

## Former Taylor Duma Leader Discusses Start Of New Firm

By Emily Johnson

Law360 (June 13, 2025, 4:24 PM EDT) – Even before joining the firm then known as Taylor English Duma LLP nearly two decades ago, former managing partner Michele Stumpe said she had already developed a track record of launching successful businesses.

Now she is bringing that entrepreneurial spirit to a new Atlanta law firm, Ardis Law LLP, which she founded this month after joining the ranks of several attorneys to leave the firm now called Taylor Duma LLP. At Ardis Law, Stumpe said she and a few other former Taylor Duma attorneys are hitting the ground running, having brought along more than 200 clients.

Those clients' move is a testament to their approach to client service, which she described as wanting clients to feel as if "when the weight of the world is on my shoulders, I know that Ardis has my back," Stumpe said.

"We've got a history of starting and operating successful businesses," said Stumpe, referring to her and her husband, Kerry Stumpe, CEO of Ardis Law. "I think that's just going to continue. Now we have a great bench."



Michele Stumpe

Before departing Taylor Duma, Stumpe said she helped to establish an efficient management committee, which gave her and her team the chance "to be able to leave without compromising what we had built."

Stumpe also helped guide the firm after it restructured its ownership in June 2024 from a handful of owners to about 16 owners, founding partner Marc Taylor confirmed.

Stumpe said she felt comfortable leaving after the management committee "got into a good stride." That committee represents the **first of its kind** in the firm's history.

"Once we accomplished those goals, it became clear that we could really continue to operate on three or four and we didn't necessarily need me anymore, or at least I felt that way," Stumpe said. "I've been thinking about this for a while, but I wanted to make sure that I left the firm in a good position."

Stumpe's exit **followed the departure** of firm co-founder Joseph M. English in April. English is now leading Offit Kurman Attorneys At Law's new office in Atlanta.

Stumpe and former Taylor Duma senior partners LeeAnn Jones, Lisa Harper, Matt Rosenkoff and Kyle Baker **announced** on June 4 that they had started Ardis Law. The firm guides clients in litigation, employer and executive counseling, commercial real estate, leasing and lending services, creditors rights and bankruptcy, and hospitality.

Stumpe and Jones will continue to work with Ardis Dispute Resolution PBC, which they started in 2024 to provide mediation, arbitration and court-appointed neutral and special master services

Here, Stumpe talks about how she and her team left Taylor Duma, the strengths of Ardis Law, and why she's looking to recruit corporate attorneys.

### What did you learn from your time with Taylor Duma?

It's like everything in life. It was a really great opportunity. I've always been very actively involved in leadership with

the firm for the past 15 years. I held different roles in leadership, whether it was leading the women's mentoring program or serving on the executive committee or one of the senior tier one partners. The opportunity to become managing partner, I was interested in helping the firm. We were transitioning from a five-person ownership to a much larger ownership group.

I saw an opportunity there to help shape and mold how that structure was going to work, because historically when you've got 20 people in the room, it's hard to get things done. We were able to put into place a more efficient operating system for our leadership and I felt like we accomplished that. It was a great experience and I got to see a lot of the efficiencies that we were able to accomplish by creating more of a management team structure.

We got to that point and I felt like I didn't need to be in that role anymore. I had worked on the management team with the current leaders, Ann Schildhammer, Jeff Kuester and Steven Zelkowitz, along with a couple of other folks. LeeAnn and I were both in that group and I think we felt like we had gotten into a good stride, and they could continue to do it as effectively and efficiently with an even more narrowed down [focus]. We shrunk down the management group initially. Once we got into a good stride, it opened up the opportunity for us to be able to leave without compromising what we had built.

### **So you're referring to the new management committee Taylor Duma announced?**

While I was the managing partner, we did everything more by committee. I would lead the meetings, but we really were implementing a structure that was more of a small group structure. That got implemented and made me feel like it was something that I could go ahead and depart and not compromise anything because we had built the structure and the process.

### **You mentioned the restructuring. It went to a larger ownership group?**

I became managing partner right before that. My role and goal was to help in that transition and to get us to where we could try and make the operations of the firm more efficient.

### **Was that following English's departure?**

No. He was one of the original five. In June [2024] we transitioned from five to something like 16 owners and I had become the managing partner in April. We were looking to expand the equity partnership and the ownership, but with that we needed to create a structure so you don't have 15 people all in the room making every decision.

We took that and tried a couple of different things and ultimately landed on a management committee of six or seven people. That was still a little bit unwieldy, but we got into a good cadence. Having six or seven was important, because we had a lot to get done, so we accomplished quite a bit. Once we accomplished those goals, it became clear that we could really continue to operate on three or four and we didn't necessarily need me anymore, or at least I felt that way. I've been thinking about this for a while, but I wanted to make sure that I left the firm in a good position.

### **How will your background, including serving as founding partner of Stumpe & Associates for seven years, help you in starting this new law firm and continuing the alternative dispute resolution firm?**

My husband and I have a long history of founding organizations that have been successful. Back in 1997, I started a law firm with two other partners to form what's now Weinberg Wheeler Hudgins Gunn & Dial LLC. I was the de facto kind of managing partner early in my career, helping to get everything organized, start the firm, pick out the furniture and arrange for the IT.

Then about four years into that, my husband and I decided to start our own firm. I had gone to Africa and had found a passion for protecting people and wildlife in Africa and decided I wanted to focus on that more.

At the time we started Stumpe & Associates, my husband was an architect and I knew that I couldn't do everything, so he agreed to step out of his role as an architect and come over to run all of the day-to-day business and basically managed the firm as CEO. He managed the firm for seven and a half years and we were very successful and profitable and we had several other attorneys.

We were recruited by Taylor English back in 2006 to start a hospitality practice.

We came over to Taylor English and he continued to act in that same role and capacity over our practice. The way Taylor English kind of works is you have pockets of practices, so it's like having a small law firm within a big one.

Over the past three years, we've grown in that practice to 11 people in that group. Over the past year and a half, he's had to double down and do a lot as I was kind of out of pocket as the managing partner. He attained a higher level of profitability even with me not having as much time. We've had a very good group and a very profitable group, so as he continues in that role and I have had the experience of managing partner and CEO-type role, we're just well suited.

The folks that we've got coming with us are just outstanding, stellar people. Lisa Harper ran [TFH Legal] for 35 years. She and I were competitors, actually. She and I were the two top licensing firms in the state of Georgia and we joined forces about a year and a half ago. She's a great add and she's got that skill set of having been the managing partner at her firm.

Matt Rosenkoff, Kyle Baker and LeeAnn Jones were all equity partners at Taylor English, so we've all had that inside insight on running the business.

I'm also the co-founder of the Giving Kitchen, which is a national charity that started here in Atlanta. Kerry and I both founded a nonprofit, Children of Conservation, and have grown that. We've got two schools that we've built in Zambia and we've got 450 kids on scholarship in Africa on an annual basis.

We run that like we run our business. We also have a separate consulting company where we do alcohol training and mystery shopping. He runs that mostly.

We've got a history of starting and operating successful businesses. I think that's just going to continue. Now we have a great bench. Our associates are superstars. They remind me of what I was when I was starting a new firm three years out of law school. They're good people with a diverse range of skill sets. We'll be looking to add other skill sets where we have a few gaps, but we have a tremendous foundation.

## **So does Taylor Duma still have a hospitality practice?**

They do have a resort practice. There's two guys over there who do resort work like with timeshares. But as far as a hospitality practice from the standpoint of representing restaurants, hotels, alcohol, food, beverage, regulated products, no. Everybody came with us.

## **What are the strengths of Ardis Law?**

We've just got a really good breadth and the good news, too, is that all of our clients are coming as well. We're starting our new practice with over 200 clients. They've been incredibly supportive. I've got clients that I've had for 20 years saying: "Hey, can I do a video testimonial for you? What can we do? We're so excited."

We've got a really broad base. Matt, LeeAnn, Lisa and Kyle, we've all done a lot of litigation in pretty much every type of area, whether it's premises liability, corporate disputes or products liability. We also have bankruptcy and commercial lending, commercial leases experience, and executive and employer counseling.

Lisa Harper has worked with executives and companies a lot. We've got some real estate experience and a lot of restaurant hospitality — everything that those clients need from the basic contracts and leases.

Our gap right now is probably corporate, so we'll be looking to fill some of those gaps within the next couple of months. We've identified where we'd like to fill in and we're going to be very strategic about it. We don't have plans to grow big. I couldn't see us ever being more than 50 attorneys, but probably somewhere in the 20- to 30-attorney range over the next year and a half would be a good sweet spot for us.

## **What does it mean to you to start the firm with over 200 clients?**

I think it's just a testament to our culture within our group in particular cause a lot of those are the hospitality clients, and you know it's something we talk about all the time is that our role is to help our clients sleep better at night. When they're panicked, if we're their first call and then they get off the phone with us and they feel OK and they feel like, "OK, I'm good, I've got this." That's the way we want every client to feel, and I think we've done a good job of that.

I've been practicing for 30 years and last year one of our biggest clients, RaceTrac, held an appreciation luncheon for our team — our paralegals, associates and partners — to thank us for the partnership. Typically it's the other way

around, where you're doing those kinds of things for clients, but to have a client that felt so strongly that we've been a partner, that meant a lot.

We've had a number of our clients who have just kind of done things for us. If they're opening up a new restaurant, they want to invite our paralegals because they helped them get that license in time for the opening. It's a true kind of partnership feeling and that's really what I think a lot of us are looking forward to, is getting back to the basics with our clients where we can have those strong personal relationships where we're not seen as, "Oh, here comes the legal bill." We're seen as: "Oh my gosh, these are the people that I trust and they're going to have my back. When the weight of the world is on my shoulders, I know that Ardis has my back." That's what all of us really enjoy.

I had a case with Matt Rosenkoff where we had a plaintiffs case where we represented a woman who was a quadriplegic who had gotten injured in an accident on MARTA [public transportation].

I always saw Matt as being this very hard worker who works really hard for his clients. About six months into that case, I'm talking to the client and she said, "Oh yeah, Matt just left. He just brought me my Captain D's," and I was like, "What are you talking about?" She said, "Oh yeah, he brings me Captain D's every Friday."

I just thought, my gosh, this is a guy who I just never would have expected. He coaches kids in softball. He leaves the office every day at 3 p.m. to pick up his daughter. But he's working at 11 p.m. after his kids go to sleep. He's one of the hardest working attorneys that I know and one of the smartest attorneys that I know but he just genuinely cares and takes that time to be personal.

That's really how all of the people who are coming with us are and that's what we're really looking forward to – being able to be a little bit smaller, being a little bit more nimble and focusing a little bit more on the Southeast as far as our coverage. I think we're going to be able to recapture some of that.

--Editing by Robert Rudinger.