

From Lateral to Chairwoman in Eight Years at Crowell & Moring

Angela Styles represents generational change at the storied DC law firm.

BY KATELYN POLANTZ

Updated at 11:59 a.m. EST

Eight years is not a long time to propel a lawyer from lateral recruit to firm chairwoman.

But Angela Styles did it. Loyal now to Crowell & Moring, the government contracts attorney keeps almost a dozen rubber ducks — an informal firm mascot — on a shelf above her desk, next to a model fighter plane. The 47-year-old lateraled into Crowell in 2007, and her tenure as the firm's leader began on March 6. "Being a lateral would only be a concern if I hadn't fully adopted the culture," she said.

She has other concerns now: Styles will need to continue moving the firm through its generational succession plan; she'll face the challenge of preserving Crowell's tight-knit culture as it matures to 500 lawyers; and she wants to diversify the firm's practices and clients while making sure they don't parch its roots.

Success in law and politics has always guided Styles. Her father, Linton Barbee, co-founded Hewett Johnson Swanson & Barbee, which grew to be one of Dallas' most prominent law firms. He later became a partner at Fulbright & Jaworski.

Through his success and political activism, Barbee got to know a Texas politician named Joe Barton,



ANGELA STYLES: "She has star quality," a partner concluded after meeting her. "Being a lateral would only be a concern if I hadn't fully adopted the culture," Styles said of her new responsibilities.

Photo: Joe Shymanski

the Republican congressman. When Barbee's 19-year-old daughter, Angela, needed some professional polishing, he sent her to Washington to work in Barton's office in the summer of 1987. She played on the congressional office's softball team and shared an apartment with two flight attendants.

The congressman promoted her from unpaid intern to legislative aide, a rare job for someone without a college degree, so she decided to postpone her undergraduate junior year.

"There are some people who don't have those open and engaging personalities. I think she's very open and compassionate, and people always sense they can talk to her and share

information with her," said Cynthia Sandherr, who worked in Barton's office with Styles.

Styles left Capitol Hill for the University of Virginia, where she earned her bachelor's degree, then went to the University of Texas School of Law. She became an associate at Baker Botts and focused on Federal Energy Regulatory Commission work. She didn't find the work as interesting as she had hoped, so she switched to government contracts law.

When George W. Bush won the presidency in 2000, Styles returned to politics as a member of his transition team. She liked working at the General Services Administration but

knew the Office of Management and Budget held “the most interesting of all the jobs,” she said — its administrator of federal procurement position. Then-OMB director Mitch Daniels interviewed her and soon Styles, eight months pregnant with her second child, was confirmed by a unanimous Senate.

RECRUITING STYLES

“My husband [Scott, a lobbyist] and I had a lot of discussions about, could we manage this,” she said. Three months later, the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, “completely altered the job.” Her office was still responsible for the administration’s ambitious outsourcing program for government work, but she also pitched in on the birth of the Department of Homeland Security.

Her in-laws moved to D.C. from Texas to help the couple with their 2-year-old daughter and newborn. “It’s not like you’re just going to say, ‘I’m unavailable,’” Styles said.

The Office of Federal Procurement Policy gave Styles a platform to get to know contracting companies and work in a political environment.

Styles left government in 2003 for Miller & Chevalier, where she became a partner. It took four years for Crowell & Moring, with one of the largest government contracts practices in town, to call with a job offer.

“We were looking for the next generation of leaders for the group, which is one of the first things I said to her when I called her,” said Shauna Alonge, a former government contracts partner at Crowell who is now a consultant. “I was very mindful that she would think she was just a little fish in a big pond.”

The firm then had few lawyers in the group in their late 30s and early 40s — causing concern about an

emerging generation gap between the more senior lawyers and the associate ranks, Alonge said. A hiring committee at Crowell interviewed Styles and, after the interview, then-partner Stanfield Johnson had one comment, Alonge remembered: “She has star quality.”

Another government contracts stalwart, partner Richard Bednar, needed a younger colleague to whom he could introduce a client — the Defense Industry Initiative on Business Ethics and Conduct, which comprises major contracting companies. Styles got the job and picked up so much work so fast that partners joked she had been “too integrated,” Alonge said.

“She stepped up immediately. We introduced her to our institutional clients, and they took to her immediately,” Alonge said.

She had carved out corporate clients that were not large government contractors at her former firm. Since then, she’s focused on suspension and debarment situations and developed more of a crisis-management practice, she said. Styles still serves as coordinator of the Defense Industry Initiative.

CROWELL’S FUTURE

This winter, her election as chairwoman seemed almost preordained — word began to spread more than a month ago that she was the candidate preferred by the firm’s leadership. Crowell’s 104-lawyer equity partnership voted her chairwoman on March 6.

The Crowell that Styles will lead is much different than the firm her predecessor, Kent Gardiner, became head of nine years ago. Revenue has almost doubled, from \$188 million in 2005 to \$369 million last year. The firm ballooned from fewer than 300 lawyers 10 years ago to nearly 500 lawyers, as it has recruited laterals more aggressively.

The target number of billable hours associates must work each year has increased, too — to a 1,900-hour minimum, which is fairly standard among large firms. The firm encourages its associates to count an additional 500 hours of work, such as time spent on marketing and client development, making that one of the highest targets in the city, according to two people familiar with the firm.

Styles plans “not growing for growth’s sake,” and said she hopes the firm can strengthen practices such as cybersecurity and health care while maintaining its reputation in government contracts, regulation work and litigation.

She taps Gardiner and other former firm leaders for advice, she said, as well as peers including Alice Fisher, Latham & Watkins’ D.C. managing partner and a close friend; and Marcia Madsen, Mayer Brown’s government contracts chairwoman.

For now, Styles is still co-chairwoman of Crowell’s government contracts practice, alongside Daniel Forman.

“I think there will be a graceful transition maintaining the excellence of the government contracts practice,” said Stanfield Johnson, a former Crowell chairman and one of the firm’s first government contracts partners. “Ultimately, the future of the firm will be built on the strength of those young lawyers.”

Update: This story was updated to clarify the billable hour guidelines the firm gives to associates.

Contact Katelyn Polantz at kpolantz@alm.com.