

# Diversity Matters

## Valuing Race and Gender

Fall 2012

## Her Secret to Success: Hard Work Pays Off

 By [Katie Marren](#)

Erica Mason was recently named shareholder in Baker Donelson's Atlanta, Georgia office. She has experienced great success as a litigator in the Labor & Employment Department at Baker Donelson – however, it is not only her accomplishments in the courtroom that make her a standout attorney. Erica's superior work ethic was embedded in her at a young age, which is reflected in both Erica's past experiences and current work.

Erica was raised in Atlanta and has always loved calling the city her home. Although Erica is a true "Georgian," she has always valued her Panamanian heritage. Throughout her childhood, Erica's grandmother constantly reminded her to never take for granted any opportunity that this country has to offer, and to always work harder than her peers. "It was worse than the typical, 'I walked three miles to school up hill in both directions'" Erica recalls. "It was more like, 'I walked ten miles each way to school through the jungle with a machete, fighting off snakes and mountain lions.' How do you ever make an excuse that you have it too rough when you grow up hearing stories like that?" She still tries to visit her family in Panama at least once a year.

Beginning in high school and continuing through and beyond college, Erica worked in the music industry. She held a number of positions in marketing, promotions and A&R (talent scouting) at

labels including Sony Records and Virgin Records, working with artists such as Monica, Lenny Kravitz, Van Morrison and Janet Jackson. Erica's final gig in the music industry was as the General Manager of Def Jam South, the southern division of Island/Def Jam Music Group, a position she was offered and accepted before her senior year in college. In order to graduate on time, Erica had to work and study concurrently, but her can-do attitude led her to embrace the challenge. "My typical day included work in the morning, class during lunch, work through dinner, night classes, then promotional events for Def Jam, and finally many very late nights spent in the office afterwards studying or sleeping on a spare couch. I could not allow school to affect my work, and I was not willing to sacrifice my education for my job." With incredible organization and determination, by the following May, Erica was able to graduate with a degree in Economics, cum laude, from Georgia State University, while helping the label sell millions of records and launch the careers of musicians such as Ludacris.

After two years in this position, Erica was offered a promotion with Def Jam's parent company that would have forced her to leave Atlanta. Instead of continuing her career in music, Erica decided it was an appropriate time to pursue her lifelong goal of becoming a lawyer. Erica chose the prestigious University of Pennsylvania Law School



in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she was drawn to the intellectual community and highly-regarded program. While she initially intended to practice entertainment law, Erica quickly found that she enjoyed litigating and being in the courtroom, and decided instead to pursue a career in employment law.

After law school, Erica returned to Atlanta and joined a boutique law firm that had recently been formed by several former "big firm" attorneys and specialized in employment litigation. Working in such an environment allowed her to quickly gain experience in her early years, especially under the mentorship of David Gevertz. David's mentorship helped her excel in her early days. "He allowed me the luxury of being myself instead of a 'cookie-cutter' image of what an attorney was supposed to be, and encouraged me to focus my

## Her Secret to Success: Hard Work Pays Off, *continued*

energy on becoming a great attorney. As long as I was willing to put in the work, I would be successful." As the only Latina female attorney in the office, Erica appreciated this gift tremendously.

Erica joined Baker Donelson's Atlanta Office with David in 2007, and immediately volunteered to serve on the firm's Diversity and Women's Initiative Committees, two firm initiatives she is passionate about. Erica also mentors several diverse college and high school students who have expressed an interest in going to law school, and serves on two non-profit boards addressing the educational and health care needs of Atlanta-area women and children.

Erica also quickly became recognized for her talent as an employment litigator,

selected by her peers as a "Rising Star" in Labor & Employment Defense by *Georgia Super Lawyers* (2010-2012) and as one of *Georgia Trend Magazine's* "40 Under 40, Georgia's Best & Brightest" in 2012. Erica believes it is her business know-how and competitive drive that her clients find so appealing. She feels it is most important to understand her clients' business goals before developing a litigation strategy. "Sometimes winning and protecting the brand is most important, other times, it is more important to get out quickly," she says. "Either way, you cannot meet your clients' needs if you don't know what they are."

Erica's cases are also personal for her; she is excited when they are successful, disappointed when they are not, and

treats every case as if it were her own company on the line. Additionally, she tries to help her clients save money long-term by coaching them on litigation avoidance strategies such as drafting and developing non-discrimination/anti-harassment policies, procedures and training, as well as diversity and inclusion training.

Erica's entire career has been defined by her determination to succeed. In recent years, Erica has worked to strike the right balance between work and personal life. She has three children and knows how difficult it is to plan one's time as a working parent. Although she often has to sacrifice a few hours of sleep, she finds both her family and her work incredibly rewarding.

## Blowing up the Barrier Between Work & Family

*Christy Tosh Crider and Tonya Mitchem Grindon*

Almost every attorney has felt the strain of balancing a successful law career and time with family. So many attorneys try to separate their lives by saying, "If I am at work, I have to be working, and if I am at home, I can't be dealing with work." We have found it works best to blow up all those boundaries. It's really not about segregating your life—it's about trying to combine things so you can do them all together. As equity partners of a large law firm with five children between us under the age of 12, we've learned a thing or two over the years about solutions. We recommend removing the barriers between work and home so that each complements the other. The following are our top eight practical tips for blowing up boundaries.

### **Christy Tosh Crider's Tips:**

Keep a single calendar for work and non-work appointments. Work and family appointments are often of equal priority, so it can be beneficial to keep them on the same calendar. An Outlook calendar for the day might read as follows: 10 a.m. Appointment with CEO; 11 a.m. Stop by school on the way back to the office for lunch with the kids; 4 p.m. Deadline to file motion in Jones case. Keeping one calendar allows you to move seamlessly from work events to non-work events with equal priority.

Bank billable hours for more family time. Lawyers often burn out after repeated strenuous stretches of work with little pockets of family time in

between. I recommend setting billable and non-billable hour goals for yourself and tracking them on a weekly or monthly basis. When you get significantly ahead of pace for the year (i.e., you've been having a particularly strenuous time at work), use those extra hours you've accumulated to treat yourself to some family time. For some, that may be picking up your child from school every day at 3 p.m. for a week. For someone else, you may have banked so many hours that you can take an extra impromptu vacation with your spouse. Whatever it is that gets your engine running outside of work, use your banked time for that.

Think outside the box on planning time that meets multiple priorities. I am the

## Blowing up the Barrier Between Work & Family, *continued*

children's choir director at my church, which allows me to spend time doing something that meets two of my priorities: serving my church and spending time with my children. However, I got really excited when my children's choir decided we should sing outside our church to serve others and started making trips to nursing homes and assisted living facilities, which is my primary client base. Imagine the delight for both my children and my clients when the children sing old-fashioned gospel music in nursing homes around Nashville, Tennessee. Also, I have frequently enjoyed taking clients and their children along with my own children to events they would enjoy, such as the circus, a concert and even a monster truck jam.

Don't be afraid to work outside the office. I almost never miss 6 p.m. dinner with my family. These years are short. The children will be gone, and my career will still be here. However, after they go to bed at 8 p.m., it is not uncommon for me to get online and take care of an hour or so of work that still needs to be done that day. The same analysis applies for a midday event at my child's school, lunch out of the office with an old friend or an afternoon matinee with my husband without having to hire a sitter. These are all indulgences that attorneys can enjoy if they are willing to work at night or early in the morning at home to make up for the lost time.

**Tonya Mitchem Grindon's tips:** Involve your children in your community service activities. Our profession



requires a commitment to pro bono work and charitable activities in our communities. Many lawyers say, "I just don't have time to do these community and pro bono activities with all of my obligations to my practice and my family." Involving your family members in these activities, however, is a great way to give back and to spend quality time with them.

For example, I am president of the Nashville Humane Association (NHA) and volunteer at fundraising events and at the shelter. I always try to bring my children with me to help volunteer at the shelter, which allows them to spend time with me and with animals. I also have my children volunteer every year at the annual Mutt Strutt, a walk to benefit the NHA. They are responsible for handing out T-shirts to the walkers. They get a real sense of accomplishment and love seeing the dogs.

Another example is volunteering for Room at the Inn, a program that

provides shelter in churches to homeless people. Twice a year, we are responsible for preparing sack lunches for homeless individuals to take the next day when they leave the church. My children make the list of what we will make for lunch. They go with me to the store to buy the food and then help prepare the sandwiches and sacks.

Including your children in these types of activities gives you time with them, you give back to the community, and your children get the opportunity to be involved in their communities in meaningful ways.

Include your family in your marketing activities. Business development doesn't mean just late dinners and trips out of town. There are ways to strengthen relationships with existing clients or develop new clients and include your family. I have taken my son and a potential client and his son to Tennessee Titans football games. I have taken my entire family and the family of a client to the circus and have taken my daughters and a client's daughter to a Taylor Swift concert. There is nothing better than hearing your client's child tell your client how great an event is. Your children will love it, and your client will love it because they are being treated to an event and getting to spend time with family as well.

Incorporate work time into family quiet time. While the kids are doing homework, you can also do your homework. I often sit on the sofa with the kids while they are doing their

## Blowing up the Barrier Between Work & Family, *continued*

homework or reading quietly and I edit documents or complete my timesheets. Sometimes my youngest son will get his blanket and lie his head in my lap while I work. My secretary has commented on how my timesheets sometimes make her smile when my children have written love notes or created drawings on my documents.

### Our Favorite Joint Tip:

Take your family with you on work-related trips to fun locations. A three-day conference in Orlando, Florida, in

February at which Christy was speaking moved from “dreaded” to “anticipated” when she decided to take the kids and told them they were going to Disney World. When Christy had clients to visit in Colorado, a quick ski trip with the family made perfect sense.

Last year Tonya brought her oldest daughter to Los Angeles when our firm was doing a pitch for securities work for a public company. Her daughter’s aunt, uncle and cousins live there, so she was able to stay with her relatives for the

day while Tonya was working. Tonya also took her middle daughter to Chicago this year when she was speaking at a PLI Continuing Legal Education Seminar. Then they got to spend an extra day touring the city. She had a blast, and Tonya was able to have a wonderful trip with her.

These opportunities don’t fall into your lap. They take careful planning and creativity, but you can make them happen.

## Plessy Day 2012

The Louisiana Supreme Court Historical Society, with board members Donna Fraiche, Mimi Koch and Ben Janke (New Orleans), co-sponsored “Plessy Day” – an event to memorialize the history and legacy of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and to remember the truth that separate but equal is inherently unequal when decisions are made based on race.

The Plessy and Ferguson Foundation was established by Keith Plessy and Phoebe Ferguson, descendants of Homer Plessy, a shoemaker who on June 7, 1892, bought a first-class ticket to sit in the white-only train bound for Covington, Louisiana; and Judge John Howard Ferguson, a judge in Criminal District Court, who ruled against Plessy for violating Louisiana’s Separate Car Act. The Separate Car Act of 1890 provided that railway companies carrying passengers must provide equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races. Judge Ferguson’s decision was upheld by the Louisiana Supreme Court, and in 1896, was affirmed by the United States Supreme Court, establishing the doctrine of “separate but equal” and

cementing the use of law to separate the races. Not until the United States Supreme Court decided the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 was the precedent overturned.

Each year, on June 7, the Plessy and Ferguson Foundation sponsors a program to remember Plessy and the events surrounding his actions in buying the railway ticket. The Foundation focuses on ways to teach the history of Civil Rights through understanding the *Plessy* case and its effect on the American conscience. This year, the Supreme Court of Louisiana Historical Society joined as a co-sponsor of the 2012 Plessy Day program held at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA) to bring Professor Blair Kelley of N.C. State University to speak about her 2010 book *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts of African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson*. Professor Kelley’s work recalls the well-known events leading up to *Plessy v. Ferguson* as well as the lesser-known stories from 1900-1907 of brave fights against segregation inspired by Plessy.

Professor Kelley was introduced by Keith Medley, author of the book *We as Freeman: Plessy v. Ferguson*. Professor Kelley discussed her research for her book which chronicles the litigation and organizing by local groups against segregated rails that led to the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896 and the streetcar boycott movement waged in twenty-five southern cities from 1900 to 1907. She was grateful for the opportunity to visit New Orleans and to see the historical marker placed on the spot at Press and Royal Streets where Homer Plessy boarded the train in 1892. Professor Kelley’s presentation was followed by readings by five students who wrote essays sharing their impressions about the *Plessy* case from their present day perspective.

The Plessy and Ferguson Foundation will continue in its mission to present programs to bring discussion, debate, and understanding on the subject of civil rights to the community. You can read more about the foundation at <http://plessyandferguson.org/>.



## Baker Donelson Attorneys in the News, Involved

[Amy Champagne](#) (Jackson) was elected as a Member at Large for 2012-2015 on the Executive Committee of the newly-organized Mississippi Bar Appellate Practice Section. Amy was also recently appointed to Mississippi's Judicial Appointments Advisory Committee by the First Supreme Court District. Her two-year term began July 1, 2012.

[Joann Coston-Holloway](#) (Memphis) has been elected to the Girl Scouts Heart of the South board of directors.

[Chris Davis](#) (New Orleans) has been nominated to be the vice president of the Comité Maritime International. The Comité is a non-governmental entity that is the oldest international organization devoted to maritime law. Its members are the maritime law associations of all countries throughout the world. This is a distinct honor, as in the 115-year-history of the CMI, only two Americans have been elected as vice president, and no American has ever been elected to the presidency. Chris was nominated by the U.S. Maritime Law Association and the British Maritime Law Association. The election will take place at the meeting of the CMI in Beijing in mid-October 2012.

[Nancy Degan](#) (New Orleans) has been nominated to serve as the chair of the ABA Section of Litigation for 2014-15. Nancy has also been named by *New Orleans Magazine* as one of 16 Top Female Achievers for 2012.

[La'Verne Edney](#) (Jackson) was presented with the Mississippi Bar Distinguished Service Award at the Annual Awards Brunch.

[Donna Fraiche](#) (New Orleans) was honored by the American Health Lawyers Association as a Pro Bono Champion for

her dedication to providing pro bono services in the Health Law Field during calendar years 2010 and 2011. This is the first year for the award. Donna also represented Baker Donelson at the recent International Business Conference for Women and Minorities in Gulfport, Mississippi.

A program on the Freedom Riders presented by a team that included [Charles Grant](#) (Nashville) has been chosen as the Best Program of the Year by the Harry Phillips American Inn of Court membership. In addition to serving as Team Captain, Charles assisted in the design and presentation of the program.

[Jennifer Keller](#) (Johnson City), chair of the Labor and Employment Practice Group, has been recognized as one of the "nation's most powerful employment attorneys" by *Human Resource Executive* magazine. Jennifer will be recognized in the "Up and Comers" list in the June 16 issue. The magazine uses information from bios, client and peer evaluations and Lawdragon to compile the list.

On April 13, [Rachel LeMay](#) (Houston) began her one-year term as president of the Texas Women Lawyers.

[Catherine Long](#) (Birmingham) has been named one of only 20 "Birmingham's Finest" Honorees by the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation of Alabama. The full list of honorees will be featured in the October issue of B-Metro magazine and at several other networking events during a fundraising competition set to end on November 8.

[Erica Mason](#) (Atlanta) has been selected by *Georgia Trend* magazine for its "Top 40 Under 40" list. Erica has also been selected for the 2012 Fellows Program

of the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity.

[Masae Okura](#) (Atlanta) will present two seminars titled "New Developments in Immigration Law," on June 30. The seminar, held by the Japanese Saturday School in Raleigh, North Carolina, the North Carolina Japan Center and the Consulate General of Japan in Atlanta, will be presented in Japanese. The seminars will focus on the southeastern U.S. and review recent changes in immigration law, areas of concern and visa requirements.

[Kristine Roberts](#) has been selected to the inaugural class of *Memphis Business Journal's* "Super Women in Business." Nyka Scott (New Orleans) was nominated by Congressman Steve Scalise and appointed by Governor Bobby Jindal to the South Louisiana Non-Flood Protection Asset Management Authority.

[Stacie Winkler](#) (Memphis) received the Star of the Quarter Award from the American Bar Association Young Lawyer Division for her hard work on the New Partner & In-House Counsel Conference in March and the Young Lawyer Division Spring Conference in Nashville in May.

[Monica Frois](#), [Sherry Dolan Ormond](#), [Erin Pelleteri](#) and [Brandy Sheely](#) (New Orleans) were awarded the Animal Legal Defense Fund's (ALDF) 2011 Advancement in Animal Law Pro Bono Achievement Award. In announcing the award, the ALDF's Pro Bono Coordinator, Tom Linney, commended the Firm's "dedication, expertise, and commitment of pro bono hours in achieving our mission to protect the lives and advance the interests of animals through the legal system."

## Recent Firm Accolades

On Friday, July 27, Vault presented awards to the top 25 law firms for overall diversity, as well as the top 5 firms for diversity for women, minorities and LGBT. Baker Donelson received awards for "Best Diversity Overall" (9th) and for "Diversity for Women" (4th). The Firm was also recognized in the "Diversity for Minorities" category (6th) and for "Diversity for LGBT" (24th).

The 2012 Vault Survey Awards took place at the Grand Hyatt Downtown in Washington, D.C. The Law Firm Diversity Rankings were based on the results of an annual Law Firm Associate Survey, in which more than 16,000 associates rated their firms on their commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive workplace. Doreen Edelman (pictured center-left) and Alisa Chestler (center-right) were at the ceremony to accept the trophies on behalf of the Firm. Baker



Donelson is excited to be recognized for the opportunities we offer diverse individuals and we hope to continually

improve upon our commitment to creating an inclusive environment for all of our employees.

On June 19, Corporate Counsel published the "Diversity Digest: Diversity Scorecard," ranking Baker Donelson 167th.

Baker Donelson's Diversity Committee sponsored this year's Nashville Pride Fest 2012 on June 16. The event, held in downtown Nashville, drew a record crowd of more than 8,000 people. The Firm was the only large law firm sponsor and one of only two law firm sponsors.

The Firm's diversity efforts were recognized by the Nashville Bar Association, which presented the Firm with a Leadership Award. The award was based on a number of criteria, including hiring minority 1L and 2L summer associates, hiring a minority high school intern and increasing the number of minority lawyers in the Nashville office. Mark Baugh (Nashville), chair of the Firm's Diversity Committee, accepted the award at the Nashville Bar Association's Law Day Luncheon on April 30.

## Diversity Scholarship Recipients 2013

Each year, Baker Donelson awards three scholarships to diverse law students. Each recipient is awarded a \$10,000 scholarship and a salaried 2L Summer Associate position in one of our offices. This year's recipients are:

- Stephanie A. deJesus will be joining the Firm's Houston, Texas office. She is a 2L at the South Texas College of Law.
- Willie Santana will be joining the Firm in Knoxville, Tennessee. He is a 2L at the University of Tennessee School of Law.

- La'Toyia J. Slay will be joining the Firm's Jackson, Mississippi office. She is a 2L at the Mississippi College of Law School.

We look forward to them joining the Baker family next summer!

## Where We'll Be

We'll be "Reaching Monumental Heights" at the 24th Annual National Asian Pacific American Bar Association (NAPABA) Convention in Washington, D.C., November 15 – 18! Look for Baker Donelson attorneys at the convention, which celebrates how far Asian Pacific

Americans have progressed in the profession. For more information on the convention, go to [2012convention.napaba.org](http://2012convention.napaba.org).



## Diversity Matters Editor



**Nancy A. Vincent**, of counsel in the Nashville office of Baker Donelson, is a member of the Firm's Corporate group and concentrates her practice in the areas of government contracts, including state and federal procurement transactions and administrative law. Ms. Vincent also represents governmental and private entities in administrative matters and complex litigation, including matters involving telecommunications.

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