had enthusiasm but an appetite for jumping in.”

Correll was given small cases to work on, including a series for IBM. The company was involved in contractual disputes surrounding the improvement of several school districts’ technology systems. “Michelle was responsible for several of those cases from soup to nuts,” says Tayback. “I supervised her with minimal oversight. ... All of them settled.”

Then her undergraduate degree came back to haunt her. Recognizing the earning potential of patent litigation, the firm aggressively recruited young associates with technical backgrounds, and sussed out which existing associates had similar backgrounds. Correll, the engineering major, found herself working patent cases. “I just adore Quinn Emanuel as a firm,” she says. “The only reason I left was because they were putting an emphasis on the

patent litigation area, and I felt that if I didn't participate it would hurt my chances of making partner. I was afraid I was getting pigeonholed in the patent area."

So she went to Latham & Watkins, a global firm that does everything from antitrust to white-collar criminal defense. It also has a robust pro bono program. A memorable client there, she says, was a Chinese man seeking asylum in the U.S. Falsely accused by the Chinese government of being part of the Falun Gong, a spiritual mind-body discipline perceived as a threat by the nation's Communist Party, he was facing persecution. "In China, once they believe something about you, it doesn't have to be legit," says Correll. "There's no due process there. If he ended up in prison, he would have been screwed."

Terrified, he fled the country, leaving behind his wife and young son, and paid smugglers to sail him across the Pacific. When his ship neared shore, he was given the following instructions: "You see those lights over there? That's where you're going. Start swimming."

By the time he neared shore, the INS was waiting. "They had so much lead time," says Correll. "There's people swimming from a ship."

Correll worked tirelessly on the case, meeting with her client regularly and reviewing his documents. "Every time I would meet with him, he would cry and talk about his son and his wife," she says. "He was so desperate to get asylum here so he could apply to bring them over." By the time she left Latham & Watkins, she believed he had a good case and deserved asylum.

But taking calls and emails throughout the night had been putting a strain on her relationship with her boyfriend, now fiancé. Wanting to find a balance between doing what she loved and being with the person she loved, she took a job at a trust and estate boutique in Westwood for a year and began to develop a plan. "I kept encountering people who were solo practitioners," she says. "Then I realized, 'Hey, these people are making a living. Why can't I?'"

Within the year—on April 1, 2011, just one month shy of her 34th birthday—she opened the Law Offices of Michelle J. Correll.

"Absolutely scary," she says. "I had a mortgage, and it was premised on a certain income level. It wasn't like if you're renting and you can downsize and get a studio."

Soon, though, Correll landed her first client. Holly Hodson was a graphic designer who built a website for a Santa Monica gym. When a payment dispute occurred over the site, she took down the website and was sued for several claims including copyright infringement, trademark infringement and cybersquatting.

"I was an emotional wreck," says Hodson. "But Michelle took control of the situation, and started explaining all my options to me in a very methodical manner. I never felt like I didn't understand what was going on with my case." Ultimately, the gym pulled their copyright claim and the matter settled out of court.

As she worked to get her solo practice off the ground, Correll also did contract work for other attorneys behind-the-scenes. Her first client who paid her on an hourly basis came from Mark Smith, who was looking to put co-counsel on a case involving three defendants. Smith remembers meeting Correll for the first time at lunch in Brentwood.

"My first impression of her was that she was really smart," says Smith. "But the reason I now pick Michelle for anything is that—I'm going to use a baseball analogy here—she's a five-tool player. She's great in court, a great researcher, one of the best writers I've met. She's good with opposing counsel and good with clients. She can do it all."

The first case for which Smith hired Correll, he says, involved "very delicate privilege issues and very contentious litigation." Except, he adds, "We had an opposing counsel who likes to yell and scream and bluster and make baseless threats," he says. "She didn't shrink from it at all. She doesn't instigate it, doesn't create it, but doesn't run from her duty to stand firm against people who are trying to bully her or her client."

Her business thrived. One of Correll's proudest moments came, she says, when she represented an architect who had been stiffed by the same gym in Hodson's case. She took the case at a hugely cut rate, and,

because she was mindful of her client's tight budget, she couldn't prepare the case the way she would have liked.

"When I showed up at day one of trial," she says, "as the other parties were giving their opening statements, I was preparing my opening statement. I wasn't able to depose the key witnesses before the trial—hearing what my client did in their eyes—I was hearing it for the first time at trial. I was showing up and going, 'Let's see how this goes.'"

The judge ruled in favor of her client.

"I had history with this gym," she says. "I wanted to beat them."

CORRELL IS STILL ON THE MOVE. This spring, she and Smith opened up a firm together, Smith Correll, with a focus on business litigation. "I am also going to continue to grow the trusts and estates practice," she says.

Her relationship with her mother is completely severed, but her father is doing well. After the divorce, he met a woman Correll describes as "the love of his life," but five years ago, she passed away from breast cancer. That loss was hard on him, says Correll, but, "He's volunteering as a docent, and dating." She sees him regularly.

Correll's original impetus for becoming a lawyer—helping those who can't afford representation—is something about which she still feels strongly.

"I figured out over the years that it doesn't always matter how good you are or how right you are on the law," she says, noting that so many factors can affect the outcome of a case. "Sometimes judges do what they want to do. [With my dad], I thought maybe the lawyer didn't do everything she could. I don't think that anymore. Sometimes, being right isn't enough. Sometimes you have to be lucky." 