

HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Local lawyer puts Houston legal scene on the map – and your TV screens



Rhonda Wills, founder of Wills Law Firm PLLC, is a co-star of the reality show "Sisters in Law" on WE tv.

JOE MARTIN
Reporter- Houston Business Journal

Rhonda Wills grew up in a small East Texas town. Raised by a single mother with four siblings, Wills knew that she wanted to get out of Winona, Texas, and go to law school.

Today, she runs a successful self-named practice with offices in Los Angeles and Houston, and recently joined the cast of a new reality TV show, "Sisters in Law." The show profiles a group of African-American female lawyers from Houston, a "Real Housewives" meets "Law & Order" style documentary series that sends the message that empowers young women to get an education and forge their own paths to success.

Tell me about the first meeting for the show. How did this all begin? The creator of the show is one of my cast mates, Juanita Jackson. Years ago, Juanita and I were best friends, and even then, she would talk about the concept for a TV show. My friendship with Juanita ended on very bad terms. We had not spoken in 10 years, and she called me out of the blue a few days before Christmas and asked me to do this. That is how it all started.

What was your first thought? To say no. I really was not sold on the idea initially, but there were two things that motivated me to do it. The first was Juanita's concept. It was totally different – a reality show that would focus on women with real careers. Women who are not married to successful men – their success doesn't come from being married to someone successful. It comes from their own efforts. That was something unique that I feel is missing from television, a role model for young girls. You can be beautiful, sexy, smart, ambitious and anything you choose to be. You don't have to marry a man to achieve those things.

That is the sentiment behind the show and was really the motivation for me to be involved. I also felt hesitant because I have a very successful legal practice. I have cases across the country. I didn't want to do anything that would jeopardize my standing in the legal community. It was important to me that this be a positive and uplifting project, even while having some drama at the same time. Three days after I was approached to do the project, my father died. He dropped dead of a heart attack. It was an epiphany for me. You only live once and you have to take life by the reins and go after things.

What has been the strangest part of having cameras follow you around? It was constant. I had no idea how time-consuming it would be. The strangest thing is that I am a very private person.

Typically, when we walk into the courtroom, we don't see a lawyer that looks like us. There are no other black, female lawyers. We formed this sisterhood. We are very supportive of one another. We are friends. But like sisters and friends, we also fight. We disagree on things personally, we disagree on things professionally. You are going to see that play out, this sisterhood, on the show.

What do you hope to achieve through the show? First and foremost, I want to empower girls and young women to know that there is more to life than twerking, making a sex tape and all of the other things some women feel they need to do in order to be wealthy and successful. I want to tell them that getting an education really is key to anything. I am an example of that. My cast mates are examples of that. Most of us grew up very poor, raised by single mothers, growing up in abject poverty. There were days, weeks, months, that I was hungry. Some of us grew up in tragedy, as well. The show is going to demonstrate that no matter where you come from, no matter how much the deck is stacked, with tenacity and hard work, you can do anything you want to do.

The other interesting thing about the show is that it shows the perspective of a plaintiff's lawyer. People have this misconception that people sue because they want to get money. For the first time, there is a show that pulls back the curtain and demonstrates what happens to you when you are catastrophically injured.

I will have clients that will be on the show that have had some tragic things happen to them. My clients hire me and they pay me nothing. I take cases on a contingency-fee basis.

It is so much pressure because I know if I don't win their case, their lives will be destroyed. I want people to see what happens when big companies and insurance companies make decisions that have a horrible impact on people.

The only thing we can do at that point is to get financial justice for the little people these giant corporations have stepped on. I am that person. I go in and represent that person. I go up against giant corporations, big insurance companies, companies worth billions of dollars.

In regard to the cultural norms that you have mentioned, this show aims to go against the grain. What is that like to be a show that is out on a limb in terms of what is considered normal? We are changing the game. We combined the whole idea of the Real Housewives with Law and Order. We have all of the glamour and excitement of the Real Housewives, but we have substance. It is excitement and drama combined with substance, with women with real careers running their own businesses.

Can you give an example? In episode No. 1, I hosted a fundraiser for one of my cast mates, Jolanda Jones. A (Donald) Trump national spokesperson shows up to the fundraiser uninvited. She and

I clashed. I'm a Democrat and she is a Republican, there is a huge clash there. Donald Trump's spokesperson was not welcome, and gets shown the door.

Why did you decide to go into a legal career? I always knew I wanted to be a lawyer. Unlike the other Sisters in Law stars, I am the only one who went straight into law school after my undergrad.

I grew up very, very poor. I am one of five children raised by a single mother in a poor rural farming community. And I just always knew what this was what I wanted to do. I went to the University of Texas and never looked back.

What caused the ambition, even as a kid? Reading books. Books were always my way of looking outside this farm town, where very few people ever left. Most people are born in Winona and that is where they are going to die. There is nothing wrong with that, but I just knew I wanted to leave and become a lawyer. I wanted to be exactly what I am now. I am living the life I always dreamed of.

Do you think Houston's legal industry will be exciting enough for viewers? We are a very international and cosmopolitan city, and the legal industry here is extremely complex. We have one of the largest federal court systems, and Harris County has one of the largest county district courts in the country. Houston has a thriving legal market and some very high-profile cases come out of Houston. We want to make sure Houston will get the credit it's due.

How do you handle the confidentiality of your client while at the same time working on a television show designed to show what happens beyond the courtroom? There are certain aspects of the cases that are designed to be public. We were very careful to balance that, but a lot of the things discussed with our clients was information already available in public filings.

► CLOSER LOOK

RHONDA WILLS

Age: 45

Family: Married 23 years, four children, ages 17, 14, 10 and 8

Hometown: Winona, Texas

Education: University of Texas, bachelor's in international business, law degree

Hobbies: "I love to travel internationally collecting wines."

Favorite destination: Rome, Barcelona, Almamfi Coast

Sisters in Law

WEtv

Thursdays at 9 p.m.

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