
Meet the Locke Lord Employee Who Inspired an Award-Winning HBA Initiative

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By Brooks Igo

(June 20) – So, your law firm is looking for a great new employee with a great attitude and charisma? Of course, you are. Always.

Meet Cindy Johnston, one of Locke Lord's most beloved employees in Dallas.



Johnston wears a wonderfully disarming smile and possesses a quick wit. She has worked at Locke Lord for nearly 10 years, where she fulfills meeting requests for six to eight conference rooms per day by making sure they are properly stocked with water, sodas, coffee and snacks, or “the works” as she calls them. Sometimes she has to pull rooms together in 15 minutes notice.

Johnston, who was born with Down syndrome, started at Locke Lord as a summer intern, but credits her attitude – she says a good policy for anyone showing up to work is to “check your attitude at the door” – with securing a long-term position with the firm. She also jokes that “mom and dad may have had some pull.”

Prior to her time at Locke Lord, Johnston worked for two other law firms. She says she actually worked herself out of a job at one of them by helping close out a file. This time she worked herself into an enduring and challenging gig.

“Everyone liked me,” she remembers about her internship. “So, they said: ‘You’re staying put.’”

Frank Stevenson, the immediate past president of the State Bar of Texas and a partner at Locke Lord in Dallas, says Johnston is not exaggerating how the firm felt about her.

“It is impossible for me to visualize Cindy without a smile on her face,” he said. “She has an inexhaustible exuberance that is a balm in a law firm environment. She provides something utterly unique. We could find someone else to stock the conference rooms, but we couldn’t find another Cindy.”

According to Beck Redden partner **Alistair Dawson**, Cindy’s influence has gone far beyond the conference rooms at Locke Lord. She helped forge his vision for Project TRAIN, a program he began as president of the Houston Bar Association.

In 2011, Dawson was meeting for depositions at the Locke Lord Dallas offices and noticed a woman with Down syndrome setting up the conference rooms and delivering mail. It was Cindy Johnston, and long after the case had ended her presence around the Locke Lord offices stayed with him.

Dawson is no stranger to the challenges and stigma people with social and cognitive disabilities face. His son is on the Autism spectrum.

“He was always told, ‘You probably won’t graduate high school, definitely won’t go to college and will never hold a job,’” Dawson recalls.

Dawson recently completed his one-year term as president of the Houston Bar Association. One of his hallmark initiatives was the creation of Project TRAIN (Training, Readiness and Inclusion Network), a program that provides education and training materials to assist employers in interviewing, hiring and retaining employees with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

He realized that both the need and opportunity are huge: 81 percent of adults with developmental disabilities do not have a paid job in the community, according to National Core Indicators, a collaboration of public developmental disabilities agencies.

Through Dawson’s leadership and efforts, Project TRAIN – which is a partnership of the Houston Bar Association, Disability Rights Texas, The Center, Social Motion Skills, H.E.A.R.T. and Jewish Family Service of Houston – has signed up 23 law firms and corporations to commit to interview and hire people with special needs through the program.

“If given a chance, these individuals can do this,” Dawson said. “We just need to give them a chance.”

The Project TRAIN momentum is gaining steam and has not gone unnoticed.

The State Bar of Texas is recognizing the initiative with a Star of Achievement Award as an outstanding bar project at its Annual Meeting in Houston this week. And in May, Project TRAIN launched a **new video** featuring stories from Baker Botts and Hayes & Wilson highlighting the work and impact of some of their employees with special needs.

For Vicky Gunning, managing partner of Locke Lord’s Dallas office, Johnston is just a good hire whatever her circumstances. She says Johnston makes a big difference because she is on every floor every day and sees more people than most of the attorneys. Johnston says her colleagues are like family.

“Work is home away from home in a way, but you get paid for it,” she quips.

Locke Lord’s attorneys and staff have embraced Johnston outside of the office as well. Johnston is involved in a theater production at Highland Park United Methodist Church called Jesters. Her performances have been well-attended by her Locke Lord co-workers.

“I showed up and saw Harriet Miers,” Stevenson said. “I told Cindy she has a pretty impressive fan club.”

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