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## [Voice of Experience: Linda Carlisle, Partner, White and Case](#)

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*By Pamela Weinsaft (New York City)*

Linda Carlisle is a straight-talker. This daughter of Texas and partner at [White and Case](#) rapidly acknowledges the challenges facing women in her industry.

“In a law firm—back when I started and even today still—you have very few women mentors. You don’t want to be a mother or girlfriend to people: you want to be a colleague, a top partner and a trusted advisor. You want to be respected for what you can bring to the table. But you are also different from many of the people whom you are working with. You’ll very seldom walk into a room and be in the majority. You learn, over time, to handle that with wit and humor and a strong hand.”

An undergrad biology and chemistry major at the [University of Texas at Austin](#), Carlisle believed she would follow her father and brother into a career in pharmacology. Two years later, she decided that she no longer wanted to go that route, and felt her only option was to teach. She married and, upon graduation, she and her husband moved from Austin to Pennsylvania, intending to pursue a career in academia.

Carlisle became involved in her local teachers’ union and discovered a talent for negotiation. “I was enthusiastic, young and wanted to make a difference so I got involved.” Ultimately, she was elected president of the union, and also acted as the union’s chief negotiator—an experience that led to her true calling: the law.

“My spouse was commuting to Washington, D.C. to work on his Ph.D. When he decided that he needed to be in D.C. to work on his degree full-time, I decided that if he was going to quit and go back to school, I was too.” She enrolled at [Catholic University School of Law](#), and “we went from two incomes to no income.” But, despite the financial hardship, Carlisle found that she really loved law school and the law. “I saw the law as a puzzle that you needed to try and solve. I worked hard, but really enjoyed it.”

While still in school, she started to pursue a legal career in collective bargaining, working part-time, first for a union-side labor firm and then for a firm on the management side. “By my third year in law school, I realized—having worked on both sides—that no one in collective bargaining wears a white hat. So although I did have a job offer from a labor law firm, I decided that it wasn’t what I ultimately wanted to do.”

Upon graduation, she joined the D.C. office of the top firm [Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft LLP](#). “I originally thought I wanted to be a litigator, but since I didn’t know for sure, I thought it would be best to go to Cadwalader, which had a rotation program so I would have more opportunities to determine what I wanted to do. After some time in the litigation group, I had to do something else for three months. The people in the tax group seemed to be having fun so I transferred in there...and never left the tax law world.”

She earned her LLM in Tax at [Georgetown](#) while working at the firm, and in 1984, with her new degree in hand, she obtained a position with the Treasury Department. “This was in 1984, which,” Carlisle points out, “was right after President Regan made tax reform his number one domestic priority.” She spent her days making specific recommendations for the clarification and modification of the tax code, something which had not been done since 1954. “I never worked so hard in my life and never had so much fun. For a tax lawyer, it was nirvana.”

Carlisle returned to Cadwalader three years later and soon thereafter became a partner in the firm. She left to join a boutique tax firm started by a small group with whom she’d worked in the Treasury Department. That firm merged with her current firm—the prestigious White and Case—in 1994.

Carlisle still gets excited by her work. “I get to be involved and important to everything that is going on. You can’t do anything without thinking of the tax implications.” And, she is quick to point out, “There is a tax lawyer in every deal.”

She continued, “Everything I do is trying to solve something, to make things work better. And trying to find a way to communicate that to clients. When I can look at parts of the law that should be interpreted in specific ways and make other people accept that view or work with people on the Hill to change the law so that it works a certain way, it gives me a real sense of accomplishment.”

## **Work-Life Balance in a Service Industry**

“When I was a young pup,” said Carlisle “you really did have to be physically in the office to do work. The beauty and the terror of modern tech is that you can do more work on your own time.”

Still, said Carlisle, “We are a service industry. When the client says, ‘I need X,’ we need to get X done. And sometimes it is at an inappropriate time. But it is better now because we can do what we need to do and get X done whenever we have the time to do it,” explained Carlisle.

Carlisle credits her spouse for his significant role in helping her to ‘get it all done,’ especially concerning the rearing of her son. “I never said no to work. I felt as though that is what I had to do. I wanted to become partner. I had to be the best there was. I don’t think I could have gotten where I am without my husband’s help,” explained Carlisle. “He retired from his job and began working from home when my son was in the 4th grade. He was absolutely instrumental in me being able to do what I’ve done professionally.”

With her now 24 year-old son off on his own, Carlisle and her husband spend much of their free time enjoying the waters of the Chesapeake Bay in their boat, fishing, waterskiing and relaxing. “I love the water,” she said. “It calms me down.”

## **Texas Wisdom for Women in Law**

When asked about the state of law, Carlisle remarked, “The industry is changing. It is important for women coming in to determine what they want to do. When I started off, I wanted to be a partner. There were no other options; it was either up or out. There are other options today. And there are options that are more conducive to work-life balance.”

“Also,” she said, “it’s important to remember that you are going to be spending a lot of time doing the job you choose so you should try to choose someplace where you can have fun—where you enjoy the people and feel comfortable being there.”

Carlisle’s last word is based on a bit of Texas wisdom. “There is an old Texas saying that is really true in law – especially for women: ‘It’s a sad dog that cannot wag its own tail.’ What really surprised me when I first started to practice law was how much you need to “wag your own tail.” Not really for the clients, though, because they can see what you are doing. It is mostly for the people within your own firm. And, there is a very fine line between being assertive and wagging your own tail and being a b\*\*\*h. That is the line that women have to find.”