

Spotlight on Clarence Risin

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When first asked to write this article about Clarence Risin, I was overwhelmed by the many directions it could take. Clarence has practiced law with Baker Donelson for 16 years. During this time, he has had great success as a trial lawyer and has actively participated in Firm management since becoming a shareholder in 2002. There is, however, an untold story about Clarence's journey to Baker Donelson and the remarkable qualities that have afforded him success in life as well as at the Firm.

Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, Clarence is one of four children who, in their early years, were raised by their mother in a single-parent household. He was orphaned at age eight by his mother's untimely death. While his sister remained in the legal custody of a family member, Clarence and his two brothers became wards of the state and were sent to group homes for their care and housing. An attempt was made to keep Clarence and one of his brothers together, but transitional living situations made this difficult and they eventually were separated.

From age eight to 18, Clarence lived in various foster care and group homes. The moves brought frequent changes in his caregivers and home environments, as well as the schools he was able to attend. His lack of stability inspired him to plan his future and led him to pursue college at Southeastern Louisiana

University in Hammond.

Clarence worked diligently in college, taking classes during the summer and often staying on campus during shorter breaks. While in college, Clarence met his wife, Antoinette, and they married soon after Clarence graduated in 1990. Clarence and Antoinette relocated to Knoxville, Tennessee, shortly after their marriage so Clarence could attend the University of Tennessee College of Law. He earned his law degree in 1994, becoming the first member of his family to earn a college or professional degree.

Clarence credits a family who ran a group home in New Orleans (and who now live in Nebraska) as being instrumental in instilling in him the belief that life could be better than his then present circumstances. Over the years, this family has supported Clarence by attending his graduations from high school, college and law school. They also were present at his wedding and maintain contact with Clarence today.

Upon graduating from the University of Tennessee College of Law, Clarence joined Baker Donelson as a litigator in its Knoxville office. Over the years, he has solidified his reputation as a skilled litigator. In 2002, Clarence became a Baker Donelson shareholder, only the second diverse attorney to achieve the level of shareholder within the Firm. Since then, Clarence has seen significant change in Baker Donelson's landscape



Clarence Risin

with regard to the recruitment, retention and development of diverse attorneys at all levels within the Firm, due largely to the diversity initiative commenced in 2002. Clarence was instrumental in the development and launch of this Firm initiative.

In 2002, Clarence helped form and lead the Firm's Diversity Committee at the request of Ben Adams, Firm Chairman and CEO. Under Clarence's leadership, the Firm set and reached a goal of increasing its minority attorneys by 100% in two years. The Firm also began recruitment at historically black law schools and established a formal mentoring program for diverse associates. The current Chair of the Firm's Diversity Committee, Mark Baugh, is grateful for Clarence's past leadership, and states, "Clarence has been very instrumental in establishing a strong diversity program at the Firm." Clarence has said that diversity is important to him because he is aware of the impact that the lack of

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Spotlight on Clarence Risin, *continued*

diversity can have on an otherwise rising diverse associate with the Firm.

In addition to his diversity efforts, Clarence served as Chair of the Firm's Personal Injury and Business Litigation Group from 2003 to 2006. He continues to maintain a successful commercial and transportation litigation practice and has significant experience in jury trials and appellate representation in federal and state courts. Clarence has been listed in *Best Lawyers in America*® in the area of Commercial Litigation since 2008 and has been voted a Top Attorney by his peers in *CityView* magazine since 2009.

Clarence is a Fellow of the Tennessee Bar Foundation.

Outside of work, Clarence enjoys spending time with his family and often can be found tackling a landscaping project or riding horses. The Risins are active members of West Park Baptist Church in Knoxville and regularly host small-group Bible studies at their home. They



Clarence and his family

currently are working to establish a food pantry at their church.

Baker Donelson Attorneys Stay Involved!



Kelli Thompson



Nancy Vincent



Christy Crider

Kelli Thompson has been elected chair of the East Tennessee Advisory Board.

Nancy Vincent was recognized as one of Nashville's 101 Top Lawyers for 2011 by the *Nashville Post* in the area of corporate law.

Christy Crider was named as one of *Nashville Business Journal's* Top Forty Under 40.

Donna Fraiche was appointed by New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu to the Tax Fairness Commission. The 10-member citizens' panel was formed to address inconsistencies in property valuations and tax exemptions that have dogged New Orleans for decades. The group was assembled to completely and thoroughly analyze the tax system in the city to make sure the system is fair.



Phyllis Cancienne



Nancy Scott Degan



Donna Fraiche

Phyllis Cancienne, Nancy Scott Degan, Donna Fraiche, Monica Frois, Mimi Koch and Danielle Trostorff were named to the 2011 *Louisiana Super Lawyers*. Nancy Scott Degan received special recognition for being among the top 10 lawyers in Louisiana and Nancy Scott Degan, Phyllis Cancienne, Donna Fraiche and Monica Frois were named among the top 25 female attorneys in Louisiana

Charles Grant won the President's Award for his work as chair of the law day program and serving as lead actor in the trial re-enactment of the sit-in demonstrator's prosecution. Charles was also recognized for his election to the Nashville Bar Association Board.

Jennifer Cooper, Linda Finley and Linda Klein were named among the 2010 Legal Elite by *Georgia Trend* magazine.



Monica Frois



Mimi Koch



Danielle Trostorff



Charles Grant



Jennifer Cooper



Linda Finley



Linda Klein

Diversity and Inclusion in the Legal Profession: Are We Making Gains?

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For the past three years, law firms have been severely impacted by the struggling economy. Similar to the recession of the 1990s, this downturn has affected recruiting and retention of diverse and women attorneys. Attorneys who began their legal careers during the 1990s recession likely thought that the legal job market could never get worse. But we have learned with the recent downturn that there is a new level of low for people seeking work and people who have lost work.



Since the 1990s, there have been many changes, among the most noteworthy being the development of the internet. The internet has allowed us to track and analyze data and trends. In 1992, as a new lawyer, it was difficult to determine how the recession was affecting minority law students and lawyers. We did not have access to the internet to communicate or read articles on any trends. The information regarding how the recession was affecting our classmates was always anecdotal and usually within our small circle of friends. Today, we are able to access data regarding minority attorneys at law firms across the country and are able to share information.

How did Baker Donelson do during 2010? We lost five minority attorneys in 2010, but we also gained 13 additional minority attorneys, bringing us to a total of 44 minority attorneys. At only 7.7% of our total attorney headcount, it is not our highest percentage. So we worked harder. We created a Minority Associate Advisory Board to meet monthly and provide us with feedback and best practices. We held a diverse shareholder business meeting in Nashville. We continued with next steps after our 2009 Firm-wide inclusion training, with a Diversity Dialogue and a lunch and learn for the entire Firm. The Chair of the Diversity Committee met with the summer associates in each office and with our incoming minority associates. We were involved with the re-creation of a GLBT Bar Association in Nashville. We continued our memberships in organizations geared towards diversity, and joined another organization that shares best practices among diversity initiative managers at other law firms. We also appointed our first Diversity Coordinator, Tammy Reeves.

What are we doing this year? We hope to heed some of the lessons that we learned during 2010 and throughout this recent downturn. There are no magic answers to recruiting and retaining diverse attorneys, and there are no short cuts. We need to continue with successful practices that we have used over the years. We also have to incorporate new ideas into our thought processes, such as not only sharing data, but also sharing successful strategies. If you are not hiring, then you need to redouble your efforts on retention of your attorneys. We will continue to expand our inclusion efforts and to become more involved in GLBT issues and we will continue to learn about each other in 2011. We are optimistic about this new year and hope to write a new chapter in our Firm's progress.

A Conversation with Baker Donelson Women

Founded in 2004, the Baker Donelson Women's Initiative was formed to address the growing national concern regarding retention and advancement of women in law firms. The Women's Initiative has made a commitment to expand diversity and celebrate the success of our professionals, and it seeks to improve recruitment, retention and representation of women in leadership while improving career development.

To that end, we want to share with you the background and observations of three of our women lawyers with the longest tenure at the Firm.



Kelli Thompson, a 1989 graduate of the University of Tennessee law school, practices out of our Knoxville, Tennessee, office. She is a commercial and employment litigator and Rule 31 Listed General Civil Mediator. She represents a variety of clients on both employment and business matters. She also provides compliance counseling and training to employers.

Kelli has been with Baker Donelson since 1995 and is a former Office Managing Shareholder of the Knoxville office.

What has been the biggest challenge of your career?

The "biggest challenge" in my career, I would say, is my whole career. It has been a challenge because it is always changing and always evolving.

How has your experience differed from what you expected when you started out?

My expectations were not clear when I started practicing with the firm. I think the most important thing is that I have stayed with the same firm through all these years. I think that speaks volumes

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Women's Initiative

about the firm and the way it treats its lawyers and employees.

What has been the most surprising thing about your career?

How diverse it has been through the years – how you always have to adapt – how much the practice of law has changed. I don't think I expected it to always be the same, but technology has totally changed the practice of law, especially in the last ten years.

What was the most rewarding client interaction?

There have been so many – but I would have to say, early on in my career, I represented a number of couples adopting children. To make a life-long difference to a family has to be the best thing I could do.

Has the landscape changed for women since you started out?

It is totally different, but still challenging. When I first started practicing, there were judges who banned women from wearing pants to court. Although this still happens occasionally, I cannot count the number of times I went to court with my briefcase only to have the court officers ask if I was the court reporter.

Why did you choose a law career?

I literally had a "light bulb" moment when I took the Business Law course as I was pursuing a degree in business. I now realize there were so many things about my intellect and my personality that made me perfectly suited for the practice of law.

You can reach Kelli Thompson in our Knoxville office at 865.549.7205 or kthompson@bakerdonelson.com.

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