By DEBRA BAKER

Lawson left after three years and joined the University of Denver College of Law, where she taught in sex discrimination cases, working primarily with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Though the "trial attorney" title still makes her chuckle ("A brand new paper bag.") the work she did on behalf of clients and the EEOC matched her interests; it was exciting to be able to go out and really start using her law prohibiting discrimination. At the time, evidence was easy to find, as employers left fairly blatant clues about why they failed to hire women or minorities. The Casper native originally opted for work in the public sector out of law school, because it seemed to offer the most level playing field for women and minorities. Lawson went through law school in an era when women in the profession were rare. As one of only three females in her class, she faced continual challenges, especially from her fellow students. A government position seemed the best alternative, and the EEOC matched her interests.

"It was exciting to be able to go out and really start making the change that I wanted to be made," Lawson says of the work.

That first job was "challenging and fun," but she eventually tired of the office's poor management. So she left the private practice she started with Fieger in 1982 and joined Atlantic Richfield Company as a senior attorney. Originally, she concentrated on work for the company's production section and its mining efforts. She was heavily involved in legal issues surrounding the Black Thunder Coal Mine near Gillette and even helped Atlantic Richfield establish what would become the town of Wright in Campbell County.

"Slogging through the muck of a coal mine was a far cry from a big city legal practice," Lawson says. "I certainly had days when I thought, 'What am I doing? I don't know anything about this!'"

Working for Atlantic Richfield led her to her next career adventure. The company occasionally referred promising employees to Leadership Denver, a program offered through the city's chamber of commerce to foster leadership development in that community. Once a month, Leadership Denver participants spent a day learning about some aspect of the city. That experience led Lawson to develop an interest in the public sector and finding a way to contribute on a larger scale.

Serving on the bench was extremely difficult work, requiring an overload that most attorneys wouldn't be able to handle. Working too hard and spending years as an overachiever took their toll, mentally and physically. "There comes a point when you hit the wall, psychologically," Lawson says. Realizing that wasn't easy for someone whose natural response was to just try harder.

Lawson entered her current phase professionally in 1990, when she went to work for the Denver-based Judicial Arbiter Group, Inc. Today, she presides over arbitration hearings and conducts judicial settlement conferences. She draws upon her judicial experience to act as a neutral party who brings the various sides together to work out a solution to their problems. It's a good fit and a good use of the skills developed over the course of a distinguished career.

Lawson has made other changes as she entered this phase of her life. One of the biggest was the addition of 5-year-old Mariah, whom she and her husband adopted in 1997 from an orphanage in Kazakhstan. Bringing a child at mid-life added a new dimension to the couple's lives. Adopting an older child brings its own challenges, but they sensed that Mariah would fit well within their family shortly after they met her. Less than a year after coming to America, Mariah, who spoke no English, is fluent in the Chinese she learned to appreciate on the bench.

Leslie Lawson was married to Dan Himes, with whom she has one daughter, Mariah. In addition to her two UW degrees, Lawson also holds an A.A. (1967) from Casper College. She is admitted to the Wyoming and Colorado bars and to the U.S. Supreme Court. Throughout a full career, Lawson has found time to serve her profession and her community. Among her affiliations over the years: Colorado Lawyers for the Arts (director, 1990), Leadership Denver, Denver Women's Bar Association (vice president and co-founder), Project Open Heart, American Arbitration Association, Colorado Bar Foundation Fellow, Denver Bar Association (trustee, 1984-87), Colorado Supreme Court Board of Law Examiners, Colorado Women's Bar Association (president, 1984-87), Lawyers for Children's Women's (president, 1994-95).

Change of Perspective

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