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**INDUBITABLY  
HOLMES**

How Patricia Brown  
Holmes beat death

**Named  
Top 50  
Women *Super  
Lawyers*  
list**

 **SCHIFFHARDIN**<sub>LLP</sub>

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In Patricia Brown Holmes' biggest victory, she beat death

# INDUBITABLY HOLMES

by JOSH KARP

photography by LARRY MARCUS

**P**atricia Brown Holmes is a former judge and a top-flight litigator with a personality so magnetic that her 4-year-old niece once jumped from a moving car when she saw her in a Chuck E. Cheese's parking lot. But the first thing you should know about her is this:

"She directly, honestly, openly and literally looked death in the eye and said, 'You're not going to beat me,'" says Ron Safer, the managing partner at Schiff Hardin, who persuaded Holmes to leave the bench for private practice in 2005.

Ten years ago, with her youngest child only 6 months old, Holmes was in pain. She had no energy. The woman Safer describes as a "whirling dervish" could barely get out of bed. Holmes saw doctor after doctor after doctor. Each said she was fine. Until the last.

"You need chemo," the doctor told her. "Yesterday."

Diagnosed with stage-four lymphoma, she was given six months to live. As this sank in, Holmes thought about her four kids, who needed a mom, then explained to the doctor that she wasn't going anywhere. Death just wasn't going to happen. And before she left his office that day, Holmes and her doctor devised a plan: He would research every possible treatment imaginable while she would do the impossible: laugh, smile and have fun—all of which would release endorphins that might aid her recovery. And off they went.

Holmes had what she needed: tasks and a direction. She did her best to smile, laugh and have fun through 10 months of biweekly chemo and painful injections of a white blood cell enhancer, even as her body withered to 110 pounds. When her doctor told her to gain weight, she and a friend chowed down each morning at the Pancake House. She fought her disease with tenacity but never anger. She took care of her family and continued to work until the day a clerk found her passed out in her chambers. Most of all, she survived. Two years later she was cancer free and has been so since.

"The Bible says, 'Be anxious for nothing,'" says Rev. Geneace Williams, who attended college and law school with Holmes at the University of Illinois. "But there are so few people who [live that way]."

Holmes is one of them.

**THE NEXT THING** you should know about Holmes is that she's the oldest of five children and tied for first in her class at Corliss High School while cooking meals, helping with homework and filling the role of extra parent to help her divorced mother.

"I'm bossy, I'm opinionated, I'm a leader, I'm direct and I'm down-to-earth," says the 49-year-old Schiff equity partner who leads the firm's white-collar crime and corporate compliance group and co-chairs its diversity committee. "That's who I had to be."

Those qualities were evident from the day Holmes arrived in Champaign, according to Williams, who recalls other students looking to her friend both for direction and as an example. Those qualities helped shape a career that began in 1986 when she joined the Cook County state's attorney's office after not a single law firm seemed interested in hiring a minority female attorney, no matter how well she'd done in law school. And those were the qualities Safer considered when recruiting Holmes, a former colleague in the U.S. Attorney's office, to Schiff 20 years later.

"I thought about who would help build this into a national practice," Safer says. "And who, as a person, I would enjoy working and struggling with."

At first Holmes was reluctant. A respected judge with a big family and enough professional, charitable and community involvement to fill several lifetimes, she told Safer he was crazy.

"She was absolutely right," Safer says. "She didn't need it, but we needed her."

Safer also knew Holmes would be instrumental in helping Schiff diversify its roster of attorneys. Coming into a firm that was at the bottom of the diversity learning curve, she was someone who could tell it like it is, and lay out—in clear, understandable terms—what needed to be done and why.

She takes the same approach in the courtroom. At the Conrad Black trial, Safer and Holmes represented Hollinger attorney Mark Kipnis, who had been charged with honest services fraud, but was the only defendant who hadn't benefited financially from the alleged scheme. During what was a tedious trial that revolved around sometimes-byzantine transactions, Holmes created a bond with the jury.

"She distills concepts to their core and cuts directly to the heart



When Holmes was a judge, says Rev. Geneace Williams, “she had the sense to say ‘good morning,’ ‘good night’ and ‘how’s your day?’ to the people who cleaned the place. Always the same, no matter how far down or high up you were.”

of the matter, expressing herself in plain terms,” Safer says. “She would get up and [the jury] would have a Pavlovian [response], ‘OK, we’re finally going to get this in straight terms.’”

Kipnis got five years probation, six months of electronic home monitoring and 275 hours of community service. He was the only alleged conspirator to avoid prison.

**ANOTHER THING YOU** ought to know about Holmes is that she’s proud of the cases she didn’t try while a U.S. attorney.

Holmes joined the Department of Justice in 1990 after four years with the state’s attorney’s office. The move, however, almost never came to pass.

In the pre-e-mail world of 1990, Holmes sent out a résumé to the U.S. attorney on the recommendation of a friend. While waiting to

hear back, she was conducting felony review early one morning at a police station when she began experiencing pain that she assumed was food poisoning. Instead, it was a ruptured ovary. She spent 10 days in the hospital.

On one of those days, her husband visited and mentioned in passing that some attorney’s office had been leaving messages on their answering machine. Holmes knew it wasn’t just some attorney’s office, and, as soon as she was able to walk, she went in for the interview. She was hired by newly appointed U.S. Attorney Fred Foreman before she even left his office.

“It was the fastest anybody’s ever been hired [by the U.S. attorney],” Holmes says. So fast, in fact, that another U.S. attorney turned to her moments later and said, “I’m not sure he’s supposed to do that.”

By all accounts a tough prosecutor, Holmes tends to remember important decisions made rather than people sent to prison. In one instance, she persuaded Foreman to defer prosecution of an 18-year-old who'd stolen a radio—planted there for the purpose of catching would-be thieves—while working at the post office. Because the radio was worth more than \$300, and because he was working for the federal government, the crime was classified a federal felony and a conviction would have dramatically altered the young man's life. Instead, deferring the prosecution did.

On another occasion, Holmes thought long and hard when the facts of an arson case against a suburban businessman failed to convince her that he had—or hadn't—committed the crime. Her decision not to file charges so infuriated the agent assigned to the case that he took it to local law enforcement and the man was tried in state court. He was found not guilty.

"She was really thoughtful in the way that she did her job," says Mary M. Rowland, an attorney at Hughes Socol Piers Resnick & Dym who opposed Holmes several times while working at the federal defender. "She had a really good perspective on the severity of the offense and also the complexities [of the defendant's situation]."

"Pat was a zealous prosecutor but someone whose heart was in the right place," Safer says. "It wasn't just 'convict the largest number of people and sentence them to the highest sentence.' It was to do justice and do it the right way."

**STILL ANOTHER THING** you ought to know about Holmes is that she understands how to treat people.

"So many lawyers haven't figured out how to treat people with respect," Williams says. "They don't garner it because they don't give it."

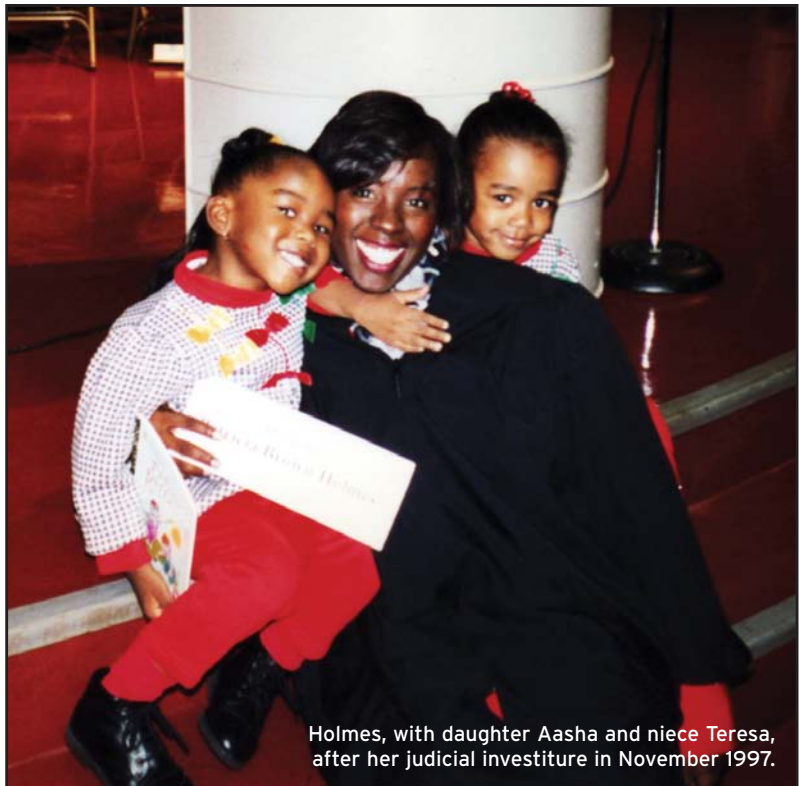
When Williams was a young attorney with a downtown firm, she would sometimes go watch her friend try cases as a federal prosecutor. Sitting in the back, Williams was struck by Holmes' technical skills and the way she carried herself and dealt with others.

"It didn't matter if you were the clerk, the opposing counsel or the sheriff. She exhibited the same respect for everybody," Williams says. "[When she was a judge] she had the sense to say 'good morning,' 'good night' and 'how's your day?' to the people who cleaned the place. Always the same, no matter how far down or high up you were."

While working for the city of Chicago's Corporation Counsel in the late 1990s, Holmes learned that eight associate judge positions were going to be vacant and cast her lot with more than 300 other applicants. Friends who knew the system told her to apply but not to expect anything. Even when she made the short list of 36, she assumed it was a long shot. So much so that when Judge Donald O'Connell called to inform her that she'd been selected, Holmes asked for her phone number so she could call her back to confirm that someone wasn't playing a prank on her.

On the bench, Holmes was committed to making sure that both sides understood what was happening at all times. Law, she believed, should serve the people, not happen to them.

Being a judge, Holmes says, helped her learn to be patient and how to keep the temptation to judge at bay until she'd heard all of the



Holmes, with daughter Aasha and niece Teresa, after her judicial investiture in November 1997.

evidence and testimony. Sitting on the bench let her look at each case from the perspective of the attorneys on both sides. It made her a better litigator. But, most of all, it taught her that the objective was for there to be justice and a solution, rather than simply a winner and a loser.

"You've got to be practical and look at the reality of the situation," Holmes says. "When you're practical, you aren't judging in ways that aren't useful."

Holmes says that being a judge was "the best job I ever had," then realizes that she's said the same about the U.S. attorney and her time at Schiff and adds, "Every job is the best job I ever had."

**THERE ARE MANY** more things you should probably know about Holmes.

You should know she's head of the governor's commission investigating the burial scandal at Burr Oak Cemetery, where her father and infant brother are buried. You should know that her husband, Michael, after learning that his alma mater, Leo Catholic High School, was in desperate need of African-American role models, left a six-figure job in order to become its \$14,000-a-year assistant football coach. You should know that she and Michael have helped several at-risk kids from Leo and their Hyde Park neighborhood turn around their lives—including a 7-footer named Big Carlos and another teen who never missed a day of school despite the fact that he'd been secretly living by himself in an abandoned home with no utilities since the day his parents walked out the door.

You should know that she taught a 240-pound Leo cheerleader how to do a back flip. You should know that she made special T-shirts to thank all of the friends, many of them attorneys, who cooked her meals, scrubbed her bathroom and ate pancakes with her when she almost died 10 years ago.

Finally, you should know that if you tell Holmes you're happy she survived, she'll laugh and say: "Not as happy as I am." ◀