

# Houston defense attorney uses 'empathy as an edge'

By Brian Cox



Sara Vanderford still heeds her grandmother's many words of wisdom when faced with a life decision.

"I don't think I went a week of my childhood without her saying 'If there's a will, there's a way,'" says the Houston litigator who keeps a photo of her grandmother in her office. "She also liked to reference King Solomon cutting the baby in half if my sister and I got into a fight."

Since both of Vanderford's parents worked, her grandmother was an integral part of her childhood, looking after Vanderford and her older sister. Every day after school, she encouraged Vanderford to do her "arithmetic," which is what she called any homework. She was a former nurse who had raised four kids and was the

bookkeeper for her husband's construction business. She lived to be 100, dying in 2012 while Vanderford was in her second year at South Texas College of Law in Houston.

Vanderford remembers when she told her grandmother that she had gotten into law school, her grandmother said, "I'm proud of you. I was hoping you'd make a doctor."

"She was tough," says Vanderford with a laugh. "She was a huge role model for me."

A native Houstonian, Vanderford excelled in academics from an early age and was naturally goal oriented. She jokes that much of her play time revolved around her older sister pretending to be a teacher and Vanderford pretending to be her student, which led to her love of school and wanting to seek higher education. In high school, she was captain of the cheer team and was active in student leadership. Her mother was a financial adviser, and later, a teacher, while her father was a mechanical engineer.

"My parents always showed up," says Vanderford. "They were very present, very encouraging, and supportive."

After graduating from a small private high school, Vanderford attended Texas A&M to study business. She adapted easily to the large school environment and was involved with Phi Beta Lambda Business Fraternity, Caring Aggies 'R' Protecting Over Our Lives ("CARPOOL"), Society for Human Resource Management, and Freshman Leadership Organization. She earned her degree in 2010 in the midst of the Great Recession. Awarded with South Texas College of Law's Academic Merit scholarship, she elected to go to law school.

Her initial interest in law was sparked when she was young. She remembers being engrossed by the coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial in the mid-1990s.

"I became a lawyer because I like to learn, figure things out, and find solutions" she says. "I like to get to the bottom of a mystery."

Vanderford's first job in law school was a clerkship for a personal injury firm, where she met an attorney who would serve as a valuable mentor.

"He was looking for somebody with common sense," says Vanderford. "He taught me that even little things matter."



**Attorney Sara Vanderford (right) and her sister, Kristin, played "school" a lot when they were kids. Kristin was always the teacher and Sara the student.**

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She laughs when she tells the story of shadowing him at her first deposition. When he noticed that she was carrying a small notebook, he took her to the supply room and said, “Appearances matter. Get a legal pad.”

He taught her that an attorney can be cordial and polite while still being tough and effective. He often took opposing counsel to lunch, and Vanderford learned from him that “you don’t have to be nasty to do the job.”

When Vanderford graduated from law school in 2014, the job market in Houston was still coming off the effects of the Great Recession and was saturated. Her first position was as an associate at aliantgroup, a management consulting firm headquartered in Houston. It wasn’t work Vanderford identified with, however, and presented few litigation opportunities. After a few years of learning the ropes, she took a position with Liberty Mutual where she finally had the chance to cut her teeth as a litigator.

As a new attorney, Vanderford drew cases that took her to justices of the peace and small claims courts all over Houston and wider Harris County. Sometimes she drove for hours for an appearance.

“That time on my feet helped me so much,” she says. “You gain so much experience being in front of a judge and speaking to a jury.”

At 5’11” tall, she learned she could strike a commanding and imposing presence in the courtroom. She began developing soft skills that would become a key component of her litigating style and philosophy.

When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted law firms across the country, Vanderford moved to a large business litigation defense firm that boasted multiple offices in Texas and elsewhere in the U.S. Working remotely, however, made forging relationships challenging and when a close colleague from her days with Liberty Mutual encouraged her to join him at Donato, Brown, Pool & Moehlmann PLLC, she jumped at the offer.

“They’re serious lawyers and excellent at their trade, but it is a chill work environment,” says Vanderford. “They’re not micromanagers, and I can be creative in the practice of law.”

She found the right fit at the civil litigation firm with its active insurance practice and representation of large corporations directly in catastrophic and non-catastrophic cases. Donato, Brown, Pool & Moehlmann PLLC also handles large loss subrogation cases, for both domestic and international insurers. Its clients include major insurers, manufacturers, refineries, petrochemical facilities, and trucking companies.

Vanderford draws on the early lessons she learned more than a decade ago about the effectiveness of civility and courtesy.

“You don’t need to be a wrecking ball to get the job done and to properly defend someone,” she says. “Sometimes the strongest thing you can do is have softness when it’s needed.”

She wrote an article in 2023 called “Empathy as an Edge: Stone Cold Advocacy with Soft Skills” for Lady Justice, a publication of the Primerus Women Lawyers Section. The article explored how empathy, a seemingly soft skill, can actually be a powerful asset in the competitive world of law practice. Vanderford argued that empathy is not just a personal trait but a crucial skill for lawyers, enabling them to better connect with clients, juries, and other stakeholders.



**Sara enjoys being the “cool aunt” with her nieces, Caitlin (above) and Rachel (below).**





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Vanderford says she realized the strength of empathy early in her career when she was deposing a plaintiff and was moved by his story.

“It really hit me in the gut,” she says, “and I realized that I could feel for him even if my client didn’t legally owe.”

In expressing empathy, Vanderford found the plaintiff was more open and forthcoming. She discovered that empathy can be disarming.

“I need to know as much information as possible so that I can navigate a case and represent my client the best way possible,” she says, “and you can only do that if you really have all the information and all the perspectives of a situation or incident.”

Now a partner at Donato, Brown, Pool & Moehlmann PLLC, Vanderford has a practice concentrating on products liability, defense of commercial trucking and motor vehicle accidents, construction defects, and some first-party defense work.

Two pieces of art hang in her office. One is a framed quote that reads, “Do it for the Plot,” which conveys her adventurous and sometimes spontaneous nature. The other is a picture of a chihuahua wearing a stylish head scarf on the cover of “Dogue.”

“I love fashion and dogs,” explains Vanderford, laughing. She also has a chihuahua named Sarge.

Vanderford says she enjoys defense practice because it enables her to serve as a protector, a guardian, and an advocate. She describes her practice as fresh, forward-thinking, and multidimensional. She embraces creativity and “thinking outside of the box.”

“I think things happen as they should,” says Vanderford. “No matter what, you arrive where you should be, and you’re going to get there whether you took the long way or the short way. Wherever you think you may have made a wrong turn, it was something you needed to learn.”



**Sara loves fashion and chihuahuas – especially her dog Sarge.**