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CAPITOL COURAGE

## Andrea McWilliams

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Million-dollar lobbyist Andrea McWilliams is known for her tireless pursuit on behalf of her clients' issues. Diagnosed with cancer in January 2006, she was just as aggressive in overcoming the disease. Learning she was pregnant days after her diagnosis, the indomitable McWilliams combined her inner strength, her faith and the support of close friends and advisors to beat the illness on her own terms.

## Be Fierce! Andrea McWilliams

Story by Julie Tereshchuk  
Photos by John Langford and Courtesy of Andrea McWilliams

FROM HER HUMBLE START ABOVE A BURGER JOINT ON Congress Avenue, to being a Capitol chief of staffer in her early twenties, blazing a trail in lobby circles and going on to become a top donor to the Bush campaign and the highest-grossing female lobbyist in Texas, Andrea McWilliams has unflinchingly met and overcome challenges.

Yet the last 18 months have been the ultimate test for this quick-witted Austin native, and through it all, her strength has been unfailing. Clients, friends and family say McWilliams has not missed a beat – despite the premature birth of her son Max, and his NICU stay; despite the death of her beloved father; and despite a surprise third pregnancy.

However, McWilliams displayed her greatest strength in overcoming breast cancer – diagnosed just days before she learned of that third pregnancy.

The good news? A healthy – although premature – Marcus was safely delivered in late August 2006. And McWilliams has overcome her cancer, even while maintaining her always-on lifestyle throughout her treatment.

Strength through breast cancer – that's McWilliams' unique yet compelling message, which she is unswerving in delivering. "Breast cancer has made me a better person," she explained. She appreciates her children and her husband more,

and savors every minute of every day. "It's been hard work, and I wouldn't ever want anyone to get breast cancer again, but you can find strength in it."

In telling her story, now that she's disease-free, McWilliams hopes to provide support and inspiration to other young women. "I want people to realize that cancer can be a part of everyday life. People live, work, have babies – all with cancer."

A key role model for McWilliams was Dallas Mayor Laura Miller – the "perfect example" of a woman who can continue to be a wife, woman and leader while beating breast cancer. Lying on a hospital gurney, pregnant and waiting for her first chemo session, an email arrived on McWilliams' ever-present BlackBerry. "Be Fierce!" wrote Miller. Those words have become McWilliams' mantra. "With Andrea, I had no doubt that she should tackle it head-on, no-holds-barred, and go into full attack mode against the disease," said Mayor Miller, explaining her pivotal email. In the same way Miller inspired her, McWilliams hopes her experience will provide hope to others.

After the birth of daughter Madison in 2001, McWilliams received infertility treatments from her ObGyn, Dr. Jeffrey Youngkin, before finally becoming pregnant with Maxwell. His birth and week-long neonatal intensive care unit stay in

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Andrea + Dean McWilliams  
in their elegant offices just  
just opposite the Capitol.  
Makeup by Lisa Gonzalez.  
Hair by Courtney Shonk  
+ Stephanie Caillabet.  
Clothing by Escada.  
Photo by John Langford;  
assisted by Kimberly Sasser.







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October 2005 began a series of personal challenges which tested McWilliams' fortitude and resilience as never before.

A stickler for self exams, while breast-feeding Max she'd taken a break. Two months after she delivered, she quit breastfeeding and immediately did a breast exam. She found a lump. Cancer.

The day following the news, she had the lump removed – and received what she describes as “the gold standard” from surgeon Dr. Ames Smith, namely clear margins around the tumor. One week later, in January 2006, and still recovering from her lumpectomy, McWilliams happened to be at Nau's Drugstore in Old Enfield. In line, she happened to spot the pregnancy tests. During her two previous pregnancies, McWilliams had lower back pain. And on this day – yes, you guessed it – she happened to have lower back pain. She purchased a pregnancy test. For two years she had stared at them, hoping to get pregnant. “Now, I had two red lines,” recalled McWilliams. “I'm pregnant and I've got to do chemo,” the rarely rattled McWilliams kept thinking.

Although it was Saturday, Dr. Youngkin opened his office to discuss her options. McWilliams soon learned that with the correct medical care, both she and her baby would survive. She was treated by two specialists from Texas Oncology – Austin-based Dr. Michael Kasper, who administered all her chemotherapy and oversaw her day-to-day treatment; and Dallas-based Dr. Joyce O'Shaughnessy.

Steadfast in her determination to beat her cancer and avoid any recurrence, McWilliams requested the most aggressive treatment possible, given her pregnancy. At the recommendation of Dr. O'Shaughnessy, who is co-chair of the breast cancer research committee at Baylor-Sammons Cancer Center, Texas Oncology, P.A., US Oncology; McWilliams received standard Adriamycin-Cytosan chemotherapy while pregnant, followed by Taxol after she delivered Marcus. (Like many cancer survivors, she continues to take Tamoxifen.) Both oncologists concur that her survival chances are excellent. “The long-term chances of remaining disease-free are very high. In the range of 95% or even more,” said Joyce O'Shaughnessy. “She's in the highest category of breast cancer survivability.”

Throughout 2006, as her pregnancy and her chemotherapy progressed, McWilliams maintained her poise so effectively that only her closest confidants knew of her illness. It takes an “enormous amount of energy, discipline and confidence to pull that off,” commented breast cancer survivor Mayor Laura Miller.

McWilliams exercised regularly throughout her pregnancy, and hired Stephanie Caillabet, a former-Hollywood wig maker, who custom-made a full-length human hair hand-tied wig to replace McWilliams' own hair. Yet it wasn't only her appearance she maintained. It was also her work schedule. In order to maintain her long work days, she employs two live-in nannies. Dean McWilliams admires “the grace

and pragmatism” with which his wife balances her time, as she hurries home from the Capitol to tuck the kids in before returning for one of the many late-night meetings that stretch on into the early morning hours throughout the legislative session. (Actually, he said many more complimentary things about her – as did all her friends, clients and business associates – however, space permits us only to say that the overwhelming consensus on her was “amazing.”)

To maximize their time at home, the McWilliams prefer to entertain clients and business colleagues in their lovingly restored historic Enfield house (She's a board member of the Heritage Society of Austin and the immediate past president of its under-40s group, Inherit Austin). It not only gives them the opportunity to invite people into a relaxed environment but also means that five-year-old Madison can join them for part of the evening.

Sitting in the drawing room of her French Chateau-inspired home, dressed in a cream-colored Armani suit and sipping tea from a china cup, Andrea McWilliams appears the epitome of inherited wealth. Otherwise how would she and husband Dean, at ages 34 and 39, be able to afford their exquisite 1922 house? They've restored it to include a guest house, swimming pool and wine cellar, filled it with French antiques and even commissioned a mural-adorned ceiling, where one of the cherubs has the face of daughter Madison (To avoid any sibling rivalry, Max and Marcus will be added soon.)

Yet their financial success is thanks only to hard work, said McWilliams, using her 10-year wedding an-

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The McWilliams family holiday portrait, 2006. Dean and Andrea with Max, Madison and Marcus in their historic Austin home.

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Wolens. “She has a [wide] breadth of knowledge and is the consummate multitasker... She’s always been a sort of tiger, with an independent mind and very certain of what she does... A tornado in Armani!”

“One of the signs of being on the bottom rung at the Capitol is having the furthest parking spot,” recalled Dean McWilliams. However, back in the early ‘90s that proved to be a benefit, as one day he spotted a “beautiful young woman” also headed to the Capitol. Her confidence, drive and intensity drew Dean to her and, despite initially rebuffing his request for a date, by February 1994 the couple were married.

Her ethos has always been to arrive early and stay late and be prepared to take on the smallest job, because you never know what it will lead to, or what you will learn from it. McWilliams discovered that her husband shared her can-do attitude, and with both holding low-paying Capitol jobs, the enterprising couple began their own side business, printing so-called “slate cards” for state trade associations. In 2000, with a stint at public affairs consulting company Public Strategies under her belt and after working with other independent lobbyists, Andrea merged her practice with Dean’s to form McWilliams & Associates, Inc.

Combining their talents paid off. In 2005, *The Dallas Morning News* featured the couple as two of the top three lobbyists in the state, and Texans for Public Justice recognized her as the top female lobbyist in Texas on their list of “Million-Dollar Lobbyists.” His wife has “a pattern of succeeding where people do not expect her to,” explained Dean. “She always goes that extra yard.”

Top: McWilliams and her father Frank Beynon at daughter Madison’s third birthday party, October 2004. Like her father, who died in September 2006, McWilliams attends Hyde Park Baptist Church. She credits her father with her strong work ethic. Bottom: Honeymooners Andrea and Dean McWilliams, February 1994. They were earning peanuts working at the Capitol, and Dean’s parents paid for the honeymoon. The newlyweds couldn’t afford an overnight stay in nearby Las Vegas.



Their fundraising for then-Governor Bush catapulted the McWilliams to national prominence. In 2000, the couple was among the first to become “Pioneers” – which meant they raised at least \$100,000 for the Bush presidential campaign. Today, they maintain their connections with the White House. Both serve on the Bush National Finance Committee, and were members of the Honorary Committee for the 54<sup>th</sup> Presidential Inauguration.

Despite the collection of framed pho-

tographs and thank you notes adorning her swanky offices – the closest lobbyist offices to the Capitol, she observed – disabuse yourself of any notion that the Bush fundraising gives them any kind of inside track, maintained McWilliams. “That’d be laughable. I get a letter that I can frame when each of my children is born. That’s it. For anyone to represent anything else is ridiculous.”

McWilliams is proud, however, of her firm’s emphasis on working both sides of the aisle. “She has clients across the political spectrum,” concurs Steve Wolens. That’s unusual in lobbying circles, particularly in Austin, she explained, and is a unique advantage. Although she works with clients from both parties, she has the Democratic roots, whereas A&M alum Dean has the Republican background. They gain strength as a team from their differences. He is the quieter, less effusive of the two. And he prefers to delve down into the details of a client’s case, where she is all about strategy. Her mind works on a three-dimensional level as she rapidly weighs all the factors influencing a

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Dean and Andrea McWilliams with the President and First Lady at their Crawford ranch, 2002.



situation. And she's not slow to share her laser-sharp and pinpoint-accurate analysis, talking with a confidence and ease that is part a natural talent, and part thanks to the long hours she spends working a client's case. "She's a master strategist," said Wolens.

And what of lobbying's reputation? She is articulate, informed and direct in discussing her profession. Lobbying has changed significantly over the last 10 years and is no longer backroom and backslapping, she said. Today it's a technology-driven and information-based job. "We involve our clients every step of the way," she said. "The only thing you have when you lobby is your reputation." Once sullied, a lobbyist's effectiveness is gone, she added. "So it only makes sense for us to have the cleanest reputation that we can, because that allows us to effectively communicate for our clients."

McWilliams learned her hard work ethic from her father. Frank Beynon owned the Burger Bank at 8<sup>th</sup> and Congress, and she and older sister Annette grew up in the family apartment above the café. Beynon went on to run the cafeteria in the Texas Employment Commission building, becoming a legend for his unfailing good spirits. Her father taught her that through hard work you can achieve anything. "When I think about my dad leaving at 4:00 a.m. every day to open the cafeteria, I'm so proud... I can only work hard - or strive to make something of myself. It was born in me."

Beynon battled ill health for many years, passing away in September 2006.



Gift in hand, McWilliams (in the visor) on her sixth birthday, July '78.

She is grateful that they were able to share some of his final days. The day he was scheduled to fly home from Stanford (where McWilliams had sent him in a last attempt to arrest his brain tumor), her water broke - and Beynon arrived just in time for the birth of his grandson Marcus. All three ended up in St. David's - which gave Andrea the opportunity not only to place her newly-born son in her father's arms, but also to steal some late-night visiting time with the man who had been her lifelong role model. "It was really special," said McWilliams. "In my robe and house shoes, with no makeup and my hat, I'd go through the basement so no one would see me."

Friends - and she counts husband Dean as her closest friend - sustained her during the months of her own treatment. Erika Herndon volunteered to attend chemo sessions with McWilliams, and says she "seemed so positive and knowledgeable, and to be in a partnership with her physician...She's been steadfast throughout."

Like Herndon, Kristin Armstrong offered to share McWilliams' chemo sessions. Armstrong has firsthand experience of living with a cancer survivor, as her ex-husband is Austin icon Lance Armstrong, who overcame cancer to go on to a record-breaking cycling career. It was Kristin Armstrong who handed McWilliams a small mirror designed to lift her spirits during chemo treatments. That mirror became a cherished gift. Like Herndon, Armstrong shares McWilliams' strong faith. "I wrote messages all over the mirror in permanent pen - words about beauty, and how



Skiing with Madison in Beaver Creek, CO, spring 2006. McWilliams was four months pregnant and had just completed her second chemo treatment. The pair also took a mother-daughter trip to London as McWilliams struggled with her own mortality. Today, doctors say her survivability is at its highest.

## Lifestyle Tips to Remain Disease-Free

McWilliams' long-term chances of remaining disease-free could exceed 95%, says Dr. O'Shaughnessy, depending on her lifestyle choices. "Her chances improve if she exercises 30 minutes a day and watches the fat in her diet. A low-fat diet of 35 grams a day is proven to reduce the risk of breast cancer occurring."

Throughout her illness and pregnancy, McWilliams exercised regularly with certified fitness instructor Michelle Mason, who advises:

- Listen to what your doctor says, although your body will also let you know at what level you can exercise.
- Women like to walk; however, also consider using weights. (1 or 2lbs if pregnant.)
- Water aerobics is great, particularly for pregnant women.
- Don't just sit around and do nothing. Exercise helps you physically, mentally and spiritually. You will have better treatments and better pregnancies if you exercise.

precious she is to God... It was simply a reminder of who she really is."

Today, McWilliams says, "Be fierce about your family, about your treatment and your faith." How has she coped over the past 18 months? "I thought I was strong, but this was hard, and it took me a while to realize I had to let go and let God carry me through this. That's when I found the strength I never thought I had."

Fierce. A tiger. A tornado. The descriptions of Andrea McWilliams' strength may vary, but the theme is

constant. Dr. Joyce O'Shaughnessy summed up the "silver lining" of breast cancer, and its impact on this remarkable woman who scheduled her cancer treatments in the same way she schedules the many other calls on her time. "Once you come through something like this, you've learned a lot about your ability to handle and overcome adversity," said the distinguished breast cancer clinician. "In Andrea's case, it has only strengthened an already very strong woman." ★

A Conversation with Andrea McWilliams  
the first in the *ask austinwoman* series

Wednesday, January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2007 - 8:30 a.m.

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The Texas State Capitol Building

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