

PUBLICATION

Q&A with Jennifer Keller

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In January, Baker Donelson's CEO, Ben Adams, announced that Jennifer Keller, a shareholder in the Johnson City, Tennessee, office, would become the Firm's next President and Chief Operating Officer effective April 1, 2015.

Jennifer has been with Baker Donelson for 20 years – her entire legal career – practicing in the Labor and Employment Group and serving as the L&E Department Chair for the last six years. Attorneys in that group cannot say enough about Jennifer's leadership and have expressed that, while they are excited for her new role, they will deeply miss her.

Before I ever met Jennifer, and while considering co-chairing this newsletter with her, I asked Jerry Stauffer, Jennifer's predecessor as COO, for his thoughts on whether I should take on such a role. He immediately encouraged me to do so, indicating that Jennifer is an absolute star. He told me then that Jennifer has a wonderful understanding of people and the ability to be tough but fair and, through all of her actions, extraordinarily kind. When I did meet and start working with Jennifer, I could see instantly what all of the fuss was about. Jennifer is a natural leader and her style is both very thoughtful and also practical.

As our readers are well aware, having a woman in one of the highest levels of leadership at a firm of more than 650 attorneys is a big deal, because despite the fact that half of associates in law firms are female, only about 20 percent of equity partners in firms are female and only a handful of "Big Law" firms have a woman in the C-suite. In this issue of the newsletter we wanted to take a moment to spotlight this transition in the Firm and to talk to Jennifer about her new role.

Q: What are your thoughts on being named the President and COO of the Firm?

A: I am honored and extremely grateful to the Firm for the opportunity to be of service in this way. I love this Firm, and I have loved it for as long as I can remember. Our people – lawyers and non-lawyers alike – are fabulous; our work is challenging and rewarding; and our values and culture are without parallel in this industry (in my humble opinion). I look forward to the new path that lies ahead. I know that the law firm of today is very different from the law firm of 50 years ago or even 20 years ago and that it faces significant challenges. But I also know that our Firm is well-positioned to face those challenges head on and to excel in exciting ways. I am deeply appreciative to all of the leaders of the Firm who have mentored me and served as great examples throughout my career. I am so very thankful for the opportunity to work with Jerry Stauffer through, and well past, the transition; his generosity in imparting wisdom and experience is treasured.

Q: What are your passions?

A: Family, service (both professionally and in the community), faith and Firm. I have wanted to work at Baker Donelson since I was in high school. I worked for another firm as a runner and got so excited every time I delivered something to Baker Worthington (the Firm's predecessor in Knoxville, Tennessee). Every time I went,

I hoped I might run into Senator Howard Baker in the hall, the elevator or the reception area. I admired him as a public servant and brilliant conciliator, having followed his political career. It seems silly, but my dream was to work at the Firm, and I am proud to be one of its leaders.

I also love to travel, as does my family. We especially love Disney, and visiting all of the Disney parks around the world is on my bucket list. I love to dance, scrapbook and am a pop-culture trivia nut. I try to be passionate about working out and becoming more fit, having devoted more than a year in an attempt to conquer CrossFit "Lite." It's still a struggle.

Another one of my passions is football. I love, love, love football, especially the Tennessee Vols and whoever Peyton Manning plays for (I even named my daughter Peyton!). We hope to make it to Denver to watch him play in what may be his final season this year.

Q: We know you have been dedicated to the Firm for 20 years. At the risk of asking the cliché question all female leaders are asked, how have you balanced career and family?

A: I have been married to my husband, Jeff, for nearly 24 years. We were high school sweethearts. He is my biggest supporter and I could not have accomplished all that I have without him. My daughter, Peyton, is 13 and in eighth grade. She's the nicest person I know, and she makes me a better person. She's very flexible and very supportive. I am very lucky to have them on my team. I have been helped throughout this journey by my mom and other family, and we've had the same nanny since before my daughter was even born. Of course, the Firm has been wonderful, genuine and flexible in its support of my career and my devotion to my family. So, it takes a lot of folks to make all this work! It's sometimes trial and error, but it has been fun figuring it all out.

Outside of work, Jennifer is heavily involved in her community and currently serves on several boards, including the Southern Appalachian Ronald McDonald House Charities, Coalition for Kids and the Johnson City Chamber of Commerce. Internally, and in recognition of her commitment to the community, she received the Johnson City office's Pro Bono Attorney of the Year Award (2012) and Public Service Award (2013) and the Firm's Howard Baker Award (2014).

In a recent interview in Bloomberg–Big Law Business called [How These Women Took The Reins of Their Firms](#), Jennifer was asked what she thinks has helped her succeed as a lawyer and a leader at the firm:

"One thing sticks out to me and I always tell people who ask me for advice: authenticity. If people see me at various times of the day and evening, I might not always have makeup on. You may come to work on the weekends in sweatpants and with your kid in tow. Things are not always perfect, and you may drop a ball now and again and need to acknowledge 'Hey, I've done this and here's what I'm going to do to set this straight.'"

Ben Adams, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Baker Donelson, believes Jennifer will be successful in her new role in part due to her success and experience as a department head. "She has consistently shown a great ability to analyze problems, develop solutions and deftly implement those solutions with her people. She is a very effective leader and communicator, well-trained and well-suited for this new challenge in her career. I look forward to partnering with her as we move the Firm to greater heights."