

Defying Medical Odds, Texas Atty Takes 1st Law Firm Job

By Rachel Rippetoe

Law360 (January 10, 2023, 2:59 PM EST) -- Allison Dickson wasn't supposed to live past 3 years old, but now, at 43, she's starting her first job at a law firm.

Texas personal injury firm Patterson Law Group hired Dickson, who has a rare form of muscular dystrophy, as of counsel in November. After graduating at the top of her class at Baylor Law School more than 15 years ago, her path to working at a law firm has included extended hospital stays, months on life support and family tragedy.

But Dickson takes it all in stride.

"My motto is, 'I don't need easy, I just need possible,'" she told Law360 Pulse. "We all have our different challenges. Mine just seem a little more visible, but we all have them. If you give us possible, we can do anything."

Dickson also works as a legal research assistant for Baylor Law School and will continue in that role, but after nearly a decade of prolonged medical challenges, Dickson said she was ready to dive into work at a law firm. Patterson seemed like a good fit, she said, because her friend and fellow Baylor alum Tennessee W. Walker is a trial lawyer at the firm and she'd always admired his work.

Dickson said she hopes her story will inspire Patterson's personal injury clients, who are usually dealing with traumatic events that can include drastic changes to their physical or mental health.

"I hope I can give encouragement to clients that no matter what circumstances you're facing, you can still move forward and do good and still fulfill your purpose," Dickson said.

When she was just 15 months old, Dickson was diagnosed with Werdnig-Hoffmann disease, the most severe form of muscular dystrophy. Infants with this diagnosis usually die before their 2nd birthday, and Dickson's mother was told she'd likely have only a year to live.

But Dickson defied the odds. As she grew up, she said, she found her greatest solace in education. She graduated summa cum laude from Southwestern University and was later recognized as a distinguished alum at both Southwestern and the Temple Independent School District, where she went to high school.

"For me, education opened so many doors," she said.



Allison Dickson

But going from a laid-back liberal arts school like Southwestern to the more formal environment of Baylor Law was intimidating at first, Dickson said.

"I was almost a dropout before I even started," she said. "There were moments that I thought, 'What am I doing? This is hard. I'm exhausted, I'm pushing myself to the brink trying to keep up.' It was probably the most challenging nonmedical experience of my life."

Her first day of law school, Dickson attended a class that had large stadium-style seating. Because she uses a wheelchair, she had to sit in the front row.

"I was right at the bottom all by myself. I mean, who wants to sit in the front row?" she said. "But this woman behind me reached over and said, 'Do you want me to come down there and sit with you?' I said, 'Yeah, that'd be great.' She and I are still friends today."

As she started to meet people, Dickson said, she realized that everyone, to some degree or another, felt the way she did — a little scared and intimidated. But soon she was excelling, and graduated in 2007 at the top of her class and as a member of the Baylor Law Review.

On the same day Dickson graduated, however, she found out her father had been diagnosed with cancer.

"It was a roller coaster of a day," Dickson said. "It was a high high, and obviously a very low low with the diagnosis."

She had planned to stay in Waco, Texas, to participate in a bar review program, but she instead returned to her hometown of Temple to be with her father during his treatments. But Dickson continued to study for the bar on her own, using her iPod to listen to lectures and take notes. She passed the exam on her first try in July 2007.

Shortly after she passed the bar, Baylor Law approached her about a job as a research assistant, where she could help with legal research on the school's various projects. Dickson worked for the law school up until February 2014, when she acquired a respiratory illness that sent her into septic shock and respiratory failure. She was in the hospital for five months, including three months on life support.

"They told my mother, 'She might never breathe on her own again. She may never talk again,'" Dickson said.

The recovery process was long. Dickson said she is just now getting back into a normal routine in her life. But not everything has gone back to the way it was before she got sick. Dickson now must ingest food and water through a feeding tube. She hasn't had anything to eat or drink orally in nine years now.

She's not sure if she'll ever eat real food again, but she knows what she wants if she ever gets the chance: Taco Bell and Starbucks.

"Whether it's here or in heaven, that's my order," she said.

After her hospital stay, Dickson said she had to regroup and figure out a new path. She started working on a number of local philanthropic projects with education as her main priority, including starting

multiple scholarships at her alma maters from high school to Baylor Law.

"I just so valued my experience at Baylor," she said. "I want to make sure that students for generations have that opportunity."

In 2021, Dickson formed the Allison Dickson Just Need Possible Foundation to further her philanthropy projects, assist nonprofits and continue providing scholarships. And at the end of last year, she took on not one but two jobs in the legal industry, resuming her role as a research assistant for Baylor and starting at Patterson Law.

Even if she hadn't gone on to practice, Dickson said her legal background has already come in handy in advocating for herself and knowing her rights. She hopes that she can now transfer that knowledge into helping Patterson's clients.

"I'm getting my feet wet," Dickson said. "I haven't actually met any clients yet, but I'm looking forward to it. I am a people person. I love to meet people. I love to connect with them and form a relationship with them."

Travis Patterson, the managing partner of Patterson Law, told Law360 Pulse that the firm is thrilled to have Dickson onboard.

Dickson likewise said the Fort Worth-based firm has welcomed her with open arms, even as she works remotely from Temple.

"I like being around a group that really supports each other and roots for each other, and this firm does that," she said. "It's just been such a joy to join them and hopefully bring something to the table for them and contribute to what they're already doing."

--Editing by Alanna Weissman.