



***Gwendolyn R. Keyes
Solicitor-General,
DeKalb County, Georgia***

Leading in the Law

With 80 employees and almost 700,000 “bosses” (i.e., registered voters), Gwen Keyes has a complex job. She’s also the highest-ranking elected woman in one of Georgia’s largest counties – a county which spans 270 square miles and represents fifty-two different cultures.

A petite woman with a beautiful smile and a confident yet humble manner, Gwen is the quintessential example of a next generation woman in leadership. While her area of service and expertise happens to be the law, and specifically the elected office that prosecutes all crimes punishable by less than one year in jail, she is – first and foremost – a leader.

To be successful and effective in her job, she must demonstrate all of the qualities of a strong and balanced leader. She must be both tough and compassionate; intelligent and down-to-earth; hard-charging but not intimidating; confident but not arrogant; strategic and tactical; politically savvy but not self-serving; results-oriented and people-friendly; serious and able to laugh at herself. From all indications, Gwen Keyes is all of these and more.

From Succasunna to Atlanta

Gwen hails from Succasunna, New Jersey where she grew up in a close-knit and supportive family. Expecting to leave her home state for college, Gwen decided instead to remain there and accepted a full scholarship to Douglass College, a liberal arts women’s college located in New Brunswick and affiliated with Rutgers University. At the time, she thought her interests lie in the business field and so she pursued a degree in Finance.

But finance was not to be her career choice. “Reading Rage of Angels by Sidney Sheldon,” Gwen explained, “changed my direction completely. It was about a woman lawyer. That did it for me.”

Gwen then took the LSAT and joined a pre-law society. She also applied to several law schools including the University of VA, UCLA, and Seton Hall. On a whim, she completed an application for Emory Law School along with her girlfriend. As it turned out, Emory accepted her and she was soon Atlanta-bound.

Arriving in the capital of the South for the first time was a new experience for Gwen. But almost immediately, she knew she liked the atmosphere. She also liked the independence she felt.

Planning her career after law school, Gwen saw herself going into the corporate world. But finding a job wasn't easy. In the interim, she did some volunteer work and interned in the Fulton County District Attorney's office. That internship led to Gwen's first full-time position as an Assistant Solicitor-General in the office she now leads. It also opened the door to a whole new world – the world of government and public service.

A Perfect Combination – Community Service and Law

Between 1993 and 1994, Gwen served as Assistant Solicitor in DeKalb County. She went from there to Assistant DA in Fulton County. In 1998, she successfully ran for Solicitor-General of DeKalb County where she has remained until the present time.

To get a perspective on her position, there are only thirteen full-time Solicitor – Generals in the state of Georgia and of that number, only four are women. Gwen doesn't focus on the numbers, however, but rather on the job to be done, the opportunity to serve, and the impact she hopes to make.

In her own words, she explains, “What really excites me about my current role is training young lawyers, being involved in the community, and lobbying the legislature on important issues.” Gwen is also among a growing cadre of next generation African American leaders who are collectively strategizing on ways to ensure a better future for all citizens of Georgia – economically, socially, and environmentally.

Gwen's personal list of accomplishments are already too numerous to list. They include President of the Georgia Association of Solicitors-General, 2003-2004; Leadership DeKalb, Class of 1999; Leadership Georgia, Class of 2000; Vice President, Rotary International, South DeKalb Chapter; Chair, Admissions Committee of the Emory Black Law Students Alumni Advisory Board; and Chair of the DeKalb County Domestic Violence Task Force, Subcommittee on DV Fatality Reviews.

Her awards are equally numerous and impressive, e.g., Emory University School of Law Black Law Students Association Distinguished Alumni Award, 1996; Communities of America Trail Blazer Award, 1998; Millennium Diva Award, 1999; Inductee, Douglass College Alumni Hall of Fame, 2001; Women Looking Ahead News Magazine's List of Georgia's 100 Most Powerful and Influential Women, 2001-2002; Who's Who in American Law, 2002-2003 Edition; Outstanding Atlantan 2002-2003 Honoree; and DeKalb Rotary Council's “You Are the Key” Award for distinguished service and leadership, 2003.

Impressive as these achievements are, ask Gwen what she's really passionate about and she'll tell you that she loves advising and mentoring young people, especially young girls. Her best advice? "Stand confident. Confidence erodes stereotypes." On this subject, Gwen is clearly an outstanding role model.

Gwen is also committed to her own leadership development and ensuring that she and her staff are operating at their highest level of effectiveness. What seems to keep this high-energy and socially-conscious leader on her toes is a commitment to excellence and desire to make a difference.

Futurescape

Recently Gwen moved her parents to the Atlanta area. As a single professional woman, she's enjoying having her family closer and looking forward to the years ahead. As for next steps in her career, Gwen hasn't made any firm commitments, but she has a plethora of options and opportunities.

If she chooses to stay in the public service arena, her future appears bright. Imagine this: Cathy Cox as Georgia's Democratic Governor and Gwen Keyes as Secretary of State or Attorney General. It's certainly a possible scenario.

On the other hand, if she decided to make a change of course, there's no doubt she'd be successful. An intelligent, articulate, and inspirational leader like Gwen can write her own ticket!

By Susan B. Hitchcock, Creator of the Age of SHEroes
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