

DAILY BUSINESS REVIEW

PROFILES IN LAW

Former Palm Beach Prosecutor Joins Cohen Milstein to Fight Sexual Abuse Nationwide

by Celia Ampel

When Takisha Richardson first sat down with a 13-year-old Palm Beach County girl whose mother’s boyfriend was charged with molesting her, the attorney was met with silence.

“She was nonverbal,” said Richardson, who was a special victims unit prosecutor at the time. “She wasn’t communicating anymore. Our initial discussions had to take place via notes.”

Richardson knew her job wasn’t just about putting the man behind bars. She wanted to make sure the young girl found her voice and became her own advocate.

So the prosecutor began visiting the teenager’s home off the clock, sitting



TAKISHA RICHARDSON

Born: 1976, Miami

Education: University of Florida, J.D., 2006; Florida A&M University, B.S., 1999

Experience: Associate, Cohen Milstein Sellers & Toll, 2018-present; Assistant State Attorney, Palm Beach State Attorney’s Office, 2010-2018; Assistant Public Defender, Palm Beach Public Defender’s Office, 2006-2010; Investigator, Office of Capital Collateral Regional Counsel, 2002-2003; Paralegal, Miami-Dade Public Defender’s Office, 1999-2002

Takisha Richardson, former Chief of the Special Victims Unit of the Palm Beach County State Attorney’s Office, has had a lifelong passion for supporting sexual violence survivors.

in her room and speaking to her or chatting with the godmother the girl admired.

“That grew into her then texting me, and we started developing the relationship more from there,” Richardson said.

“Letting her know that I wasn’t just her lawyer from 8 to 5 ... the relationship was more than that.”

When it came time for the girl to testify at trial, she spoke “bravely and

succinctly and clearly,” Richardson said. The man received a 45-year prison sentence.

Helping sexual abuse survivors find strength is what drove Richardson as Chief of the Special Victims Unit at the Palm Beach State Attorney’s Office, and it’s what drove her to move into private practice last month.

Richardson joined the Palm Beach Gardens office of Cohen Milstein Sellers & Toll PLLC, a 90 plus attorney plaintiffs firm with a team focused on sexual violence litigation, to make a difference beyond county lines and to help families win often much-needed financial remedies.

“My one life goal is to change the stigma associated with sexual abuse and make it more a victim-centered view instead of a victim-blaming view,” she said.

MUTUAL ADMIRATION

Richardson has been impressed by Cohen Milstein’s work since she saw Michael Dolce, Of Counsel at the firm, persuade the Florida Legislature in 2010 to eliminate criminal and civil statutes of limitation for childhood sexual battery: “I watched him basically from the rafters, in awe,” she said.

It turned out the admiration was mutual.

“For the entirety of her career, Takisha has fought to defend women and children who have been the victims of unspeakable acts of violence,” Dolce said in a statement. “I’ve been familiar with Takisha’s work for years, and I’m confident that her tireless work ethic, team leadership

and unique hands-on experience will prove invaluable for our clients.”

Richardson wants to bring those skills to civil work in part because she has seen how financial limitations stop victims from getting therapy or otherwise moving on from the abuse.

“A lot of times, it would shape the prosecutions,” she said. “If the perpetrator is the breadwinner in the family and he’s now incarcerated, then the mom is now discouraged from speaking out because he’s the person paying the rent, he’s the person paying the car bill.”

Richardson has seen how sexual abuse affects families since she was a child when she learned two of her friends were victims. In the meantime, Richardson was already becoming outspoken: She was in theater from a young age and won an oratory contest in elementary school.

“I’ve always had the gift of gab and the gift of argument,” the Miami native said. “I liked presenting my ideas and having people listen.”

After graduating from Florida A&M University in 1999, Richardson became a paralegal in the Miami-Dade public defender’s office and then worked in the Fort Lauderdale branch of the Office of Capital Collateral Regional Counsel, which handles death penalty appeals.

It wasn’t long before she earned her law degree from the University of Florida in 2006 and became a public defender in Palm Beach County, later switching teams to the state attorney’s office and rising through the ranks. She also

joined the Palm Beach County Sexual Assault Response Team, an organization of community stakeholders who aim to “ensure victims receive comprehensive, compassionate care.”

ADULT VICTIMS

Richardson won significant victories for many children, who went from “broken little birds” to vocal self-advocates. But she noticed losses were much more common when it came to adult victims of sexual violence.

“It’s interesting to me that a person charged with sex abuse against an adult woman can merely come into court and say, ‘No, she wanted it, and it was consensual,’ and juries have great difficulty convicting those perpetrators,” she said.

The same thing doesn’t apply to other crimes, Richardson said. In a burglary case, “the jurors aren’t saying, ‘Well, how do we know your television was taken?’”

The #MeToo movement has been heartening to Richardson, but she knows more needs to be done to change society’s view of sexual violence. The most rewarding part of her job, she said, is giving those who have experienced abuse the courage to stand up for themselves.

“They go from being victims to being survivors in the process,” she said. “I tell them all at the beginning, ‘Your experience is one thing that happened to you, and it doesn’t have to shape who you are.’”

Celia Ampel covers South Florida litigation. Contact her at campel@alm.com or on Twitter at @CeliaAmpel.

COHENMILSTEIN

Powerful Advocates. Meaningful Results.

2925 PGA Boulevard, Suite 200, Palm Beach Gardens, FL 33410
561.515.1400 | cohenmilstein.com

Chicago, IL | Denver, CO | New York, NY | Palm Beach Gardens, FL | Philadelphia, PA | Raleigh, NC | Washington, DC