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PERSON
OF THE
YEAR
2016



**Patricia
Brown
Holmes**

watches the watchmen

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A YEAR OF CHANGE, A YEAR OF CONSEQUENCE

With a new firm on Chicago's legal landscape and a role investigating a nationally followed police scandal, Patricia Brown Holmes is Chicago Lawyer's 2016 Person of the Year.

BY EMILY DONOVAN

Patricia Brown Holmes likes to point out a sketch hanging in the Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila break room.

It's a caricature of a photo of a selfie. In it, Holmes holds her phone in front of her and the other three named partners. All four look friendly, smiling, like they could be ready to laugh.

"She's just one of the world's best human beings you'll ever meet," Ronald S. Safer, one of the four in the caricature, said of her later. "She is kind and generous and funny — positive. You've talked to her, right?"

Holmes, the second black woman to serve as president of The Chicago Bar Association and a founding member of the Black Woman Lawyers' Association of Greater Chicago, is well-thought of throughout the legal community and South Side Chicago. She was a "firecracker" of a judge, according to new Cook County State's Attorney Kimberly M. Foxx; a tough but fair prosecutor, according to an old opponent; and a cancer survivor who sponsors scholarships for boys attending her husband's high school on the South Side.

Just in the first half of this year, Holmes wrapped up her presidency of the CBA, left her firm of 10 years along with 21 other partners to found their own and oversaw the sale of Burr Oak Cemetery, which she had rehabilitated following a grave-desecration scandal.

Then, in July, Holmes' name made national news. She was appointed special prosecutor to investigate whether Chicago police covered up for the officer who shot and killed teenager Laquan McDonald.

Cancer and cheer

Holmes was born in San Diego and grew up on the South Side of Chicago. She became the first in her family to complete college.

"I've always been fair," she said. "Growing up, if you wanted to cut something down the middle, I'm the person you want to cut it."

She took the LSAT on a dare. She had been planning to go to medical school but her friends at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign insisted she consider law school. She signed up for the test on one of the last days before the deadline and didn't take any preparation classes.

She didn't have lawyers in her family, so she entered the competitions her classmates entered and joined a bar association when they joined. Being a CBA member since law school, she said she didn't fully realize how many other attorneys she had met through the organization until she became its president last year.

After graduating law school in 1986, also at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, she and her now-husband Michael Holmes, a fellow U. of I. grad from the South Side, moved back to the Chicago.

They moved downtown to Roosevelt Road and Michigan Avenue. However, Michael came home one day and said he quit his job as a city planner under Mayor Harold Washington. His old high school, one of two predominantly black private boys' schools on the South Side, was rumored to be in such financial straits it would close. Michael took a job as dean of students to help save the school.

"He quit his job for like a tenth of the salary," Patricia Holmes said. Holmes laughed. "So no more high-rise."

Her husband laughed at the pay cut, too. He said working at Leo Catholic High School is basically volunteering, since he and Holmes put so much of their own money toward sponsoring students' tuition every year.

The couple moved to Hyde Park and eventually had three children. Michael

became the head football coach and Patricia, a competitive all-around gymnast in high school, started coaching the cheerleading team, gathering volunteers from local all-girls Catholic schools or public school students from the neighborhood.

Holmes was an assistant state's attorney, then an assistant U.S. attorney. She became the chief assistant corporation counsel for the city of Chicago, prosecuting for all of the departments for the city, then a Cook County Circuit Court judge.

Holmes kept coaching cheerleading even after her Stage 4 cancer diagnosis in June 1999. One month after adopting a baby boy, Holmes was told she had lymphoma throughout her body and should expect to live for another six months.

"That was tough," Michael Holmes said quietly.

She said she looked at her three young children — that baby boy, now 17; a daughter, now 22; and a stepson, now 33 — and thought about how she may never see them again, much less get to see them grow up.

She had a four chemical chemotherapy cocktail every two weeks until April 2001, then took another two years to recover.

She said the bone marrow stimulant Neupogen saved her life. She could feel an immediate effect after her first shot of filgrastim and she remembers her doctor saying he should buy stock in the company. She laughed saying she now wishes she had thought to buy stock in it too.

Now, after her recovery, she said she's extra lovey-lovey when she sees her kids.

"Sometimes I just sit and stare at them and soak it all in," she said.



It's been so long since she had cancer that she no longer even has to return to the doctor's office for checkups. After she hit 10 years in remission, doctors would consider any cancer an entirely new case rather than a recurrence.

When you survive something like that, her husband said, you get motivated to do more.

"You can't pay me to do something I don't like or that I think is a waste of time or that's unpleasant or that's something that I think I'm going to look back on and regret," Patricia Holmes said.

Michael Holmes said that wasn't a change in attitude per se, as the couple always had a mentality of working hard and providing for their families, which he said came from their backgrounds as poor kids on the South Side who were the first in their families to complete college. But the diagnosis and unlikely survival made them realize they had to live their lives to the fullest.

"I think it's inspired her to do maybe more than she thought she could do," he said. "It gave her the inspiration to not be afraid."

'You know what? Why not?'

Cook County State's Attorney Kimberly M. Foxx had a good impression of Holmes right from the start.

pitched private practice as an opportunity to mentor young lawyers and affect people on a large scale.

"I had never done it before and I thought, 'You know what? Why not?'" Holmes said.

A cemetery scandal

Holmes shot up in bed when the news came on the television.

Gravediggers and a supervisor are accused of desecrating graves at the Burr Oak Cemetery, an news anchor announced.

Holmes couldn't believe it. Burr Oak is a historic black cemetery southwest of the city in Alsip. It's the final resting place of the likes of singer Dinah Washington and civil rights figure Emmett Till. And Holmes' dad and a younger brother are buried there.

She called her stepmother, then her sister and her brother.

And then she called the governor.

"I was like, 'What the heck are you doing?'" she said.

Gov. Patrick J. Quinn said he was forming a blue-ribbon task force to investigate, and he appointed her chair.

In a scheme uncovered by the FBI and the Cook County Sheriff's Office in 2009, Burr Oak gravediggers would open a grave, put a body in, charge the deceased's family cash, take the body out and dump it in the back, put another body in and charge another family cash, pull out and dump the second body, and put in and charge a third family. Diggers could put a grave in the book as one body and pocket the extra cash.

"IT GAVE HER THE INSPIRATION TO NOT BE AFRAID."

When they met almost 20 years ago, Foxx was an assistant public guardian a year out of law school working in front of Holmes. She appreciated how engaged Holmes was with each case. She also said Holmes was in control of her courtroom and could remind you of that with a gentle whisper or a cutting glance.

"It was not a boring room to work in," Foxx said.

Foxx can only guess as to the source of Holmes' energy in the courtroom, saying maybe it was tied to the judge's years as a coach for Leo High's cheerleading team.

"I was tough on everybody, but I was fair about it," Holmes recalled of her courtroom years. "If you did your job, you got kudos. If you didn't do your job, I called you out on it."

Foxx said Holmes was generous with her time, helping Foxx understand the significance of her child protection work. Holmes has been a mentor to her ever since, the new state's attorney said.

"I feel very honored and blessed to have met her when I did," Foxx said, adding that a number of black female legal professionals in Chicago would say the same.

Holmes' assignment in the Juvenile Division in abuse and neglect was one of the most difficult on the circuit court, said Sara L. Ellis, now a U.S. District Court judge. The stakes are high when the state wants to separate a child from his or her parents and the public defenders may want to keep that family together.

Holmes said being on the bench is the essence of the legal practice. But after nine years, she allowed Ronald S. Safer to convince her to join him at Schiff Hardin.

"It was stunning for those of us who had been in public service work, and particularly those who maybe aspired to the bench, to have someone leave the bench," said Foxx, an assistant state's attorney at the time.

Safer said Holmes could take the lead both on building Schiff's white-collar practice and on improving the firm's diversity. He said Holmes was hesitant to leave the bench — she told him she was changing lives — but he

When family members would purchase a headstone for a person's unmarked grave, she said gravediggers would put a headstone on any unmarked grave and not figure out where the specific person's plot was.

"That kind of thing," Holmes said.

Quinn flew Holmes out to Washington, D.C., where she testified before Congress. The task force helped draft new cemetery laws, and she served on the congressional cemetery commission.

The state's attorney's office prosecuted. As part of the private cemetery company's bankruptcy settlement, courts appointed a trustee to run and rehabilitate the cemetery then decide what to do with it.

Holmes was that trustee. The bankruptcy court gave settlement funds to more than 500 litigants and more than 5,000 parties who settled for a \$100 check each. It also designated some funds for rehabilitation costs.

Holmes had two dilapidated buildings torn down and replaced by one new building she called "beautiful." She also had an automated system added so people searching for a grave can type in the deceased person's name at a kiosk and find them easily.

She said neighbors came over to thank workers as they put in 1,000 feet of wrought-iron fence. That may sound like it's nothing, but "you should have seen what was there before," she said.

Trees on the edge of the cemetery were so overhung that the two-lane street was more like a one-way street. Holmes had to get permission from the local government to close down the encroached lane while landscapers trimmed back the trees and bushes.

Under the settlement, they built a monument of a little girl with a little brother holding a picture of a deceased family member. She called it "just gorgeous."

Another monument will recognize the individuals who had to be reinterred.

Holmes said everybody who goes out there — "particularly if you'd been out there before" — is pleased.

She said the settlement ran out of money to redo all the roadwork and there were still some plumbing issues that needed to be resolved.

Holmes rehabilitated Burr Oak on top of running her private practice. In 2016, the cemetery was sold to the family that owns and operates Restvale Cemetery and Mausoleum, also in Alsip.

New season, new firm

Holmes had been with Schiff Hardin 10 years when she made her next big career move.

"Ideas had been thrown around about, 'Huh, wouldn't it be nice to do things differently and do things with the millennials in mind?' " she said. "And so next thing you know, one thing leads to another and we're opening the doors of a new firm."

This spring, Holmes and 21 other Schiff Hardin partners co-founded Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila LLP with offices in Chicago, San Francisco and New York.

She said Schiff Hardin's partnership agreement meant none of the co-founders could talk to Schiff Hardin associates or anyone else below partner rank before they left. Holmes said her own secretary had no idea and was probably more shocked than anybody when the news broke.

Holmes called Schiff Hardin a fabulous firm.

"It really was just do something different," Holmes said. "Why not? Life is short. Live."

Safer also said he wished Schiff Hardin well.

"They're great people, and it's a great law firm," he said. "We wanted to do something completely different that you could not do at a law firm that was established and big."

Robert H. Riley, another name partner, said the new firm doesn't pay much attention to comparing internal metrics published in national legal publications each year to its competitors.

"I've not yet met a client that cares about average profits per partner or realization rates," Riley said.

Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila has no minimum number of billable hours, which Holmes said allows associates to be more efficient. The work model is different, as attorneys work in teams for individual cases rather than always in the same practice groups. Holmes also said it's a little easier to become an equity partner, since the firm doesn't track realization rates that other firms might use.

The art decorating the firm is different, too. Joseph A. Cancila Jr., a founding partner, said he always shows the break room to clients and guests who visit the Chicago office.

It's lined with caricatures of each of the firm's attorneys by Chicago artist Lena Walker.

"It shows the character of the place and shows that we like one another and care for one another and are willing to not overstate our self-importance," Cancila said.

The office was decorated by Andre Guichard, an abstract artist from the South Side, and its furniture is supplied by a minority-owned business run by Holmes' friend.

"By hiring him [Guichard] to put up our artwork, we helped one of his guys pay his kid's college tuition," Holmes said. "You put that money into the neighborhood and it works."

Sixteen shots

In July, Holmes accepted another job — this one with a national following.

Holmes was selected by Cook County Circuit Judge LeRoy K. Martin Jr., presiding judge of the court's Criminal Division, to investigate whether officers lied to cover up for a white Chicago police officer, Jason Van Dyke, who fatally shot 17-year-old black teenager Laquan McDonald 16 times in October 2014 and has been charged with murder. She may also look into the conduct of the officers' supervisors.

Martin told a local newspaper none of the government agencies he was required to contact wanted the job. Civil rights attorneys Locke Bowman and G. Flint Taylor, who filed one of the petitions seeking the special prosecutors, suggested Holmes.

"No one could have picked a better special prosecutor," said Sara Ellis. "She is fundamentally fair."

Ellis has known Holmes since 1994. They were opponents when Holmes was an assistant U.S. attorney and Ellis was a federal defender, then the two worked together for five years in the white-collar practice group at Schiff Hardin.

"Sometimes we agreed and sometimes we didn't agree, but I knew that she was coming from a place of wanting to do the right thing as opposed to a place of ego," Ellis said.

Holmes said she immediately started getting calls from people who told her things like, "Now that you're there, I know no matter what the outcome is it's going to be the right outcome."

"That makes me feel good because nobody's looking to me for a preconceived result," she said.

Holmes laughed when told there was a *New York Times* opinion column addressed to her and said she avoids reading anything about the case.

"I just want to view the evidence and the evidence takes you where it takes you," she said.

In August, Chicago Police Superintendent Eddie Johnson asked the Chicago Police Board to fire seven officers under Rule 14 of the rules of conduct, which prohibits officers from making false reports. At a status hearing on Nov. 16, Holmes announced a special grand jury of 16 jurors and 10 alternatives had been impaneled.

Holmes declined to talk about the content of the case.

"I understand the public's desire to know, but the Constitution created a process for a reason, and we're going to follow that process," she said.

She said she doesn't even think about public attention on the case, saying she's going to be criticized no matter what happens so there's no benefit in worry about it.

"I just do the job," she said. "When you've had cancer and you've faced death? Unless something's about to kill me, I try not to worry about it." CL

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