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One Woman's Battle

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One woman's battle

■ HOPKINS

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case."

Ann Hopkins is, as she has said, a "presence." She drinks beer, swears, smokes Winston Gold cigarettes and, as she once said, isn't "afraid of getting into the snake pit."

On a recent weekday morning, Hopkins came to the door of her townhouse, her short hair still wet; she was dressed in a pink suit, red heels, no makeup (she is allergic to cosmetics), gold watch and ring, and stockings with a run in one leg. In an interview that ranged between her kitchen and living room, depending upon where the children were, Hopkins said she could not provide the answer to what everyone wants to know: whether she could actually go back to Price Waterhouse – a place that clearly doesn't want her.

She sat on the couch and imagined several scenarios. Then, she concluded, for the record: "Until an option to appeal is not exercised, or until all appeals are exhausted, I don't have a decision to make."

At times, Hopkins, with her brisk, sensible, confident manner, seems unfazed by the criticism that has been leveled at her: that her chances for a partnership might have perked up if she had only styled her hair, worn makeup, and learned to walk and talk more femininely. "Suppose that somebody wrote down about you that you needed a course in charm school," she said. "That isn't a matter of truth, that's a matter of 13th-century point of view. That particular comment cannot possibly be offensive. It can only be laughable." But Hopkins' supporters say she has been wounded by the name-calling. "She's not impervious," said Ruth Hopper, a neighbor, adding, "Anyone in her position has to protect oneself, and part of this protective cover is, 'I'm not going to be hurt by this.' "

When pressed, Hopkins says only that it bothers her when the press makes sweeping generalizations, based on litigation that by its very nature "villainizes both sides." Actually, she claims, it doesn't bother *her*: it bothers *her* that it bothers her *friends*, some of whom still work for Price Waterhouse.

Friends rush to her defense. Commented Douglas B. Huron, one of her lawyers: "It's been fun working with her. I suppose that if you're a man who has never worked with a dynamic, assertive woman, you may have to get used to the notion.

"As a professional, she's extraordinarily competent, very demanding, she's very careful, very high quality, works very hard and expects others to do the same," said Hopper, who has followed the proceedings. "So I don't know how you describe that. I don't know why it has to be characterized as either 'hard' or 'aggressive.' "

Hopkins has described herself as small-town Texas, from the right side of the tracks. Her family was military and moved around the country and to West Germany. When it came time for college, she selected Hollins College, in Roanoke, Va., because a friend of her mother's had gone there and loved it. It was an interesting choice, considering that the all-women's Hollins is known not only for its academic programs, but also for its Southern charm-school atmosphere. (Even in the late '60s, when other campuses were in revolutionary uproar, Hollins women still wore lime green skirts and Pappagallo flats to classes, talked about fraternity beer parties at the University of Virginia and preferred sunbathing to striking).

At Hollins, Hopkins, like many graduates of all-women's institutions, says she came to believe she could succeed on merit alone: "That it's you and the problem, competing with everybody else to get the best solution."

After graduating, Hopkins went on to get a master's in mathematics from Indiana University. Then, after a one-year teaching stint in the math department at Hollins, she took a job at IBM, developing mathematical models. She held several different jobs before landing in 1970 at Touche Ross, an accounting firm, where she worked as a project manager for big computer systems. "In that day and time, engineering and scientific skills were just sucked up into the industrial enterprise as fast as they were developed," she said. "We had, all things considered, remarkably interesting jobs to do, and there was a scarf-over-the-shoulder, what-do-we-do-next attitude and environment. NASA was my client. It was a new agency. It was run by a very young and nonbureaucratic and 'let's-get-the-job-done,' almost a Marine Corps attitude."

As her career advanced, and the world of technology matured, those Right Stuff attitudes changed. At first, she didn't blame sexual discrimination. "One, I'd never seen it before. It wasn't something I looked for. It wasn't something I would have noticed, had it been there." She took action against Price Waterhouse only because she received an "unsatisfactory explanation for an irrational business decision."

People who have followed the Hopkins case have tended to view it as a continuous series of events and have wondered how Hopkins, despite her tenacious exterior, has been able to perservere, both financially and emotionally. Her lawyers, who over the course of this battle have become friends, as well as part-time psychiatrists and counselors on erratic child behavior, have been wonderfully delinquent about billing; Hopkins so far has paid only about $67,000 of the $429,000 of costs incurred. As for her emotional stamina, she says that, in truth, there have been 1½ years or so between major happenings. And, as far as Hopkins is concerned, the day-to-day activities associated with raising three children by herself (her husband left her several years ago) and holding down a full-time job have almost always put those priorities well ahead of any lawsuit.

As she talks, her eldest son, Gilbert, 12, appears in the kitchen doorway in a faded Phillips Academy T-shirt. Hopkins' children have grown up with this fight. When faced with a choice of reading a front-page Washington Post story about his mother or reading the sports section, Gilbert might choose sports. Sometimes the children ask questions, such as "How many more times do we have to win?"

Hopkins eyes Gilbert closely. "Are you going to wear that same shirt again? It's got a big hole in it." Gilbert says that he knows, and Hopkins lets the matter drop. He tells her he needs an excuse note for school, and she turns to the kitchen counter to write it.

"My son, T. Gilbert Gallagher, has a number of commitments, established by me, that make it necessary for him to be out of school from 11 a.m. on – what's the date? – Wednesday, 6 June, and all day Thursday."

"OK," she says, handing him the note, "that takes care of that. Now. Gilbert, what else do you need? Do you want some money? How much? Well, if you don't know, I certainly don't. $2? You're not going to take off for Maza [a shopping mall, with a nearby McDonald's] again, are you? I mean, $2 won't cover it, if you are. Now, do you want some breakfast? Do you need some shoes? You don't want orange juice or anything?"

A few minutes later, Hopkins' daughter, Tela, 14, appears in the kitchen with two friends. The girls have finished with school – at least, they're not going to any more classes – and they're headed for Kings Dominion, an amusement park 70 miles south of the District, with three waterslides and a Rebel Yell roller-coaster.

"I need mucho money," Tela says.

Replies Hopkins, "Well, I don't know about mucho money, but – do you remember – Oh, I know what you need to do – go up to the fourth floor, and there's a pair of black jeans, and bring me the contents of the pocket."

Hopkins says she doesn't know whether there are lessons for her daughter, or other women, in her story. "Time will have to tell on that one," she says. "One of the difficulties of being on the leading edge, or with being first, is that you can't generalize from an observation of one. That's a question more appropriately addressed to an attorney."

In any case, she says that the issues involved are, by now, slightly "stale." Working women have additional concerns these days, she says. "They're talking about child care and other civil issues – maternity leave. I mean, there was no maternity leave at any of the Big Eight I ever worked for."

It's time for Hopkins to go to work. She reminds her youngest, Peter, 10, who is out of school, to lock the door. "You're not always good at remembering that, you know," she says. (Hopkins once told a reporter that she has always treated her children as adults: "I didn't goo-goo and gaa-gaa.")

Then, grabbing her Coach briefcase, she walks out the front door of her townhouse and climbs into her red van. Hopkins drives up her street, takes a left onto busy Connecticut Avenue, then disappears into a stream of commuters who, like herself, are headed for work.