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Beyond the Gavel: Mentors for Life

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It's very common for an attorney to clerk for a judge early in their legal career before moving to private practice or an in-house counsel job. However, what is rare are the strong, ongoing relationships attorneys can form with those judges. Those relationships can be invaluable to an attorney's career and those judges can serve as mentors for life. We interviewed three of our own Baker Donelson women attorneys who have maintained a close relationship with some of the judges they worked for early in their careers.

From the U.S. Bankruptcy Court in Tennessee, the Louisiana Supreme Court, the Southern District Court of Mississippi and the Eastern District Court of Louisiana, these women took those experiences and turned those working relationships into lasting mentorships.

For this interview, we chatted with Jan Hayden from the Firm's New Orleans office, Derbigny Daroca from the Firm's Baton Rouge office and Meagan Jones from the Firm's Memphis office.

How often do you keep in touch with the judge you used to work for?

Meagan: Judge Kennedy and I still talk at least once a month. He likes to stay up to date with what is going on in my career as well as my personal life, and we love to discuss the bankruptcy issues/cases gaining attention around the country.

Jan: Unfortunately, my judge (Judge Blanche) passed away about 20 years ago, but before that, we kept in touch quite often. I would call him when I needed advice about work, and we would often go to lunch. I even have a portrait of my son when he was a baby that Judge Blanche's wife painted for me.

Derbigny: In my career, I've had the privilege of clerking for two judges – Judge Bramlette and Judge Vitter – both of whom I regularly keep in touch with and go to for advice.

How has your experience in those clerkship roles shaped the path of your career today?

Meagan: While clerking, I had the opportunity to work on various corporate bankruptcy cases. As a result, I gained valuable experience and a significant interest in corporate law which led me to Baker Donelson.

Derbigny: Law school teaches you how to think critically, but not necessarily how to write, and that was a skill that I learned from Judge Bramlette. He taught me to appreciate the consequence of every written word. I credit Judge Bramlette with teaching me how to write and Judge Vitter for teaching me how to work – both vital skills that have led me to my role at Baker Donelson today. In addition, Judge Vitter was a strong woman leader who taught me how to respond to daily workplace issues, including perceived sexism, by commanding respect graciously.

Do you have any examples where those relationships have helped you land a job or other role?

Meagan: If you are from Memphis, you know Judge Kennedy. He is the most intelligent, generous, fair, patient, and humble man I know and a great mentor. Having worked for him, I was able to make many connections, including getting to know his prior law clerks from Baker Donelson, which I believe ultimately helped me land the role I am in now.

Judge Kennedy is also a huge supporter (and alumnus) of the University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law, and specifically the National Duberstein Bankruptcy Moot Court Travel Team at the school. When I was a 2L in law school, I was lucky enough to join the Moot Court Team and meet Judge Kennedy. That experience led me to now serving as an Adjunct Faculty Member at the Memphis School of Law and as the Head Coach of the Duberstein Moot Court Team. If it were not for Judge Kennedy, I would not have had the opportunity to work at the law school nor feel the urge or responsibility to give back to the legal community by way of coaching students in oral advocacy.

Jan: While I was clerking, on our way back from lunch one day, we saw there was a dance contest sponsored by a local charity outside the courthouse, so Judge Blanche and I entered, and we won. While this experience did not exactly help me land a job, it did give me some local notoriety that was certainly a topic of discussion in many job interviews to follow. Newspapers picked up the story and I can tell you in every single interview I had for a job included the question, "Are you the one who won the dance contest?"

Derbigny: My experience clerking for Judge Bramlette is what qualified me for the job with Judge Vitter. And it was my experience working on a case for Judge Vitter alongside attorneys from Baker Donelson that helped me make those connections and helped them keep me in mind when the job I have now became available.

What's piece of advice has stuck with you from your former judge?

Meagan: Judge Kennedy always said, and I quote, "A reasonable settlement is better than the speculative results of a lawsuit" and I truly believe that is the best advice for any practicing attorney.

Jan: It's been a while, so specific advice may have faded a bit, but Judge Blanche, by his approach to law, set an example for me that likely has affected my approach to the practice of law throughout my 40-plus years. Judge Blanche was a people person and no matter how he differed from others on the court, they were people he admired and respected, and he enjoyed sharing time with all his colleagues. I have tried to keep that attitude. No matter how aggravated I get with opposing counsel or their clients, or they with me, I have tried to treat them with the respect they deserve...not always successfully, I must confess, but it has been my goal to follow in the steps of Judge Blanche and others of his generation. I see it as an important part of maintaining our profession.

Derbigny: One of things Judge Bramlette taught me that has really stuck with me is how to address an email – he told me to always start an email with "Dear." He also taught me to be courteous to everyone you come in contact with and make a point to know their names – advice he truly lives by.

Judge Bramlette and Judge Vitter also showed me that integrity comes before politics – keep your head calm, do your best work, apply the law, and don't get caught up in the noisy world around you.

In 2020, I was pregnant and interviewing for jobs at the beginning of a pandemic. I was very conflicted on whether and how to disclose this information (knowing legally I was not obligated to). When I received a job offer from Baker Donelson, Judge Vitter gave me sound advice that was catered to me. She advised me to be up front and honest about my situation, which proved to be the right advice because I was able to begin work feeling that I started off on the right foot. And when the time came, the Firm fully supported me when I went on parental leave later that year.

