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A Special Sit-Down with Baker Alum Judge Ruthie Hagan

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December 20, 2021



Before leaving Baker Donelson's Memphis office to become one of the most recent appointees to the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Western District of Tennessee, Judge Ruthie Hagan was a friend and mentor to many. Appointed in 2020, Judge Hagan was sworn into the bankruptcy bench on October 16, 2020.

Judge Hagan and I had the opportunity to catch-up over lunch recently to discuss her transition from private practice to the bankruptcy bench, as well as Baker Donelson's impact on her growth and development as a female attorney.

Judge Hagan's favorite memories at Baker Donelson

When asked what some of her favorite memories are from her time with the Firm, Judge Hagan's first (and immediate) response was: "Retreats!" According to Judge Hagan, the attorney retreats were always a great opportunity to spend time with colleagues and to get to know people across the Firm's footprint. Spending time with colleagues in a more laid-back, social setting was always good for morale and helped attorneys build their internal networks.

In that same vein, Judge Hagan said she also loved working on teams with various attorneys in other practice groups and offices. Judge Hagan said that she really misses getting together as a team to bounce ideas off one another to help resolve issues. "Working with a team of attorneys was a great way to not only come up with different strategies to help clients get the best result, but it was also a great learning opportunity," Judge Hagan said

While the people of Baker Donelson were the focus of Judge Hagan's fondest memories at the Firm, she also mentioned that she missed the \$0.25 soft drinks from the vending machine, the crushed ice from the break rooms and the impromptu videos like "Baker Idol" that the Firm made for summer associates.

Baker Donelson's role in preparing Judge Hagan to assume the bankruptcy bench

According to Judge Hagan, the sophisticated clients and challenging work she had during her time in the Memphis office was integral in helping her prepare to don her black robe and assume the bench. These sophisticated clients led to sophisticated work and complex issues. The experience in these areas helped Judge Hagan perfect her analytical and issue-spotting skills, and they have come in handy as a bankruptcy judge.

She also said that working on different teams with various attorneys in other offices and practice groups helped hone her skills, as well, since different angles and theories are always helpful in resolving issues. Judge Hagan also mentioned that representing multiple Chapter 11 debtors in her recent years with the Firm were some of the most educational and practical experiences that helped prepare her for the bankruptcy bench.

The Firm's mentor program was also vital to Judge Hagan's development. "Baker Donelson has some of the most wonderful mentors who are experts in their field of practice," Judge Hagan said. She enjoyed working with attorneys who had been practicing bankruptcy for many years and were able to impart their knowledge and wisdom. She never hesitated to reach out to her mentors (and Firm experts) when she wanted to talk through an issue, but she also appreciated the responsibility that her mentors gave her. "My mentors gave me projects and allowed me to run with them," Judge Hagan said. At Baker Donelson, Judge Hagan felt that attorneys were given as much responsibility as they were willing to take, and attorneys were given the opportunity to really learn how to practice law and become the best advocate possible for the client.

Issues facing the advancement of women in the legal industry

As a working mother herself, Judge Hagan is acutely aware of the pressures that many women face in advancing in the legal industry. "Being an attorney means being available for those emergency projects or filings and being available can often be a challenge for women who have other responsibilities outside of the office," she said. Learning how to balance the pressures of family, work and life is one of the biggest challenges women face. But, according to Judge Hagan, mentorship is the key to the advancement of women. "It's so important that women have mentors who are invested in their advancement and success, and who are willing to advocate on their behalf," Judge Hagan said. Women need to show-up for and support other women.

The importance of mentoring

"It is so important to support and develop young lawyers and encourage their growth," Judge Hagan said. "We want to continue to have generation after generation of female attorneys, and mentorship is the key to getting there."

Mentoring encourages an attorney's development in so many ways. Not only does it provide guidance and leadership in learning how to actually practice law, but also, it helps young attorneys learn how to navigate the hills and valleys that all lawyers travel on the road to progress. Whether it is talking with a mentor about a specific bankruptcy question or about how to balance billable hours and raising a toddler, mentors offer us the confidence that we so often need. A good mentor is critical to the success of a developing lawyer. And, for all those mentees who were fortunate enough to benefit from the wisdom, encouragement or help from a great mentor, Judge Hagan has a final reminder: "Remember to always pay it forward!"

Judge Hagan's impact on a young lawyer.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention how Judge Hagan impacted my first few years as an attorney at Baker Donelson. Judge Hagan was generous enough to take me on as a formal mentee, and she was always patient and thoughtful in giving her advice. She answered countless questions about a range of topics – from specific bankruptcy questions, to general strategy questions on brief writing, to puppy training – and she was always supportive and encouraging (even when a certain young mentee came into her office upset after falling down a flight of stairs at the courthouse in Jackson, Tennessee). She never hesitated, and she jumped right to action.

Judge Hagan was an invaluable asset to Baker Donelson during her time with the Firm, and she has done and continues to do so much to make each of us proud to call her a Baker Donelson alumna.