

# From the Newsroom to the Courtroom

Get the facts. Write the brief. Tell the story. These have been the endeavors for Debra Thomas '87 and Kara Altenbaumer-Price '03 since they were children; however, the platform by which they tell their story changed throughout the years. Early on, they sat behind disc-jockey chairs, news desks, and microphones, as they told the public of current events and hot topics.



Altenbaumer-Price

by Casey Mims

Now, Thomas and Altenbaumer-Price tell their story to a judge and jury. These two Tech Law grads turned from careers in media to the legal field. Both women said their background in the media has made them better lawyers.

Altenbaumer-Price's interest in the law precipitated from a news story assignment on the Tech campus. After college, she reported for the Lubbock Avalanche-Journal, where she covered Texas Tech University. Altenbaumer-Price interviewed former School of Law Dean Frank Newton, and he asked her about enrolling in law school. In fact, he continued to tease her about it until eventually she paid the late fee for the LSAT.

"Tech was great for me," Altenbaumer-Price said. "I found the school friendly and the faculty approachable.

"And now that I have been out practicing, albeit for a short while, I've been able to see that Tech really does provide a great legal education," she said. "Law school was the first time something was truly hard, and because of that, I really blossomed into who I am today."

When speaking of her time in law school, Thomas recounted a somewhat different tale of law school.

"I would seriously question the sanity of anyone who says that they loved law school," she said, "but some of my dearest friendships were forged there."

Thomas said she encourages current law students to find an area of the law that they really love and go for it.

"Never let anyone else set your limits for you," Thomas said. "Never compromise your own ethics in order to win— Play fair; share; keep your sense of humor about yourself."

In the third grade, Thomas "published" a newsletter, which she sold to her neighbors for a nickel a piece.

"I wish I had one of those now," she said.



thoughts about the way in which the media portrays the law. They feel that news coverage is an attempt to provide accurate information, but without a legal education, it is ignorant.

"I think most journalists, including me a few years ago, do not understand much about the law," Altenbaumer-Price said. "They see things as right and wrong in a vacuum apart from the law, not whether they are constitutional or unconstitutional or what things mean in the larger sense of the rule of law."

Thomas said she believes that the media generally tries to get it right and provide fair coverage, but that this does not happen because most reporters are not lawyers and the issues involved are often very complex.

"As most lawyers know, it can be difficult to explain these issues with complete accuracy in a lengthy brief," Thomas said. "Try doing it in a few lines or a few seconds!"

Thomas' background in the media, particularly in media law, proved to be especially beneficial when she assisted U.S. District Judge Mary Lou Robinson, who presided over the highly publicized suit of *Texas Cattlefeeders v. Oprah Winfrey*.

Thomas said she often represents journalists who either need assistance getting access to public information or who are being sued because someone does not like what was reported. She said she

"I am sure it would be hysterical to see what a nine-year-old considered newsworthy."

Thomas gained a unique perspective at an early age, since her father was a small-town judge and her brother was a law-enforcement officer. As a news reporter, Thomas covered trials and interviewed judges, lawyers, plaintiffs, defendants, victims, and the accused. When comparing the two careers, Thomas said that she still crafts language to tell a story, but the main difference is that the audience changed from a news reader or viewer to a judge or jury.

Altenbaumer-Price also attributed her media involvement as an enormous benefit to her legal career because of the writing and reporting skills she learned early on.

"The basic thing reporters do is take a lot of facts and information and cull them down to the parts that matter," Altenbaumer-Price said. "We are trained to basically evaluate what is the most important and put it at the top of a story and go down from there."

"Essentially, that's what legal writing is, or at least should be," she said.

Altenbaumer-Price's life goal was to be a reporter, although she chose not to tell family and friends of her secret aspirations to attend law school and to become a "political-reporting guru" because she

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wasn't sure it would ever happen.

"But life takes strange turns, and practicing law is actually a huge detour from my life plan," Altenbaumer-Price said.

She said that covering major news stories helped her ability to interact well with people in prominent positions. For example, at the young age of 19 she interviewed then-Texas Governor George W. Bush.

"I was faced all the time with one-on-one situations with people with much bigger jobs and many more years on them than me" Altenbaumer-Price said. "I had to learn not to be intimidated by people or situations, which has been a tremendous skill in my job because I am faced every day with new tasks I don't know how to do and with people who have worlds more knowledge and experience than me."

"But I just think, I've done more daunting things before and a lack of age or experience doesn't mean I can't or shouldn't be doing something," she said. "That was a big lesson journalism taught me."

Both alumnae shared common

understands firsthand the challenges a working journalist faces, as well as the commitment to protect sources.

Often, Thomas said she is called upon to assist the spokesperson, or to take on the role of spokesperson, for clients involved in matters that require sensitivity and a balance between the public's right, or desire, to know and a litigant's right to a fair and impartial jury. She said she works alongside the strategic communications practice groups, which are experts at handling media relations and crisis communications for clients.

Both women worked exceptionally hard to see their careers flourish in their respective Dallas firms. Altenbaumer-Price's work at Hughes & Luce L.L.P. focuses on white collar criminal defense, telecommunications and appellate work. Thomas is a trial attorney in the business litigation section of Bracewell & Giuliani, L.L.P., representing clients from all over the world and trying complex business litigation cases. ■