



Fall 2005

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Recommended Citation

Jones, Rae (2005) "In law and in life, Martha Henderson sticks to the plan," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol14/iss3/8>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Alumni Profile

In law and in life, Martha Henderson sticks to the plan

For Martha Smith Henderson '83, life after graduation from Illinois Wesleyan has in many ways turned out just as she had planned it. But that doesn't mean that her many accomplishments have come easily.

A wife, a mother, and a partner with an esteemed Los Angeles law firm, Henderson is also one of few African-American women among the elite group of California State Bar certified workers' compensation specialists. And, in the last year, she has added "published novelist" to her list of achievements.

"Every job that brings with it a level of responsibility involves challenges," she says.

A Webb, Miss., native, transplanted to California by way of Peoria, Ill., Henderson says she knew by the time she was in sixth grade that she wanted to be an attorney. As a member of the debate team in middle school and later in high school, Henderson says, "I enjoyed researching issues and analyzing arguments." She was also good at winning those arguments. The oldest of six children, Henderson confesses she has always had a "take charge" personality. "My sister says they don't even question when I say, 'Just do it.' That's what happens."

While still in high school, Henderson says she had her entire curriculum plan for obtaining a three-year bachelor's degree mapped out before entering Illinois Wesleyan. She successfully completed her plan with a degree in political science, graduating with honors. "Studying at Illinois Wesleyan really prepared me academically for entrance into law school and, later, into the field of law," says Henderson. "I found that the curriculum inspired and motivated me to reach my highest potential, and upon leaving Wesleyan I felt really ready to go out into the world and make my way."

After she married her high school sweetheart, Roosevelt, in 1983, the couple decided to move to California so that he could pursue an acting career. Henderson attended the National University School of Law in San Diego while working several part-time jobs. "We survived eating bologna and salami sandwiches on paper plates," she recalls.

Presented the American Jurisprudence Award for earning the highest class grades, Henderson received her law degree at National University after clerking with an environmental protection agency and a private attorney. She passed the grueling California State Bar examination on her first try. A move to Los Angeles netted her a job with an insurance defense firm, which provided her first on-the-job exposure to workers' compensation issues.

When her son Bryce turned 1 year old, Henderson opened her own firm in Mission Hills, Calif. Smoothly combining her roles as mother and lawyer, she recalls, "We had dinner, play time, a change of



clothes, and everything else he needed” in the office. “He grew up there.” Now 11 years old, Bryce is accustomed to his busy mothers’ schedule.

While continuing to run her firm, Henderson decided to serve as regional counsel for Superior National Insurance Company, just as Roosevelt was switching careers to become a firefighter/paramedic for the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

“I wanted to do something different,” she says, “so when I had an opportunity to go in-house with one of the largest insurance carriers in the state, I took it. That position provided me firsthand knowledge of the inner workings of a large insurance company. And, since their primary focus was workers’ compensation, it provided an opportunity for me to continue in what had become my specialty.”

The selling of Superior National provided opportunities for Henderson to branch out. Heavily recruited, she decided to join what is now the law offices of Martin & Martin, LLP. As managing attorney there since 2000, she trains and oversees staff attorneys in the firm’s workers’ compensation department. She is also involved in hiring and in marketing the firm’s services. This fall, she was made a partner in the firm.

“Early on we recognized that, as one of few women, and even fewer African-American women, Martha is a pioneer in the area of workers’ compensation,” remarks Areva Martin, managing partner at Martin & Martin. “In her five short years she has positioned herself as a leader in the field and we are extremely happy that she is part of our team.”

Not something taught in law school, workers’ compensation is considered an ever-changing specialty area that requires constantly meeting extensive experience, education, and training criteria. “The full day exam for becoming a certified specialist was like taking the bar exam all over again,” says Henderson.

As a certified expert in the field, she is now a sought-after speaker on the newest trends in workers’ compensation law and related topics. In addition to her professional challenges, Henderson is also involved in mentoring and developing sports camps for disadvantaged children. And she is now a budding novelist. Her first book — *God with a small ‘g’* — will be released this fall by Trafford Publishing. The novel depicts a woman who seems to have everything — a beautiful home and successful career — but who is devastated when she finds out her husband is leading a double life. “It was inspired by so many people who have elevated material possessions, desires, and power to godlike status while completely neglecting God in their lives,” says Henderson, who is already at work on her second book.

Even though her first novel took her two years to write, she approached the task the same way she has all the other challenges she has faced: with discipline and a clear plan for success. As she used to tell her younger siblings: “Just do it.” For Martha Henderson, that’s more than a slogan — it’s a way of life.

This profile was adapted from a feature story by Rae Jones that appeared in the *L.A. News Observer* and is used with permission of the *L.A. News Observer*.