

WINSTEAD LAWYER TELLS ALL ABOUT HER TIME ON “THE APPRENTICE”

by ERICA LEHRER GOLDMAN

Austin appellate lawyer Roxanne Wilson can finally tell inquiring friends and fans the day-to-day details of what she was up to during her mysterious two-month absence last fall from Winstead Sechrest & Minick, where she works as a third-year associate.

Wilson, 27, was one of 18 candidates competing for a chance to work for real estate developer Donald Trump on NBC's current season of “The Apprentice.” She made it to week 13 of the television reality program, before getting the boot from The Donald on the May 22 episode. The season ends June 5, with a live 90-minute final episode in which Wilson will participate. Wilson says she has no idea which of the remaining contestants — Sean or Lee — will be chosen.

“I was fired, but I feel so honored to be the first African-American female to make it to the final four,” says Wilson. “It is a pity there were no females in the final two, but I think we had a good run.”

Back practicing law since mid-November 2005, Wilson says the most challenging part of returning to Winstead was having this “huge experience” she couldn't discuss.

She couldn't talk about where she'd been from late August 2005, when she found out she was a contestant, through mid-February, when the producers announced the cast, because she had signed what she calls a “typical \$5 million limited-liability nondisclosure agreement” used for reality TV shows.

“Everyone . . . was speculating about where I had been,” she says, but she couldn't tell them.

Pursuant to the agreement, Wilson was allowed to talk to the press regarding her experience only after hearing she had been fired or hired. Prior to that time, anyone Wilson told had to sign a \$5 million nondisclosure agreement, including her two sisters, her father, a handful of friends and the partner for whom she worked at the firm, former Texas Supreme Court Justice Craig T. Enoch — about nine people in all.

A native of Phoenix, Wilson earned a business degree from Baylor University in 2000 and a law degree from the University of Michigan Law School in 2003.

In her free time, she became a certified Jazzercise instructor and currently teaches several classes a week in Austin. She also serves on the board of directors of the Austin affiliate of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation and sings with her church choir.

Before going to work at Winstead, Wilson clerked for Texas Supreme Court Justices Scott A. Brister and then-Justice Enoch, now a Winstead shareholder.

Wilson says she “stumbled into auditioning” while organizing alumni events for Baylor grads in Austin last July. Mark Burnett Productions, which produces “The Apprentice,” had notified the alumni association that it was holding a special audition day for graduates of Texas colleges. Wilson thought, “What would it hurt to fill out an application?”

The first audition consisted of meeting with two female producers, which she did over a lunch break from work, and filling out a short application. She says she received a call-back two days later to return for a lengthy on-camera interview.

She next filled out a longer, more elaborate application with questions ranging from her most embarrassing moment to how she would handle certain business situations, she says.

Making the cut, casting producers asked Wilson to prepare a five-minute video chronicling a week in her life. She says her video



ROBERT MANILLA

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highlighted work, teaching Jazzercise and socializing with friends during happy hour. Then the casting producers asked her to fill out even more written applications.

In August 2005, she heard that she had made the finals, which required a week of additional auditions in California.

At that point, Wilson realized she had to tell her boss, Enoch, who chairs Winstead's appellate practice group. Enoch then spoke to the firm's shareholders.

"Because of the nature of 'The Apprentice' program, very few in the firm could know about her plans," Enoch says. "I can appreciate that, because of the nature of the drama, you have to be very careful that nobody lets out the secret, but it makes it very difficult for a participant who has a regular job. They obviously have to let their employer know. I was very proud of Winstead for giving her the time to participate in the program and to encourage her every step of the way."

Participating in the show is quite a commitment not only for the individual but for the employer, Enoch adds. Not only did Wilson's participation require her to be gone from the firm for a couple of months while filming, but afterward she had to make appearances and promote the show.

"We've all chipped in to help cover for her," he says. "We thought it was an exciting opportunity that doesn't happen every day. I know the firm is pleased for whatever role it had to play in all this."

Wilson, for her part, says she is grateful for the firm's support and for the opportunity.

Behind the Scenes

While in New York, Wilson lived at the posh Trump Tower, but in close quarters: She shared a room with various cast members. Her roommates changed from week to week, depending on who had been fired and who remained. By week five Wilson had her own room.

Living with her competitors was challenging, says Wilson, especially since there were cameras everywhere in the suite except the bathroom.

Wilson's family couldn't call her, but she could call them from the suite. Although she talked to her sisters, both of whom signed nondisclosure agreements, the conversations were awkward, because Wilson couldn't tell them the details of her experience.

"It would be like, 'Hi Roxanne, how are you?' 'I'm fine. Now *you* talk.' My little sister was so psyched: 'You mean I can talk, and you can't talk, and you have to listen to what I say?' " laughs Wilson.

Wilson's older sister, Rhonda, says, "I was very excited for her." Rhonda, the office manager for the Ellis Law Firm in Phoenix, has helped her sister handle her newfound fame by assisting with correspondence, lining up appearances and responding to press inquiries, among other things.

Wilson says she learned three big things from "The Apprentice" experience, all of which are useful in her day-to-day life at the firm.

First, she learned how to deal with major clients — Wal-Mart Stores Inc., Sam's Club and the Embassy Suites hotel chain — under pressure, scrutiny and tight deadlines. The assigned tasks had to be done quickly and expertly.

Second, she experienced the tug of simultaneously catering to different "audiences" — Trump, his executives and the client — and addressing their concerns.

"I liken that to being in the courtroom," says Wilson. "You have to please your client but also the jury or judge and make sure you come up with a solution or result pleasing to everyone."

Third, Wilson also found the experience of going into the boardroom akin to going to court. She had to anticipate every argument that could possibly come up; think on her feet; articulate and demonstrate strengths persuasively; and acknowledge weaknesses in a way that didn't undermine her credibility and professionalism. "I think it was a good training ground, especially for a young attorney," she says.

Wilson says that her best experience on the show was when, as a reward, her team, Synergy, won

the chance to take a girl who was seriously ill on a shopping spree to a toy store in conjunction with the Make-a-Wish Foundation.


The worst part of the experience was the lack of shut-eye. "I do have good endurance, which is probably why I lasted as long as I did, but by week 12, I really needed some sleep," she says.

As for what The Donald is really like, Wilson says: "What you see on TV is what he is really like. He is very charismatic, he is witty and he is very endearing. That is why he gets away with saying things others wouldn't necessarily get away with saying. I enjoyed getting to know him on the show."

Since filming "The Apprentice," Wilson has turned to motivational writing and speaking. She recently returned to her hometown of Phoenix and visited local elementary schools, hoping to inspire children to pursue their dreams.

One significant benefit to having been on the show, she says, is the visibility it has given her when promoting causes that matter to her, such as the Komen Foundation and the Make-a-Wish Foundation.

Wilson recently traveled to California to model for a Jazzercise apparel catalogue. Jazzercise will donate 10 percent of the proceeds from the outfit she models to the Komen Foundation affiliate in Austin. Wilson also maintains a Web site chronicling her experience on the show and listing her upcoming projects and appearances.

"I think lawyers can do so many different things, including compete and compete well on a show like 'The Apprentice,'" Wilson says. "The opportunities we take in our lives away from the firm only enhance what we can do for the firm and our clients." 

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