

# Jessica Williams

*Partner, Little Morris LLP*

Jessica Williams' road to becoming partner at Little Morris LLP, a certified public accounting firm based in Boise, that has been anything but easy. But if anyone has fully demonstrated the ability to overcome obstacles to obtain one's goals, it's her. Raised by a single mother in Riverhead, New York, she spent summers in Idaho, where her father lived, long before she knew it would become her home — or that she'd one day become a single mom herself.

"New York was always home," she says of her youth. "It was nice in the sense that it was culturally diverse. It gave me a lot of different experiences than what I may have otherwise known."

Williams and her brother worked in their mom's trophy shop from a young age. "My mom was broke and couldn't afford other workers, so we made two bucks per hour to make trophies," she says. "But we also learned how to be responsible financially. We bought all our own clothing and learned how to spend wisely. My mom also taught me the value of saving money for tougher times." She describes herself as a "geeky kid" who played viola. "I was in multiple orchestras both locally and regionally," she says. Her viola teacher even wanted to send her to Julliard. Which sounded

good to Williams until about seventh grade.

"In seventh grade, my mom had sold the trophy store and went to work for the CPA office that had done the store's taxes that season," she recalls. "After school, I'd go there and — back then, everything was on paper — the ledger pages all had to be added up, so I'd foot them after school. I thought that was the coolest thing in the world. That's when I decided to become a CPA," she says. "I was a complete geek. I was in Mathletes and just a total nerd kid."

## College Years

After high school and at 17 years old, Williams relocated to Boise. "I came here to get to know my dad better," she says. "I wasn't old enough to go to a university yet, so I started out at Treasure Valley Community College. My dad lived in Payette, which was near there. I didn't even have a driver's license.

"Before starting, I planned out the whole two-year program so I could finish in a year and a term," she continues. "I knew I'd go to Boise State University afterward because dad was a big fan. I planned out the BSU workload the same way, so I could graduate in a

year and a term." But her plan to finish in three years changed when she got into a car accident after finishing her first two years. "I rolled a car three times down an embankment on the freeway," she says. "I had to take some time off school to recover from that."

And then there's the part about the bullet in her hip. "I woke up in the hospital after the accident, which I don't remember because I got knocked out [she was thrown from the car] before the car started rolling," she says. "The

doctor was there asking the guy I'd been dating — who he'd called after not being able to reach my dad, since it was the most-often called number in my phone at the time — how I got the bullet in my hip. I started laughing hysterically. I thought the doctor was joking. And the guy, whom I'd only been dating for a couple months and who was raised in a small town, must have been wondering what happened to this girl who grew up in New York.

"But then the doctor

asked me how the bullet got there, and I said, 'I don't have a bullet in my hip!' Turns out, the people who'd done the x-rays hadn't completely removed my clothing first, and the zipper from my pants was on my hip and looked like a bullet. "Amazingly, I had no broken bones," she continues. "I had some glass in my eye but they were able to flush it out and I recovered pretty well." Unfortunately, it was around the same time school was about to start, so she opted to take the semester off. "I worked with a tax accountant through the season and then continued back at school that summer," she says.

"The remainder of my time at BSU, I worked for a construction company and did payroll," she continues. "It was a weekly payroll for more than 100 people across a dozen states. I got a lot of experience in bookkeeping, payroll and compliance, and seeing how operating a business worked. But after I graduated, I knew I needed more excitement."

## Early Career Challenges

Williams moved to Klamath Falls, Oregon, after graduation, and went back into public accounting, beginning at one firm for about a year, then moving to another. "After a year at the second firm, the owner had to have back surgery and, with what little experience I had, I ended up running the office at age 23. I did that for the latter part of the year, until he returned. At that point, he'd decided to retire and started talking to me about buying out his practice," she says. She didn't feel she

had enough experience yet, so he sold to another firm and she left for a different one. "The partner I worked with closely there, Andy Peterson, became very much like a dad to me," she says. "They wanted to groom me toward becoming a partner." But she wasn't quite ready. She stayed at that firm for four years, during which time she had two sons, James and Jonathan. "When I had my second child, I'd become a single mom. I also had severe complications after having my youngest [Jonathan]," she says. "They released me from the hospital the day after he was born, but I was back after two weeks due to continued bleeding. But since the baby had already been released, he couldn't stay with me there. "I had

someone who was taking care of James, who was a year and a half old, but Jonathan was only two weeks old and I was breastfeeding and doing all the mom stuff and had him with me at the hospital. Someone came in and told me if I didn't have someone with me physically at all times, child services would be called and the baby and I would have to leave.

"So I called Andy in a panic and said, 'I don't know how I'm ever going to pay for it, but can you send one of the girls to come and be with me because otherwise they're going to take my baby.' His wife and daughter ended up coming and took care of both children. I was on bedrest for several weeks and they totally took us in. Amazing people," she says. "I recovered. They hooked me up to where I could work from their home for a while until I could go back to the

office."

After that, Williams and her husband decided to try to work things out, and it was time to make a move. In 2006, they chose Boise as their new home. "Little Morris was hiring and was recommended by people I knew," she says. It was the only place she interviewed, and she landed the job.

"Within two weeks, I got meningitis and was in and out of the hospital for a month. It was the worst start of a job you could ever imagine.

Amazingly, they didn't fire me," she says. "I tried to show up for work and I could barely walk and they'd send me home. The whole firm was there for me. It was a rough year, because when you get meningitis, your immune system shuts down. I got sick every month. I had shingles. I had everything you could think of that year.

"I made it through, did tax season, and everything went well after that outside of getting sick and that the kids' dad left when they were ages three and one."

## Becoming Partner

After having children, Williams didn't consider becoming partner right away because raising her family was more important. "I know how much more partners have to work. I didn't even think it was an option," she says. "I focused on raising my kids and doing a good job because I loved what I did. It's always

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been something I enjoy and, fortunately, I found a really good daycare provider who'd work beyond her normal hours for me during tax time.

"Here I was a single mom, paying thousands of dollars for daycare and, on top of that, Jonathan was prone to ear infections and the medication was expensive," she says. I didn't know how I was going to do everything. But I just kept on going. I couldn't stop that momentum, and it worked out. People were there and they helped."

This is where Williams' budgeting skills really kicked in. "I lived very thrifty because the kids' dad was a deadbeat and has never paid child support," she says. "Now that they're older and there's no daycare needed, I put that same amount of money into retirement instead of increasing my cost of living."

It wasn't until 2013 when the road to becoming partner opened back up for her. "I hadn't been thinking about it because the boys were still just five and seven years old," she says. "Doug Black asked me to coffee and began talking about the process and how it could work. It takes a long time and there's a lot of development that has to happen, so we started down the path. "I was shocked he was offering the opportunity," she says. "I didn't even know how to respond. But we continued. I was wondering if it was because I'm a woman, and I made a comment along those lines, and very quickly got corrected that it wasn't the case. I was told it was performance and the right criteria to be offered that path."

The firm even tailored

Williams' projects according to her availability as a single mom as well as her personality type and experience. This meant taking on projects that weren't as time-sensitive as others, in case things needed to be rescheduled. "If we can pick and match clients that work better with different certain personality types, we do. I tend to get a lot of clients that need assistance regarding bookkeeping and payroll."

### **Leadership as a Woman**

Williams feels her greatest success surrounds working with staff regarding challenging clients. "I have a tendency to listen and to be there for people," she says. "They respond to my sincerity in my communications and what I do, and I think that works well with clients, too," she says. "For example, I had a client during one of the times of a merge, who'd call me and schedule an appointment but say they'd meet with someone else at the firm first, then I could come in after the meeting and they'd fill me in with what I needed to know. It went that way for the first six months of working together, but now it's completely 180," she says. "They appreciate my input and everything I do. They went from being undisclosed about things to opening up about everything — even more than I want to know. I think it was particularly showing them that I had the necessary skillset and knowledge."

Working in the industry as a woman has its own set of challenges, but Williams takes it in stride. "I may get called a bookkeeper sometimes, I've just learned not to take offense. A man isn't called a bookkeeper, he's called an accountant. That's just the way some clients are," she says. "Then there are the rare occasions where a man acts inappropriately because I'm a woman, and I've learned to deal with that by being up front and setting boundaries."

Setting boundaries was a lesson she learned in high school. "I had a bit

of a rough childhood, so I went to counseling and eventually got it through my head that how you feel, how you perceive things, how you react to things, those are all choices. You can choose how you handle life, and part of that is setting boundaries.

"A lot of people say I'm one of the happiest people in the world," she continues. "And it's because I can choose to be happy. If something's bothering me one day, and I smile while talking, it changes people's perception, which rubs off on me and makes me happier."

Williams says her only regret about her career path, looking back, is going through college so fast. "Four years works well, but I also think kids should work while they're in school. I worked full-time while at BSU, taking 20 to 24 credits at a time. I don't recommend that. I was running on five hours of sleep per night."

But at the same time, it's a prime example of Williams' ability to persevere when confronted with difficult situations. She's achieved success by focusing on the positive, no matter what life throws her way, and by zeroing in on what makes her happiest: her work and her family.