



# Melanie Shoemaker Griffin: YLD President and More

By Christi N. Morgan

**W**onderfully generous. Compassionate. Infectiously enthusiastic. Inspiring. Some of the state's most successful lawyers have used those words to describe Melanie Shoemaker Griffin.

Griffin's friend and classmate Barbara Leach ('07) describes the 2006 College of Law graduate as "a perfect mix of energy and optimism, determination and graciousness. She is the most disciplined person I know. Whatever goal she sets for herself, she achieves, whether that's in the courtroom, in the boardroom, in a familial setting, it doesn't matter. She is more capable of juggling friendships, relationships, cases and philanthropic endeavors than anyone I've ever met."

Griffin also can be described much more basically as a planner. When she was in grade school, Griffin's plan to practice law took shape.

"I wanted to go to law school since I was about 8 years old. I dressed up as an attorney for Halloween and decided that I would pass out candy as opposed to going trick-or-treating," said Griffin, whose costume included fake eyeglasses and a briefcase.

As a junior at Manatee High School in Bradenton, Griffin formulated a plan to attend Florida State. "I came for an American Legion Girls State program and fell in love with Tallahassee and the Capitol and knew that I wanted to come

to school here."

When she was finished, Griffin had earned three degrees from the university – a bachelor's degree in business finance, a J.D. and an M.B.A. She worked in state government the entire time she was a student.

Upon graduation from law school, Griffin joined Dean Mead's Orlando office, where she had previously served as a summer clerk. She has consistently been one of the firm's top performing associates and, in just her fourth year of practice, was one of the youngest attorneys in the firm's history to earn an AV rating.

Early in her career, Griffin conceived a plan to serve among the leadership ranks of several professional organizations. Griffin has served as president of the Central Florida Association for Women Lawyers (CFAWL) and on the boards of The Florida Bar Young Lawyers Division and the Young Lawyers Section of the Orange County Bar Association. Under Griffin's engaging leadership, CFAWL's membership doubled and event attendance skyrocketed. At the end of her presidency, CFAWL was named chapter of the year by the Florida Association for Women Lawyers.

In June of 2013, Griffin reached another major milestone when she was installed as president of The Florida Bar Young Lawyers Division (YLD).

"When she was getting sworn in, she made a point to do the Seminole chop from the podium at the general assembly of The Florida Bar," said Sean Desmond ('00), who served as president of the YLD from 2011-12. "That was an awesome thing for me to see as a Florida State alum."

"It's been really fun," said Griffin a few months into her presidency. "There are two initiatives that have been significant priorities for the YLD and things that we've already accomplished. One is communications. That is one of the most simple and important things you can do for an organization – to ensure that you are communicating effectively and pushing out information about which members need to be informed. We have increased our social media presence and newsletter communications, publishing an issue about every two weeks."

"The YLD is also focused on helping to lead the Bar on technology issues. It is something that young lawyers are facing every day – for example, how do we handle increased e-mail communication without having the length of time that we used to have to think about our responses."

In line with those priorities, Griffin can be especially proud of a social media campaign that resulted in 2,000-plus new Facebook and Twitter followers for the YLD and YLD Law Student Division groups. The campaign also

**“Griffin,” continued from page 3**

raised more than \$2,000 for The Florida Bar Foundation. Additionally, Griffin has used the newsletter to educate law students and recent graduates about how to best transition into practice and about the resources the Bar can provide.

In terms of technology, the YLD has started a monthly lunchtime Webinar series. The first Webinar was held in August and addressed technology issues in the practice of law. That event garnered 10 times the number of attendees compared to Webinars hosted previously by the division. “It shows that members really are craving that type of education. A big part of the reason we had that jump is, not only is there such an interest in it, but we also now have the communication systems, through our newsletters, social media and our Web site, that members actually know what education we can provide.”

Another priority for Griffin is the expansion of the division’s “Mentoring with the Masters” program, which is a series of short videos that provide practical advice to young lawyers about topics like deposing a witness. Griffin aims to triple the number of videos posted online during her presidency.

Because Griffin is extremely passionate about mentoring, it is fitting that the endeavor is central to her presidency. Griffin has dozens of mentees located across Florida. She even helped establish a 1L mentoring program at FAMU’s law school. An extremely engaged alumnus, Griffin also makes time to help students at Florida State. During one busy week in September, she had dinner and lunch with Florida State law students, counseling them on networking and the legal profession.

“There were people along the way for me, who really shaped my life and helped me get where I am today by mentoring me and opening doors that would have otherwise been closed. So, from a very early age I thought it was important to give back and pay it forward,” said Griffin, whose most influential mentors include Sean Desmond, Renee Thompson, who is another former YLD president, and Barbara Leach, who is the current CFAWL president. “So, I

**“There were people along the way for me, who really shaped my life and helped me get where I am today by mentoring me and opening doors that would have otherwise been closed. So, from a very early age I thought it was important to give back and pay it forward.”**

have taken a huge interest in mentoring. It is critical that law school students get input from attorneys about their law school journeys and future practice of law.”

Although Griffin will travel 30-40 weeks during her year-long presidency, she still is very committed to her substantive practice. Support from her firm and her penchant for planning have allowed Griffin to stay productive.

“My firm and I both prepared – thinking that it would be more challenging for me to keep up with my client work, but I actually am going to end up exceeding the firm’s billing requirement this year,” said Griffin. “My firm has everything set up so well. Not only online, but even my desk phone rings simultaneously to my cell phone. It allows me to be out of the office and not worry about being able to effectively

serve clients.”

During her seven years in Dean Mead’s commercial litigation department, Griffin’s top priority has been her clients. “It’s really important to me to maintain a substantive practice and be taken seriously in that realm, not just someone who is involved in bar activities. What has been great is the client relationships I have developed – I have clients now that I’ve worked with for most of my career. You develop a

special relationship and I don’t want to let them down.”

Focusing on business and complex commercial litigation, Griffin specializes in contract disputes, including prosecuting and defending non-competition, non-solicitation and confidentiality cases for her business clients. She has had great success obtaining preliminary injunctions and temporary restraining orders in federal court and in the Orange County Business Court, where she almost exclusively practices.

“I cannot imagine a better place to work because of the opportunities,” said Griffin about Dean Mead. Very early in her career, Griffin was handed the reins to take a lead role in her cases, taking depositions and often appearing in court. “They have also been supportive of me being involved in the community,

“Griffin,” continued from page 4

thus not only giving me a large role in the substantive part of my job, but also allowing me to have a large role in contributing to the profession.”

Most people would look at Griffin’s schedule and become overwhelmed, but Griffin says keeping up with her many responsibilities is, “surprisingly easy, as long as I remain flexible.” Griffin has her single mother, Jean Shoemaker, to thank for her can-do attitude and ability to accomplish more than might seem possible to others.

“I’ve never actually met anyone with more energy than Melanie. I don’t know how she does what she does, but she is incredible,” said Desmond, who quickly realized what an asset Griffin was when she joined the YLD board on which he was already serving. Desmond made sure his mentee was assigned to lead key projects even though there were more senior members on the board.

“You can’t bench your best player,” joked Desmond.

“I was on a schedule from an early age,” said Griffin about the roots of her ability to effectively juggle competing priorities. “One day was dance and one day was piano lessons and one day was choir and one day was church. I remember that even from Kindergarten. For me, being busy and balancing different activities – my mom always encouraged me to explore – wasn’t a big deal. Also, my mom didn’t really allow me to watch T.V. So, T.V. has never been that important to me. Sometimes I wake up and realize that I haven’t watched T.V. in a week.”

A social worker by profession, Griffin’s mother also passed along to her daughter a compassion for people.

In addition to mentoring students and young lawyers, Griffin has worked with detained female juveniles and garnered substantial support for an Orlando-area Title I elementary school.

“My mom really cared about giving back to the community, being a genuine person and being true to others. From an early age those values were also important to me, and a skill that I developed over the years. To me, it is important to appreciate people and have a positive attitude as a leader.”

When not practicing law or serving her community and profession, Griffin has a fulfilling personal life. Most of her spare time is spent with husband Mike Griffin, a commercial real estate broker.

Melanie and Mike became friends during their senior year of high school, after meeting at a student government leadership conference. They began dating while Melanie was in law school and became engaged shortly after she graduated. On the morning of their wedding in February 2009, they ran the Gasparilla 15K race before exchanging vows that afternoon.

“It was really fun,” recalled Griffin. “He wore a shirt that said, ‘I am marrying her today,’ and I had one that conversely said, ‘I am marrying him today.’ It was something fun for us to do together before all of our friends and family joined us for the rest of the day.”

The Griffins still run together on the weekends. They also enjoy attending college football games together – Mike is chair-elect of the University of South Florida’s national alumni association – and share a love of wine. The couple has been to Napa Valley three times in the past five years, once during their

honeymoon and most recently after an American Bar Association meeting that Griffin attended in San Francisco.

“Mike and I have known each other almost half of our lives,” said Griffin. “He has helped me in the second part of my life in terms of bouncing ideas off of him, getting feedback about things professionally and learning to have fun.”

Up until this point, Griffin’s plans have been very concrete – earn her law degree and M.B.A, marry her best friend, work for a firm that represents business clients, serve as CFAWL president and serve as president of The Florida Bar Young Lawyers Division. She will be eligible to become a partner at Dean Mead at the end of 2014, so that goal also is within sight.

After that, Griffin admits there are many question marks in her future. Although she finds herself for the first time without a plan, the Florida State law school community is sure to be impressed and inspired by Griffin for years to come.

“She really is, first and foremost, a model Florida State Seminole,” said Mike. “When you look at the type of leaders that FSU has produced, particularly the College of Law, she is following in the footsteps of so many people before her who really set a high bar. As proud as I am of her personal and civic accomplishments, when she received her AV rating very early in her career and the peer recognitions that come with the *Florida Trend* and *Super Lawyers* recognitions, that is a validation that her professional peers respect her work product, in addition to everything else she does, which is truly incredible.” ■