

Elizabeth Starrs: A Profile Of the New CBA President

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One nickname for Liz Starrs, new CBA President, is “The Baby-Faced Assassin.” She is known for having a “very innocent face” and for being “deadly” in moot court competition. Another moniker she admits to is “The Vault,” because apparently she can keep a secret. She keeps them so well, in fact, that she hardly told us a thing for this profile. Luckily, though, she has many forthcoming friends who were happy to spill the beans.

What we did learn: Liz was a theater major in college, with dreams of making it as an actress in New York. In her pre-attorney days, she was a substitute teacher, a McDonald’s manager, and a life insurance salesperson. Liz is one of eight children (four boys, four girls). Heart surgery at age 12 left her with a sixty-five-stitch scar on her back. Some say she is “a perfect Capricorn.” She once was roommates with Gates McFadden, who played Dr. Beverly Crusher on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

A Detroit native, Liz grew up in a bustling household among siblings, parents, and alternating relatives and friends. “You could go over to her house at any time of the day and there would be a light on and a person up,” says childhood friend Karen Fitzgerald-Hutchinson, who is married to attorney Dennett Hutchinson of Holland & Hart LLP. Her father, a probate and tax lawyer, believed in “education for education’s sake,” which is something that was ingrained in her early on. Language also was a priority in her family. She took diction class from Miss Spencer once a week for nine years.

As part of “The Starrs Pack,” Liz was influenced by her siblings. “Eight kids in ten years means you’re all about the same age; and the only thing you have to lord over your brother or sister is age.” With such a large family, she learned it was best to always tell the truth. She also learned when to keep her mouth shut. Appearances weren’t important. “No one would notice if you got your hair cut,” she says. Despite being scattered around the country now—New York, Michigan, Colorado, Arizona, Oregon, and Alaska—she and her siblings communicate regularly, thanks to the Internet.

When Liz was 14, her dad took her to Canada to teach her to drive “in case of an emergency.” Later that year, she decided to share her new skills with her 68-year-old cousin DeeDee, who never had learned to drive. Things were going well up and down the driveway until Liz instructed DeeDee to go for it “one more time.” DeeDee put her foot on the gas pedal instead of the brake, and the two were thrown out of the car when it slammed into a tree. The car was totaled and DeeDee’s arm was broken. Liz did not tell her friends about the incident for years, because she was “too embarrassed, because it was so irresponsible.”

In 1975, Liz graduated from the University of Michigan, where she acted in small theater productions and was involved



Liz Starrs (front left) offers welcoming remarks to Karen Mathis (right) at a 2005 reception for Mathis, 2006–2007 ABA President.

in her Delta Gamma sorority. After graduation, she followed her best friend to Boston, working some of the odd jobs mentioned earlier, before going to law school at Suffolk University.

Liz says she doesn’t remember when she decided to become a lawyer, but Fitzgerald-Hutchinson recalls: “We always knew she’d be a lawyer. From the time we were in grade school she would say, ‘when I become a lawyer . . .’ She loves what she does and always has.”

While in law school, Liz interned at the Massachusetts State House for the Ways and Means Committee. Barney Frank was a Representative at the time, and Michael Dukakis was Governor. For a time, she considered a career in politics, but changed her mind and clerked for a Boston firm instead.

When Liz graduated from law school, the senior partner at the Boston firm told her, “We don’t hire women.” So, she found a job at a law firm that did, not giving the rejection much thought. She attributes this outlook to a naïveté that developed during eleven years in an all-girls Catholic school. “The nuns taught me I wouldn’t be judged harshly either way if I were to be a stay-at-home mom and wife, or President of the United States. I always felt I could do anything.” She adds, “As long as naïveté doesn’t make you stupid, it gets you through things.”

One thing Liz is not is overly-emotional. “Some have thought it a weakness, but it helps me to be strategic.” The best advice she ever received was at a continuing legal education program given by former Chief Judge of Denver District Court Connie Peterson: “Be yourself.” Though a common adage, the words ring true for Liz even today.

Driven and self-confident, Liz “just went through life” as it came to her. She was “a little too young” for the civil rights



Liz Starrs with Immediate Past-President Roger Clark.

movement (she was 14 years old during the Detroit riots), and she didn't get involved with the sexual politics of the day. (She notes, however, that the plays she performed in had "no real roles for women—*Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*. The women were horrible human beings.")

Liz, 52, is the founding partner of the Denver law firm of Starrs Mihm & Caschette LLP. She handles legal malpractice cases and has tried more such cases than any other attorney in Colorado. Primarily, she represents lawyers and business owners. Her practice takes her around the state, representing lawyers in all areas of law. She has a knack for mediation and listening (close friends and colleagues describe her as "solid, thoughtful, and honest"), and easily earns the trust and confidence of clients and juries.

Her law partners, Michael Mihm and Rich Caschette, has each known Liz for more than twenty years. Liz jokes that Rich is "her longest adult relationship." Michael says she's akin to a sister. The three worked together for many years at Kennedy & Christopher. (Liz was the first-elected president of that firm when it changed from Cooper & Kelley). In the spring of 2003, Liz walked into Michael's office and said she was going to start her own firm and asked if he would join her: "It took me about twenty seconds to say yes." Rich, who was then at another firm, adds, "It took me only five." They know she'll be a great Bar President because "she governs by consensus, but isn't afraid to make tough decisions."

One of her close friends is Marla Williams, past-executive director of the Colorado Women's Foundation. "If Liz says she'll do it, consider it done." The two met at an early Colorado Women's Bar Association ("CWBA") convention. "We were the only ones wearing jeans."

They have stayed close ever since. Liz continues to be active in the CWBA. She was instrumental in forming a group of female senior litigators to meet and mentor new female litigating attorneys. "Stand and hold open the door for others—that's how Liz operates," says Marla Williams.

Her friends and family emphasize her sense of humor and wit, but when asked for specific stories, nobody's talking. Close friend Pam Gagel, who first met Liz when she took a road trip from Michigan to visit the University of Denver's Delta Gamma sorority house, would only comment: "Let's just say there are a few Liz Starrs masks floating around this town from a birthday party she once had." Marla Williams confirms this, but won't elaborate. "She inspires her friends to do crazy things. She also knows how to take a joke." When running for the Board of the CWBA, Liz implored members to vote for her because she was "raised by nuns and couldn't vote for herself."

Her tenure as CBA President won't be her first go-round with such a position. Liz was President of the Denver Bar Association from 2002 to 2003. She also is a member of the American Bar Association, American Trial Lawyers Association, As-

sociation of Professional Responsibility Lawyers, and Colorado Trial Lawyers Association. She is a fellow of the American College of Trial Lawyers and the American Board of Trial Advocates, and was the first woman from Colorado invited to join the International Academy of Trial Lawyers.

As CBA President, there are a few agenda items at the top of her list: supporting the Colorado judicial system and celebrating the fortieth anniversary of merit selection; having a network of members available to quickly respond to stories in the media; working with Karen Mathis, the first Colorado lawyer to be President of the American Bar Association; and focusing on COBALT, the CBA's new leadership training program. (See the CBA President's Message to Members on page 7 of this issue for an explanation of COBALT.)

"I don't plan to be a flash-in-the-pan, but on the other hand, being CBA President isn't about me. It's about steady movement forward and goals that will take years of follow-through to continue."

Others who know Liz agree. She truly loves the law. She truly likes and respects lawyers. She thinks the work lawyers do is important for all of society. Attorney Lorraine Parker says: "I'm just one of many people she has inspired to be a better lawyer. This is not just something she does for a living. It's her life."

Outside her demanding life as a lawyer, Liz enjoys music (concerts at the Botanic Gardens and groups like the Gipsy Kings and Armik, as well as show tunes); books (sometimes audio versions fit her schedule best; *The World is Flat*, by Thomas Friedman is her current selection); food ("real" Italian and French) and dining out (Luca d'Italia, Barolo Grill, and Potager are a few Denver favorites); and movies ("If you go a lot, you don't mind the bad ones as much."). She enjoys and brings together an eclectic group of friends. Last year, she hosted a house party for people to talk about the issues on the ballot. Marla Williams described it as "Good food, good friends, good wine, and serious discussion."

In 1999, Liz took a trip to the Middle East with three other lawyers. They went to Israel, Jordan, Bethlehem, and the Sea of Galilee. It was an eye-opening experience, because she saw Israelis, Muslims, and Christians "who thought they were so different—but they weren't." She returned from that trip with a greater appreciation of her upbringing.

"I saw people as people first. I think that's important in getting past barriers."

One of her favorite movies is *My Cousin Vinny*, starring Joe Pesci as Vinny Gambini, a no-name lawyer who has to defend his nephew who is accused of murder. Spoiler warning: He wins the case, largely with the assistance of his girlfriend, Mona Lisa Vito, played by Marisa Tomei. The closing scene epitomizes Liz's view on her successes. It goes like this (read with heavy New York accents):

Mona Lisa Vito: So what's your problem?

Vinny Gambini: My problem is, I wanted to win my first case without any help from anybody.

Mona Lisa: Well, I guess that plan's moot.

Vinny: Yeah.

Mona Lisa: You know, this could be a sign of things to come. You win all your cases, but with somebody else's help, right? You win case after case, and then afterwards you have to go up to somebody and you have to say, "thank you." [pause] Oh my God, what a %*\$#! nightmare!

Liz laughs, recalling the scene. "None of us gets ahead without the support of other people." n