ON A CONFERENCE CALL DISCUSSING the sale of a health care facility in Dallas, a Texas attorney once tried to bully his way through a commercial real estate deal with attorney Aasia Mustakeem. At one point, he actually told her to shut up.

"Excuse me?" she responded. He repeated it.

Was this a trap? she wondered. Maybe something to get her flustered and enhance his side of the deal?

"Excuse me, what have I done to deserve that?" Mustakeem responded. "If you don't apologize right now, we need to discontinue this phone call."

The Texas attorney stammered. He mumbled and hedged. Then he apologized.

"The guy wanted me to get down and sling mud with him and I wasn't going to do that," Mustakeem says. "I think he was trying to derail the conversation. It didn't work. That's not the way to interact. I was representing the buyer, and you don't want to make the buyer mad and get in the way of this deal. I just told myself, 'I'm not falling for this.'"

That Texas attorney didn't know who he was dealing with. Before becoming a partner at Smith, Cambrell & Russell in Atlanta, representing developers, purchasers and sellers in commercial real estate transactions, Mustakeem was a middle-school teacher. She's used to adolescent behavior.

Neal Jemigan, an Atlanta broker and developer who has worked with Mustakeem for 20 years, says she never strayed from the goal: to get the deal done.

"She is a dealmaker," Jemigan says. "There are some attorneys who are not so inclined. They want to protect their client and they sometimes let that get in the way of making the deal. Of course you want to make sure your client is protected, but you want to get the deal done."

"I have never met a more responsive attorney at her level of skill," says Carrie Tolbert, an attorney with Gatewood Tolbert. "She is one of those attorneys who has to look over everything to make sure it meets her expectations."

As for how Mustakeem herself feels? "The mechanics are important but that's a given. Who would want me to represent them if I didn't know the law and the mechanics of the deal?" she asks. "But there are intangibles you have to be mindful of if you want to close the deal, and one of the most important is how to interact with people. You have to be a person who can get along with people on your side of the table and the other side of the table. I always want to understand what their position is and what their goals are. We have our goals, too, and I have to advocate for our side—but in a way that gets the deal done. Always be respectful about how you get the deal done."

MUSTAKEEM'S FATHER, ROBERT E.
"Pappy" Williams, was a judge in Pittsburgh's Fifth Ward. It was called the Hill District and he was its community leader. "We had people come to the house all hours of the day and of the night," Mustakeem remembers. "Sometimes they needed help; maybe they needed a job, or just somebody to talk to."
AASIA MUSTAKEEM
- SMITH, GAMBERELL & RUSSELL
- REAL ESTATE
- GEORGIA SUPER LAWYERS: 2004-2013,
It was a diverse, working-class and blue-collar neighborhood, where steelworkers made their homes and small factories thrived in the shadow of the big steel mills. Every Friday, the family would go to Mustakeem’s grandmother’s house on Herron Avenue, across from one of these factories.

She was surrounded by high achievers. Her grandfather founded one of the first black-owned businesses in Pittsburgh, Williams Plumbing Company, and his sons learned the craft of master plumbers. Mustakeem’s mother was a Latin major in college; her aunt, Thelma W. Lovette recently had a YMCA named in her honor.

Mustakeem graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a degree in political science. Her brother, Khalil Raghrman, who lives in Atlanta, says he could see high achievement for his sister since they were students.

“She is smarter than most people,” he says. “When you talked to her did she ever say, ‘I didn’t know that’? She was studying all the time; she was the top student in the class all the time. Any time exams were graded on a curve, she broke the curve.”

Before Mustakeem became a lawyer, she had four children and taught middle school social studies. It wasn’t until the mid-1980s, after a friend told her about a part-time law program at Georgia State University in Atlanta, that she became a full-time law student. She got her J.D. in 1987.

After 25 years in practice, she understands human interaction as well as she understands the law.

“I’m not about grinding the other side down,” Mustakeem says. “If something is reasonable that you ask for and it is something we can do, I don’t have a problem turning to my client and saying ‘This really wouldn’t hurt us because of X, Y, Z.’ A lot of times, the client will say OK. Now suppose I made a request of the other side after acting utterly foolish? They might say, ‘She painted herself into a corner. Let her get herself out.’

“It’s not about being a pushover. It’s about getting a deal done.”

For example, Henry County’s decision to buy an airport from neighboring Clayton County, south of Atlanta, in 2011 could have been a perilous transaction. The deal was for $17.7 million and it was the middle of a recession. The federal government was involved, and things could have easily tangled in bureaucracy. But, says Mustakeem, who represented Henry County, “It went just fine. It was a good deal for my client.”

Or take the deal she worked on for UrbanAmerica at the Toco Hills Shopping Center in suburban Atlanta in the late 1990s. The property was slipping into disrepair when UrbanAmerica purchased the center, renovated it and restocked it with tenants. Mustakeem represented the company when they sold it. Today, it is a thriving shopping center, a reliable tax base for local government and a centerpiece retail area for the community.

“She insists on getting it right and understanding every aspect of the matter,” says Michael Coleman of Epstein Becker Green. “She is all about getting people to closing and finishing the deal.”

IN OCTOBER, MUSTAKEEM, WHO SERVES on numerous nonprofit boards and offers pro bono legal support to many of them, received the 2012 Conscientious Service Award at the annual conference of the Global Diversity Summit, an institution focused on professional issues affecting ethnic minorities in commercial real estate.

“She is a very conscientious attorney, not just with her work in the community but also by the way she goes above and beyond for clients and looks out for them on a personal level,” says Michael Tabb, chairman of the Summit and managing principal of Red Rock Global, a real estate firm. “A lot of attorneys are strictly business. They do a great job and they bill you. You feel like you hired somebody and they did a great job. She makes you feel like she is on your team.”

Mustakeem joined Smith, Gambrell & Russell in February 2011, but the walls and tabletops of her office are still bare. No trophies and awards are displayed. “They would just take up a lot of space,” she says.

Even in a recession and a cooling-off of the Atlanta commercial real estate business, an email from Mustakeem can pop into your inbox at 3:50 a.m. Through the long hours, she doesn’t forget her golden rule.

“I am never trying to make someone look bad,” she says. “I want us all to look good.”