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SHE'S HIRED

Former Birmingham attorney Michelle Lokey is “hired” as legal counsel by Donald Trump and makes an appearance on “The Apprentice 3.” How real is that?

by Jan Walsh

Burning the midnight oil changed Michelle Lokey’s life. But this late night session was not one at the office, with piles of legal documents and mugs of stale coffee. Instead she was curled up on the sofa at her Birmingham home chatting on the phone and seeking the advice of her supermodel friend Molly Sims, in Los Angeles.

Although Lokey loved her Birmingham home, job and friends, there was something pulling her away from the comfort and security she’d known there. She was ready for a life and career change.

And Sims knew her better than anyone. When Lokey’s childhood dreams of becoming a medical doctor (like her father) were dashed by Vanderbilt’s chemistry classes, Sims persuaded Lokey to join her in Pre-Law. After college, while living in New York—Lokey attending law school at Seton Hall and Sims working for MTV—they grew even closer. And through all the years and distance afterwards, they maintained this bond and remain the closest of confidants.

So in an effort to budge Lokey from Birmingham and toward Los Angeles, Sims asked a simple, but life-changing question. “What do you really want to do?” When Lokey’s response was real estate law, Sims replied, “Well, the two best at that are Donald Trump and the Pope. And I know

Donald Trump.” Sims then offered to ask Trump for some legal contacts in Los Angeles. The offer was appreciated, but not taken too seriously.

The following week, Sims attended an NBC event in Los Angeles promoting Trump’s reality television show, “The Apprentice 3.” After all the microphones were taken away, she approached Trump. “I explained that I had a friend in real estate law who wanted to relocate to LA and needed some contacts. He asked me if she was smart. And I told him she was brilliant. He then said for Michelle to call for an interview,” remembers Sims.

After scheduling the appointment, Lokey spent two weeks shopping for the perfect suit—a black, Dolce & Gabbana suit dress found in L.A. at half price, which she and Sims altered—reading all of Trump’s books, and of course, continuing her work as in-house counsel for Hibbett Sports, a publicly traded company in Birmingham. Then for the opportunity of her lifetime, Lokey flew to New York.

“Mr. Trump was the nicest, kindest and most down to earth person. He seemed impressed with my work at Hibbett’s. But when he took several calls during the interview, I grew a little worried. I knew from reading his books that he only spent 15 minutes in interviews, so I thought,

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“This is either going to be the best or the worst one of my life.”

After meeting for 30 to 35 minutes, Trump told Lokey that he couldn't provide her any contacts in California. “And I began thanking him for his time when he added, ‘Because I am going to hire you myself’. Then he asked my salary requirement. So I aimed high, and he negotiated from there.”

Afterwards, Trump called in general counsels Bernie Diamond and Jason Greenblatt. “Mr. Trump introduced them and said that he had just hired me. They both looked at me like I was an alien,” laughs Lokey. “Then Bernie leaned over and asked me when I had passed the New York Bar. I told him that I had not passed the New York Bar. I worked in Birmingham and had passed the Alabama Bar. Bernie then looked at the ceiling, as if he were thinking, ‘That makes about as much sense as hiring her.’”

Diamond and Greenblatt directed Lokey into another room. “And Bernie said, ‘you are clearly as shocked by this as we are. Maybe you should have a martini and settle down’,” recalls Lokey. But she composed herself without a martini, and the three sat and talked for a while. Both became more comfortable with the work she had done in Birmingham and soon recognized that Lokey had both the book smarts and street smarts to work for Trump.

Leaving the building in the driving rain, Lokey realized that she'd spent the last dollar in her wallet, to buy a leather brief case for the interview, and had no money for a cab. So with her new brief case in hand, new suit on her back, and the sky falling from above, she began walking back to Sims' New York apartment, where she was staying. “Nothing beats Southern hospitality, but New Yorkers are the next best thing. A woman came along and covered me with her umbrella before she dashed into a cab. Then a man passing by, yelled, ‘Oh, a damsel in distress!’ And he gave me his umbrella,” she remembers.

The following day, Sims called to thank Trump. But he

thanked her instead—and has done so several times since. “Just recently, he told me that Michelle is smart, tough and charming. But he is all of those things too. I think that's why they get along so well,” explains Sims. “Michelle may have been in the right place at the right time. But she makes her own luck. Preparation and determination equals luck.”

Today Lokey has 30 different legal projects on her desk, handling anything legal that comes to Trump, except litigation. The stack includes (but is not limited to) new agreements for all property acquisitions, getting the Chicago hotel and tower financed, the golf course project in California, his signature New York properties, and licensing and marketing merchandise with Trump's name and likeness. “The casinos are presently being reorganized with total cash inputs, and I have also been working closely with him on that,” she says.

Trump's interests are diverse and include real estate, gaming, sports and entertainment. But his image is direct and distinctive. When “The Donald” talks, people expect that bottom line, “You're fired,” TV toughness. “What you're actually seeing on TV is his lack of tolerance. And to some degree he is intolerant of anything sub par. But in reality, he is equally as fair,” explains Lokey. “Mr. Trump is undaunted by his dreams and drives the deal until it is done. He thinks through every financing possibility, develops strong and lasting relationships with people who provide lasting support for new projects, and is so personable that he can win anyone over.”

The filming of episode three for “The Apprentice 3” was in progress when Lokey began her legal career with Trump. Her office is located in Trump Towers, where the contestants live, so the NBC film crew is always around. The boardroom (in the show) is also in Trump Towers, although it is a simulation of the actual boardroom—due to the need for special camera placement.

“One day, I was either in Mr. Trump's office by happenstance, or he called me in to be an extra in a shot, and I got to know the crew,” remembers Lokey. A few weeks

later, George Ross—Executive Vice President and Senior Counsel for the Trump Organization and one of Trump's two advisors on the show—had to leave town and would be unavailable for filming the next episode. So NBC asked Lokey to take his place. “When they asked (on Wednesday night) if I would fill in for George, on Thursday night and then Friday in the Boardroom, I already had a weekend trip (to LA) planned to visit Molly. But I quickly moved my ticket out a week or two,” she laughs.

Lokey's life may be stranger than fiction. But “The Apprentice” is truly reality television. They did not comb her hair or make up her face. She wore her own clothes. And there was no script, nor time to develop serious stage fright. “I was a little nervous. Everything is a test. So I am sure that Mr. Trump was interested to see how I would handle something different being thrown at me,” she realizes.

During filming Lokey worked with Carolyn Kepcher, Trump's other advisor on the show and Chief Operating Officer and General Manager for the Trump National Golf Club. And she admits to being intimidated by Kepcher before the two met. “Carolyn comes off as tough, and she is tough. But she is also open, kind and fair. We went together to make our own independent assessments of the candidates and lunched together.” The contestants never know when the advisors are coming. They just appear. “So when we're around they are pretty well behaved. The camera crew actually sees more of the breakdowns than we do.”

Later in the boardroom Lokey and Kepcher asked the candidates questions about obvious problems, to determine what went wrong and why. In Lokey's opinion, much of Trump's final decision (regarding who is “fired”) depends on how the

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candidates handle themselves in the boardroom. “I truly think that he tells no one who he is going to pick. The NBC executives are just as surprised as the audience.”

But Lokey's legal work was not neglected during the shooting. “I took it with me on the set and worked during breaks. My job is definitely as counsel, not the TV show. But it was fun, and I would do it again,” she says.

In the short time Lokey has worked for Trump (since October 2004), she has learned a lot. But the greatest lesson is one of confidence. “He has taught me to be confident in what I say and in my actions. He always says, ‘Don't be a choker. Don't choke under pressure. And this job is more pressure than any job I have held,’ she admits.

Still burning the midnight oil, Lokey works nine plus hours a day. But she balances her job with Trump with another, more important job—being a mother to her two-year-old son, Jack. “I am a mother first. It is my best, favorite and most rewarding job.”

“How she maintains her softness working through hard situations, in a cutthroat legal world, is amazing. You would never believe this sweet woman is a kick butt attorney,” says Scott Leger—lead singer for Wide Awake rock band and Lokey's leading man.

Yet neither her real estate law, reality TV, nor real life adventures keep Lokey from returning to Birmingham for an occasional visit. She misses the city's peacefulness and her 5:30 A.M. running buddies, the “Euclid Fighting Armadillos.” But she loves the energy of New York more. “Central Park is at the end of my street, so I run there and walk to work. You can find peace in New York too. You just have to seek it out.” Making her own luck and her own life, Lokey confidently seeks life's next episode. **B**