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Alumni Profile: Joan Lucas, the General Counsel of Mississippi State University

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Mississippi State University received national attention on the football field this year. Amy Champagne recently sat down with Baker Donelson Alum Joan Lucas, the general counsel of Mississippi State University, to talk about Joan's role advising one of the largest universities in the Southeast, what she enjoys most about the job and whether she owns a cowbell.

Tell us a little bit about Mississippi State University and how your position is of importance to its operations.

Mississippi State University is a comprehensive, land-grant university which was created by the Mississippi legislature in 1878. We currently have over 20,000 students, approximately 9,000 employees, and a presence in all of Mississippi's 82 counties. The mission of the university is three-fold: service, research and learning. Our office provides guidance to our university president, Dr. Mark Keenum, the vice presidents, athletic director, deans, department heads and other administrators regarding all aspects of university life. We routinely handle everything from contract negotiations, employment matters and student conduct issues, to NCAA investigations, litigation and external investigations.

How long have you been in this position and what were your prior positions with the organization?

I have been in this position for about four years. Prior to becoming general counsel, I served as assistant general counsel and as interim general counsel.

Following the retirement of your predecessor, you served as interim general counsel before being permanently appointed to the position. Did you face any particular challenges in leading the organization during that time of transition?

Absolutely. When I started as assistant general counsel, there were three full-time attorneys in the office including myself. After being here for only a little over a year, the two senior attorneys both retired when the university offered an early retirement incentive. I then became the interim general counsel and the sole attorney. I had both a great deal to learn quickly and a great deal of work to do by myself.

In addition to serving as the university's general counsel, you are also a special assistant attorney general. What does that position entail?

The designation as special assistant attorney general allows me the ability to represent Mississippi State University in court without obtaining additional authority to do so from the attorney general's office.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

The overall culture of working on a university campus – the energy and enthusiasm of the students; the desire of the employees to truly impact lives whether that is through service, teaching or research; the excitement that comes along with athletics; the variety of speakers, performers and others that you get the opportunity to interact with on campus; even just being able to walk across a beautiful campus on a daily basis – it all combines to create a great place to work.

What is the toughest thing about your current position?

The toughest and perhaps my favorite part of the job is knowing that no matter how long I am here, I will never

have a routine week. There is always something new that a student or faculty member does or asks or wants to do. Helping work through these situations can be both challenging and rewarding.

Prior to joining Mississippi State University, was there a particular reason you chose to work for Baker Donelson?

Yes. When I evaluated where to work, I loved the new litigator option at Baker Donelson. Other firms offered positions within a particular department, but Baker Donelson allowed me the opportunity to try different areas of litigation. It was the perfect foundation for me to have coming into an office where every day is different.

Your assistant GC, Brandon Jolly, is also a Firm alum. What is it like working so closely with a former colleague in a non-Firm setting?

It is excellent. At Baker Donelson, I was fortunate to be a part of a number of litigation teams who worked closely together on lawsuits. Brandon and I continue that team approach at MSU. It is excellent to have someone to bounce ideas off of, to collaborate with and, most importantly, to point out to me when I am wrong.

What do you do in your spare time?

I am the mother to two wonderful children, and I spend most of my spare time with them. We live on the far end of Starkville and spend most of our time outdoors riding horses and four-wheelers, or just enjoying the country.

What would you most like to be doing in the proverbial "perfect world" sense?

Fortunately, I am able to help this university daily and to see the positive impact that it makes on the students who attend. If I had more time, though, I would love to do more to advocate for children in need. I am currently praying about and exploring my options to become a foster parent, because there are so many wonderful children who are not fortunate enough to be born into stable families. These children need people fighting for them to help them have some sense of security and stability that I was fortunate to have as a child.

What advice do you have for young lawyers starting out?

I would recommend that young lawyers be open to all opportunities that are presented to them. I had no idea what the general counsel's office at a university did prior to joining the office, but I am thankful daily that I took the opportunity to learn.

Mississippi State enjoyed national attention on the football field this past season. Has that affected your work for the university?

It has certainly increased our workload. Our office is responsible for the university's trademark and licensing program. Due to the additional attention, we had far more people infringing on our trademarks than ever before and using our players' names and likenesses for profit. We have been fortunate to have one of Baker Donelson's intellectual property attorneys help us with this.

We at the Firm remember you as an enthusiastic fan of your alma mater, Ole Miss. Who were you cheering for during the Egg Bowl this year?

Ha! I love Ole Miss and always will. You can't work with the people that make up the MSU Athletics' Department daily and not cheer for them though. I am honored to get to work with such a great group of administrators, coaches and players, and I cheer for each and every one of them during the Egg Bowl.

Mississippi State fans are known for ringing cowbells at football games. Do you have your own cowbell?

I don't, but my children both have hand-painted bells that they love to ring!