

## BUILDING A BUSINESS:

# From Big(ger) Law to a Boutique

The Houston legal market is filled with “Big Law,” or perhaps more appropriately for this article, “Bigger Law”—firms that taut multiple offices, hundreds of lawyers and staff, and multiple practice areas. These larger firms have their place in Houston, but sometimes lawyers leave to form smaller boutique firms with a more precise practice focus.

Houston is filled with entrepreneurial lawyers eager to build something from the ground up. Even a brief survey reveals dozens of these boutique firms, many born out of “Bigger Law.” Gibbs & Bruns can be traced to Vinson & Elkins.<sup>1</sup> The founders of Shipley, Snell & Montgomery came from Baker Botts.<sup>2</sup> McDowell Hetherington’s roots link back to Bracewell.<sup>3</sup> Hicks Thomas’ founders tie back to Andrews & Kurth (now Hunton Andrews Kurth).<sup>4</sup>

Entrepreneurialism brings both challenges and rewards. The founding partners of two law firms shared their experiences of leaving larger firms to start their own. One is in its relative infancy, having been founded just eight months ago, as of the time of the interview. The other just celebrated its eighth anniversary. These interviews were edited and condensed for brevity and clarity.

### Vasquez Waite

Vasquez Waite (“VW”) was founded in 2024 by Cara Vasquez and Mark Waite, who both left DLA Piper (“DLA”) to form their own trial boutique focused on commercial litigation. The change was stark,



Mark Waite & Cara Vasquez

going from a multinational, full-service firm with more than 4,500 lawyers globally<sup>5</sup> to a single Houston office with five employees (and a dream of growth!). Cara and Mark shared their experiences.

*How long were you with DLA? Did you consider lateraling and what made you start VW?*

**Cara:** I was with DLA for about 12 years, starting as an intern. I thought of DLA as my forever firm. Mark and I worked a lot together at DLA. We made a great team and worked well together. At some point, Mark and I started thinking about a future after DLA. Lateraling to another firm was not it. I did not want to take on another firm’s culture. We wanted to be business owners. We wanted our own brand.

**Mark:** I have practiced law in almost every way a lawyer can. I started my career at a small firm decades ago, with great trial experience through the years, went in-house, and then had another career starting in 2017 at DLA. There was always a nagging desire to have my own shop one day—but only if the timing and circumstances were ever right. The time was finally right.

As great as it would have been to join friends in another small, established firm, there is the risk of having to merge into that culture. Cara and I talked about start-

ing a firm together. Cara, her husband, my wife, and I sat down, and all four of us were on board. It is our joint creation. That is meaningful.

*What was the most difficult part about leaving DLA and what was the easiest?*

**Cara:** The hardest was the comfort. I had a regular paycheck, a known target for billable hours, and plenty of work. If I needed something overnight, DLA has abundant resources. With a new venture, you do not have that initially.

The easiest part is that there are no more “Sunday scaries.” I have not had this type of joy in my practice in a long time. We get to develop our practice, focus on the types of clients we want to serve, and build a business every day.

**Mark:** The hardest is that I was in the early stages of leadership at DLA where I had roles with varied groups of people, committees, etc. Leaving was resetting the decks and giving that up. The good news is that Cara and I are co-chairs of all our committees.

The easiest part is that folks—clients and friends that I have known for years—are picking up the phone more often. Clients have called with more matters and with major matters, too—the work is there. Big Law is an incredible fit for many matters. There are a lot of matters better suited for a smaller firm with more flexible rates.

*How would you describe the culture at VW and how do you maintain it?*

**Cara:** We are still building it, but it is focused on clients, family, and fun. We want to be a respected firm that does not necessarily do it in a traditional way. The fact that my name is first is not traditional. Our logo is not traditional, our website is not traditional.

We place a lot of emphasis on people. We are focused on knowing our team and clients as whole people. We hired our first associate a few months ago, and we are excited to help her grow as a lawyer and part of the firm. This is not just a job. We want buy-in.

**Mark:** You can practice law with a lousy attitude and probably make great money. I do not want to do it that way. We want to bring like-minded people together to build and maintain the culture, and let the success follow. We want to be around people—people who are fun, smart, just good people—and give them opportunities to grow.

*What is most rewarding about VW?*

**Cara:** Freedom. For example, every new matter that comes in, I can ask “is this work I am excited about?” We decide. We get to make our day look however we want it to look for clients we want to represent.

**Mark:** The flexibility to partner with clients on a broader range of matters. There is nothing more fun than high-fiving Cara when new matters come in or when we get a great result for a client.

**Cara:** Mark really runs in my office and high-fives me.

*What are some of the most unexpected aspects of VW?*

**Cara:** The number of administrative issues, especially in the beginning. We were building furniture, creating signature blocks, dealing with IT. I expected some of that, but the ramp up period was intense. Thank goodness our administrative team was guiding us through the toughest parts.

**Mark:** Our first outing was going to an office supply store. We were giddy like thirteen-year-olds at a Taylor Swift concert, getting excited about buying office supplies. Who knew? This has been so much fun. On the other hand, one day we ran out of printer paper before a deposition, and I had to walk blocks in the summer heat in my full suit to buy more. That never happens in Big Law. That was not joyous.

*What advice would you give to someone thinking about starting their own firm?*

**Cara:** Perfect timing does not exist. The biggest reservation I had about leaving DLA was partnership. I was fairly certain

I would make it the year I left. If I left before, what would people think? “She couldn’t hack it?” “Did she leave because she didn’t make partner?” What would clients think? My good friend, client, and confidant convinced me that I was already doing partner-level work, to bet on myself, and that this was a bold and good move.

Also, office supplies are *really* expensive.

**Mark:** Cara and I often disagree, but we usually end up in the same place—that is true about timing, too. My advice is wait until the moment is right. You have to earn your bona fides to open a firm. Wait until you have the ability to generate your own business. If I did not have the interactions and experience in my career, I would not be getting the opportunities I have now.

When you are joining a firm, you do not necessarily get to choose who you work with. But when you are starting your own firm, you do. Picking who

you practice with is a rare thing in your career. My choice in Cara is someone who doesn’t always agree with me, who has many characteristics I don’t, but we clicked from the beginning. I’m thrilled to have her as a partner as we build this adventure together.

**Cara:** As we all know, Mark is great too, and I have way more hair than him.



Pam Hicks



Scott Davis



Forrest Wynn

### Hicks Davis Wynn

In 2016, Pam Hicks, Scott Davis, and Forrest Wynn formed their litigation boutique, Hicks Davis Wynn (“HDW”), after leaving Beirne Maynard Parsons (“BMP”), which was then the largest litigation-only Texas law firm. At its peak, BMP had more than 120 lawyers across Houston, Dallas, San Antonio,

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and Austin. HDW recently celebrated its eighth anniversary and has grown from the original three lawyers to 12. Pam, Scott, and Forrest shared their insight about the adventure of starting your own firm.

#### *How long were you at BMP? What made you start HDW?*

**Pam:** I started as a summer associate in 1997. We started HDW because we wanted to provide clients with the flexibility of a smaller and more dynamic firm. We also wanted the entrepreneurial opportunity. BMP started out of Fulbright and Jaworski as a specialized trial firm. We wanted to do something similar.

**Scott:** I was there for nine years. I started right after graduating law school. HDW started with talks with Pam about rumored changes at BMP. We talked about options and the conversation led to starting a firm. We both thought Forrest was a great fit to join us, and he was on board. I liked the idea of starting something from the ground up.

**Forrest:** I started at BMP in 2002. We decided to start HDW where we had a longer future and more control over the work we were doing. I wanted more autonomy with my cases and clients.

#### *What was the most difficult part about leaving BMP? The easiest?*

**Pam:** BMP had a structure in place. I did not have to make sure everyone was billing their time or expenses were paid. That was hard to leave. I'm involved with things like our lease, banking, or insurance that I wouldn't handle if I was at BMP. The most difficult part was not seeing the people I saw every day for 18 years. I missed that.

The easiest—or most fun—part was calling the clients to let them know that at our new firm, we had an even greater commitment to their success.

**Scott:** The most difficult is recruiting and hiring the right people. Fit is important, as is culture. We have been fortunate that we have found so many great people who have fit well. Hiring has been the most

challenging and most rewarding part.

The easiest part is the flexibility to make decisions quickly without the bureaucracy of a larger firm. We are more efficient at decision-making.

**Forrest:** The most difficult part was the resources. BMP had useful resources. We were surrounded by lots of talent. When we started HDW, we had to put together our own physical materials, like binders. And I could not just walk into someone's office to pick their brain.

The easiest part was the work. That did not change; in fact, it was easier. I felt more motivated. It forced me to work all aspects of the case because we did not have the BMP resources.

#### *How important is culture at HDW?*

##### *How would you describe it and how do you maintain it?*

**Pam:** We all have really different styles and approaches, but we bounce ideas off each other and work from each other's strengths. We emphasize this with our young lawyers and lead by example. Lawyers should not be strategizing on a case alone. They should talk to other lawyers to develop ideas. We emphasize working in office to keep that connection with each other and keep developing. We think it is a benefit to our clients to have that interaction.

**Scott:** Culture is extremely important. It sounds cliché, but it is about teamwork and helping others out. We try to really focus on selflessness, service, and lifting up those around you. When helping others is your priority, you will be successful as a lawyer.

**Forrest:** We focus on a lot of collaboration and mentoring. We want a good experience for young associates. It is a goal that we always keep. It is not as easy as people like to say it is, but we will not compromise on pursuing it.

#### *What is most rewarding about HDW?*

**Pam:** I have really liked seeing the next generation of lawyers that we are practicing with and developing. They are part of our team and people we can rely on.

**Scott:** The freedom and ability to steer the firm in the direction we want with culture and staying client-focused. We get to take the work we want to take and do not have to be so revenue-focused.

**Forrest:** The most rewarding part is we are involved in all aspects of the firm, whether it's resolving cases, hiring, or working on the office lease. There is a level of satisfaction and reward that comes with this level of involvement.

#### *What advice would you give to someone thinking about starting their own firm?*

**Pam:** Make a very detailed plan. Stick with your plan but be ready to pivot if it is not working. To be good in this business, you have to love what you do. Also, you want to have good partners.

**Scott:** Make sure you have a business plan. If you have the client relationships and can maintain the same level of service for your clients, do not be afraid to make the leap. Fear of the leap is the biggest hurdle. Bet on yourself and partners that you are starting your firm with. I will bet on Pam and Forrest all day.

**Forrest:** Make sure you know exactly what it is you want to do as a firm. Be certain you and your partners share that belief and that it is clear what that agreement is. You are all taking a gamble, so ensure you are on the same page. You cannot say "we'll figure this out next year." You have to say, "This is how we're doing this today and tomorrow." It will not always be perfect, but you cannot succeed if you do not start on the same page. If there was a single strength of our firm, it is trust among the partners. We really trust and rely on our partnership to cover our weaknesses.


#### *What advice would you give to your 2016 self?*

**Pam:** What motivates me is not necessarily what motivates other people. If I want people to be their best, I need to understand what motivates them.

**Scott:** It is all going to be good, do not stress so much and do not be so scared of making the leap. I wish I knew how



much fun this was going to be. It is more fun than I could have imagined, working every day with your close friends, both our coworkers and our clients.

**Forrest:** I wouldn't change a thing. I would probably just tell myself to stick with it, keep your head down, and keep going. Sometimes I think it would have been easier if we had more resources, but I am always much happier when I come out on the other side. 



*Dave Louie is lead counsel with Lyon-dellBasell, a global pet-rochemical company, and an editorial board member for The Houston Lawyer.*

#### Endnotes

1. <https://www.gibbsbruns.com/people/rgibbs/>
2. <https://www.law.com/texaslawyer/almID/900005446572/>
3. <https://mhllp.com/attorney/thomas-f-a-hetherington/>
4. <https://www.hicks-thomas.com/recent-news/1997/may/andrews-kurth-losing-10/>
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