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**P40**



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*The power of information.*

## Adoption attorney draws on lifetime of experience

*‘Tops in her field’ Coppock witnessed at early age the high cost of custody battles*

Story by  
**Nancy Henderson**  
begins on page 2

Photo by Adam Taylor Gash | The Ledger

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# Coppock shares lessons learned in adoption law

By Nancy Henderson

**F**ew adoption attorneys can fully empathize with would-be parents as much as Dawn Coppock. She was 8 when her 4-year-old cousin came to live “temporarily” with the family in Jefferson County.

“My mom’s sister struggled with some challenges,” she says. “She never did get her act together.”

Coppock’s parents ended up adopting their niece, but not before years of emotionally painful and expensive legal wrangling. The birth mother contested their petition to adopt, and they found themselves embroiled in a nasty court fight until the girl was 13.

“We had a lot of lawyers,” recalls Coppock, 56, now one of East Tennessee’s premiere adoption attorneys. “We had Amelia Strauss, one of Knoxville’s first women lawyers. We had Ben Strand, who ultimately became the Jefferson County juvenile judge. We had Boone Dougherty, a very famous snail darter lawyer. We had expert witnesses. I can remember Boone interviewing my grandfather in my parents’ living room. So I grew up with termination of parental rights litigation.”

Her family’s hard-won legal battle became the foundation of her career. Considered by her peers as “the” state’s go-to adoption attorney, with a practical-but-creative approach, Coppock frequently speaks, writes and consults on the subject, both statewide and nationally. She also produces and leads instructional seminars for lawyers through her company, Good Law, and is a fellow in the American Academy of Adoption Attorneys.

“She is tops in her field,” says Jerri Bryant, a Chancery Court judge with jurisdiction in Bradley, McMinn, Monroe and Polk counties who has known Coppock for nearly 30 years. “She thinks her cases through, and you can see her work through the eyes of those she serves.”

One of five children, Coppock grew up in a “giant, loving, chaotic” family that moved to the Holston Hills neighborhood when she was in fifth grade.

“We weren’t members of the country club,” she quips, “just kind of a scrappy teachers’ family” that often went camping and hiking. Her parents followed politics closely, supported the civil rights movement and encouraged their children to be independent and follow their dreams. Her mom was a staunch feminist.

In high school, Coppock joined the swim team and interned for a graphic art studio but had no idea what she wanted to do with her life. “I was not a particularly good student until I went to college,” she admits. “I was not a terribly directed kid, honestly.”

She enjoyed fine art, literature and psychology, but figured that a degree in management and business would open up more opportunities, and in a variety of industries.



Photograph provided

Dawn Coppock, who grew up in Knoxville and lives in Strawberry Plains, is the author of “Coppock on Tennessee Adoption Law” and has been honored by the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services and the U.S. Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute for her work.

“

**Adoptive parents and birth parents are scared to death, all of them. So to the extent that I can say, ‘Hey, here are a few things I think you want to know’ and go through those to allay some of their fears ...they really love that.”**

Dawn Coppock, adoption attorney

While studying at what was then known as Carson and Newman College in Jefferson City, she decided to take the Law School Admission Test simply because her roommate did. Her dad, who’d always suspected she’d excel at law despite her mediocre grades, was thrilled.

Coppock did well on the exam, but upon graduating magna cum laude in 1983 went to work as a purchase specialist at IBM near Washington, D.C., where she had interned for U.S. Congressman James Quillen of Tennessee. “It was really, really boring,” she says. “I decided after a year there that not only did I hate my job, I hated every job in that whole company. So that’s when I went to law school.”

After earning her Juris Doctor in 1987 from the Marshall-Wythe School of Law at the College of William and Mary, she joined the small firm of Rainwater, Humble & Vowell in Knoxville. There, she says, she handled “pretty much everything” except criminal, tax and real estate law.

Despite an early knack for civil litigation, she enjoyed working with small-business clients. Given her management background and year at Big Blue, she assumed she was on track for a career in business or technical law.

When a complicated interstate adoption case came in, one of her bosses gave it to her because, she recalls, “Nobody in the firm knew how to do it, so it was my job to figure it out.”

That was just the beginning. After representing birth moms a few times – an irony given her own mother’s fight to wrestle custody rights from her sister – she began handling cases for adoptive parents and discovered that she could easily grasp the challenges of both sides. A direct-but-innovative communicator, she instinctively knew how to ask her clients what they wanted while guiding them through all the choices – and the ones that were truly out of their reach.

“I really, really enjoyed working with those moms and felt like if I could handle their case in a way that was empowering to them and treated them with a lot

of dignity, that it could be a positive, transformative experience for them,” she points out.

“Adoptive parents and birth parents are scared to death, all of them. So to the extent that I can say, ‘Hey, here are a few things I think you want to know’ and go through those to allay some of their fears without them even having to verbalize them – they really love that.”

In the early days, she adds, “I was doing a lot of injury work and a fair amount of divorce work, and I felt like I was pretty good at all that, but not better than most lawyers. I thought I was adequate, solid and competent but I was not outstanding. But when I was working with adoptive parents and also birth parents, I really was better than most.”

In addition to being a legal coach with whom her clients could relate, Coppock was adept at remembering legal nuances that could make a critical difference at trial. Perhaps because of her own family’s ordeal, she was able to see beyond the “obvious” when other attorneys were convinced a case was hopeless.

And she was good at calming adoptive parents of newborns when they felt threatened or overprotective. “It’s so emotional when a baby’s hanging in the balance,” she says. “These are good people that just don’t know. They’ve never done





Photo by Adam Taylor Gash | The Ledger

In addition to her legal expertise, Coppock has won prizes for her blackberry pie. "You've got to learn how to make a pie from somebody who knows how to do it," she says.

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this before. More than once, I've dialed back my client's first emotional reaction and it has probably saved the outcome."

In 1993, five years after she began practicing law and with a new baby of her own, Coppock went solo, moved into an office attached to her 1850s white clapboard farmhouse in Strawberry Plains and she stopped accepting non-adoption cases.

Deer frequently saunter past the window as she works, and groundhogs munch on the grounds. A creek gurgles down the hill, while multiple porches and outdoor seats offer idyllic views of Coppock's flower and vegetable gardens.

"It's not unusual if I'm stuck on a really long conference call in the summer," she says, "for me to go outside and deadhead flowers while people drone on because, you know, it only takes one hand."

In 2017, Coppock founded a for-profit seminar production company called Good Law after years of speaking at bar association, judicial and other conferences for free. She has even been known to coax older male lawyers out of their comfort zone and into odd yoga poses at her work-life balance seminars.

"I drive an 8-year-old Prius. I'm not a flamboyant, materialistic person," she adds. "I don't need a whole lot of money. But it occurred to me that all these lawyers were monetizing information they had, and I wasn't."

"I was just rubbing myself to the nub trying to keep people trained in my area

by doing all this gratuitous speaking. [Good Law] is not wildly profitable, but it makes me feel a little bit better about burning the midnight oil getting prepared, knowing that it will help me make payroll." She currently employs two staff people.

Adoption law, like other fields, has changed tremendously over the years, Coppock says. These days, about half of the babies she places with adoptive parents test positive for opiates and the birth moms are "often too stoned to engage in any real transformative kind of process." Newborn and international adoptions are down, but cases involving assisted reproductive technology and parents who are incarcerated are up.

This spring, Gov. Bill Lee is expected to sign an open adoption law that will allow birth parents to see their children after they're placed with new families, potentially triggering new clients seeking help with enforcement, Coppock says.

Unlike many attorneys who have segued into mediation and other non-confrontational specialties, Coppock still litigates cases on a regular basis. Her courtroom style, she says, is anything but flashy. "I'm not a bully at all," she says. "I'm very much a Dragnet, just-the-facts-ma'am kind of person in the hearing."

"I know exactly what I want out of every single witness," she adds, noting an over-the-top tendency to organize exhibits, trial notebooks and evidentiary rules.

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nursing care and help with routine activities like eating, bathing and dressing, whether at home or in an assisted living or nursing home.

#### The talk

Long-term care insurance gets more expensive with age, so most people who buy it do so in their 50s or 60s. It's good to start the conversation early to have the topic on your family's radar.

"Do you have long-term health care insurance? That's a specific question that is pretty palatable," says Thayer Willis, a wealth counselor. "If they say yes, the follow-up question is: 'How does it work exactly?'"

If the direct approach doesn't jibe, try backing into the conversation. Use someone else's experience as an example and ask whether your parents have considered assisted living in the future and how they would pay for it.

#### The topic: Estate planning

Sorting through an estate without clear directives can tear families apart. That's the last thing your parents want. Talking openly about things like wills and trusts, life insurance and advance medical directives can help you understand what they have in place, and give you insight

into their intentions, Young says.

"Knowing what to expect from them, or that they've done some planning, will certainly make an emotional eventuality a little easier," he says.

#### The talk

Starting your own family, and setting up your own estate plan, is a great opportunity to ask your parents what they have in place. You can also use someone else's experience to start the conversation.

"Ask questions like: 'A friend from work had a parent pass and they could not find any paperwork. ... Do you and Mom have all your paperwork together in one place? If you were to pass, who has access to it?'" says Mark Struthers, owner of Sona Financial, a wealth management firm.

Your folks might not be comfortable talking about their finances. That's OK. Don't push them.

Instead, make it clear that you're ready and willing to talk another time, Willis says.

"You might need to take the approach of planting a seed, and that's all you do in the first discussion," she says. "Which is another reason for beginning early."

*Kelsey Sheehy is a writer at NerdWallet. Email: ksheehy@nerdwallet.com. Twitter: @kelseylsheehy.*

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season finale.

#### Opportunistic Grimaldi

Rocco Grimaldi got into Game 2 after an illness forced Brian Boyle out of the lineup.

He made the most of his opportunity by scoring the Predators' first goal after getting a nice pass from Austin Watson, who was behind the net.

"I thought (Rocco) did an excellent job," Predators coach Peter Laviolette says. "The shifts that he took, even between the specialty teams, I thought he was really strong. Once we did get clear of the penalties, it seemed whoever (Calle) Jankrok and Rocco played with, that was a good line. Rocco was a big part of it. He used his speed and his tenacity, put the puck in the right zone and pushed his speed to create."

#### Urgency returns for Predators

A 30-minute lull in the middle of Game 1 hurt Nashville, but the Predators played with urgency throughout Game 2.

"No one in the league can beat us when we play desperate hockey," Subban points out. "I think that in Game 1, they were desperate and they showed that, especially in the second period – maybe not in the first, I thought we came out the right way."

"Last game, we didn't play a full 60 minutes. Technically in the playoffs, when you do that, you don't deserve to win. Today, I felt that we tilted the ice."

#### Big goalies square off

Nashville and Dallas both boast big goalies. Nashville's Pekka Rinne is 6-foot-5 and Dallas' Ben Bishop is 6-7.

Both got off to good starts in the first two games of the playoffs.

Bishop had a 1.92 goals against average with a .946 save percentage. Rinne

countered with a 1.97 and a .923.

#### Slumping Turris

The Predators are hoping Kyle Turris ends his scoring slump in the playoffs.

He broke the 20-goal mark three times with Ottawa, but the center only scored seven during the regular season.

Turris, acquired from Ottawa in a 2017 trade, didn't score in the first two playoffs games.

#### Familiar face on Stars

Former Predator Alexander Radulov is Dallas' second-leading scorer with 29 goals. The right wing had two stints with Nashville from 2006-08 and again during the 2011-12 season.

He played with Montreal for one season and has been with the Stars the past two years.

Radulov, 32, had 43 assists during the regular season.

#### Stars rookie shines

Dante Fabbro isn't the only youngster in the Predators-Stars series.

Defenseman Miro Heiskanen, a 19-year-old rookie from Finland, scored two goals for Dallas in Game 1.

But the following morning the NHL credited his second goal to Radulov.

Heiskanen had 12 goals and 21 assists during the regular season.

