

PUBLICATION

Up Close: Baker Donelson Shareholders on Leaving a Legacy

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This article is a special feature from our 2024 summer associates Miriam Draper, Daniela Eppler, Sophia Photinakis, and Noah Raftogianis.

Reflecting on the distinguished careers of Sr. Counsels Craig Holden, Phillip Sharp, Pete Ezell, and Jan Hayden at Baker Donelson, it is apparent that their collective legacies transcend mere professional accomplishments. These individuals have not only excelled in their respective fields but have also left indelible marks on their colleagues, clients, and the broader legal community. Their contributions through mentorship, leadership, and handling in distinct areas of law have helped shape the Firm's culture and have been pivotal to its success. As they embark on well-deserved retirements, their stories serve as guidance and inspiration for future generations of lawyers navigating their own paths within the legal profession.

Craig Holden



Craig Holden will leave a profound legacy at Baker Donelson, particularly within the Health Law practice area. His journey to the Firm was notably unique and positioned him to have a lasting impact on both the Firm and the field of health law. After graduating from George Washington University Law School in 1980 with aspirations of becoming a labor lawyer, he began his career at a boutique law firm in Washington, D.C., handling high-profile OSEA and union organization cases. However, the firm faced financial challenges during the Reagan administration due to reduced regulatory oversight, prompting Mr. Holden to accept a position at the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in the Office of General Counsel. Lacking prior experience in health law, this opportunity marked a pivotal shift in his career and paved the way for his specialization in health law. Following his tenure at DHHS, Mr. Holden joined Ober, Kaler, Grimes & Shriver in 1987, where he further refined his knowledge and skills in health law. Over the years, he expanded his practice and assumed leadership roles within the health law sector, eventually becoming part of Baker Donelson when Ober, Kaler, Grimes & Shriver merged with the Firm in 2017.

When asked about the most interesting and memorable matters he has handled, Mr. Holden says the most interesting matter was a massive health care fraud case involving Columbia HCA that he co-counseled in the mid-1990s. The matter lasted five to six years, and it involved multitudes of issues that required a great deal of creativity and collaboration to resolve. The most memorable matter Mr. Holden has worked on involved his representation of ABC Home Health, which was interesting given the characters involved. The company was closely held by a married couple who had used the agency's airplane for personal reasons and put it on the agency's cost report. The couple went to jail for two years and died in a plane crash after their release.

Reflecting on his career, although Mr. Holden notes that he prefers to defer to others' opinions, he hopes to be remembered for his strong leadership during the Baker Donelson and Ober Kaler merger, as well as his tenure as President of the American Health Lawyers Association during the challenging COVID-19 era. He advises young attorneys to prioritize developing relationships and skills, stressing the importance of cultivating personal connections and establishing oneself in new and specific areas of law.

Phillip Sharp



Phillip Sharp is a recently retired seasoned litigator who practiced in Baker Donelson's Houston office. Before his legal career, Mr. Sharp earned a Ph.D. from Louisiana State University and worked as an English professor. Thereafter, Mr. Sharp attended law school at the University of Texas. He entered private practice immediately after graduating and worked at a few different law firms before joining Baker Donelson. Baker Donelson's southern presence and roots resonated with him, as his family has been in the American South for more than 400 years.

When asked why he chose to become a trial lawyer, Mr. Sharp quoted Clarence Darrow: "Real lawyers try lawsuits to juries." Despite his success representing major clients on high-ticket cases, Mr. Sharp talks about his career with an attitude of humility and grace. His advice to his younger self? To show more kindness, especially to the people who are important in his life. He also wishes that he steered clear of academia. According to Mr. Sharp, "There is more honor in being an unemployed taxicab driver than being a college professor. I would rather step on a nail every day than be an English professor." As he approaches retirement, Mr. Sharp humorously hopes to "outlive the expiration date on his peas healthily" and spend time with his family.

Pete Ezell



Pete Ezell is senior counsel in Baker Donelson's Nashville office, where he assists clients with complex commercial real estate transactions and serves as bond counsel in conduit tax-exempt bond financings. A proud Tennessean, Mr. Ezell graduated from the University of the South in 1971 before serving four years in the Navy. After his service, Mr. Ezell attended Vanderbilt Law School, where he developed an interest in tax and real estate law.

Mr. Ezell described his journey towards focusing his practice as a "broken road," but emphasized that his professional development was deeply influenced by his early mentors. In his 1L summer, Mr. Ezell clerked for a firm doing corporate real estate. He enjoyed that work and the partners he worked for, so he stayed with the firm after he graduated from Vanderbilt. About three years into practice, Mr. Ezell left that firm to pursue more complex real estate work at a new firm that would go on to merge with Baker Donelson.

Over his distinguished career, Mr. Ezell worked on many significant deals and projects that often directly shaped the community around him. He fondly recounted his work in the development of the Vanderbilt Legends Club golf course. He also spoke passionately about his current work for Ford on their Blue Oval City project in West Tennessee, an electric vehicle and battery assembly plant that is expected to constitute the most expensive investment in Tennessee history. But Mr. Ezell thinks that he will be most remembered for his work on the ABA Legal Opinions Committee, where he worked to draft its influential Real Estate Finance Opinion Reports.

Mr. Ezell's best advice to young lawyers is to build credentials early. He emphasized the value of getting involved in a substantive law committee at the state or federal level. This kind of involvement, Mr. Ezell said, allows young lawyers to expand their network and learn from colleagues beyond the walls of their law firm. It is also a way for young lawyers to recognize and learn from the leaders in their given practice area. In "retirement" (he emphasized the quotation marks), Mr. Ezell is looking forward to winding down his practice by focusing on the work that he enjoys most. He is planning on using his newfound free time to play golf, travel, and spend time with his beloved wife, with whom he just celebrated his 40th wedding anniversary.

Jan Hayden

Jan Hayden is Donelson in the clients with



currently a member of the Financial Services Department at Baker New Orleans office. Over the last 40 years, Ms. Hayden has assisted corporate restructuring and other bankruptcy matters. Ms. Hayden's

best piece of advice to young associates is to keep in mind that being a lawyer is not just a trade, but a profession. She says, finding your way as a young associate will be much easier once you appreciate your critical role in our system of government, rather than viewing a legal career as a means to pad your own pockets. While you must hold yourself to a higher degree of professionalism around clients and in the courtroom, there is always room for a little fun – especially around the office. Finding that balance is the key to success. When asked what she will be most remembered for, Ms. Hayden replied, "I don't know whether it will be the jokes I crack or the endless typos in my emails." (In her reply to the request for an interview, Ms. Hayden did in fact make a few typos.) Despite her impressive track record as a lawyer, her self-proclaimed greatest accomplishment at Baker Donelson is "never failing to make the entire New Orleans office laugh on a gloomy Monday morning."

As she begins her retirement, Ms. Hayden will ever so deeply miss her "work daughters" Lacey Rochester (Shareholder, Baltimore) and Erin Pelleteri Howser (Shareholder, New Orleans) whose offices were situated next to hers. Ms. Hayden is grateful for the time spent both mentoring and working closely with these women over the years. She believes that building true friendships with her work daughters has been a very pleasant surprise and arguably the most rewarding experience throughout her 40-year career. Ms. Hayden credits the late, renowned bankruptcy attorney Edward Heller for introducing her to bankruptcy practice when she was a young associate, taking her under his wing, always believing in her, and serving as a wonderful mentor throughout her career. After 12 lovely years at the Firm, Ms. Hayden leaves Baker Donelson with zero regrets. As she approaches retirement, she is looking forward to traveling and gardening, and hopefully, sending a few less typo-filled emails in the future.

The illustrious careers of Craig Holden, Phillip Sharp, Pete Ezell, and Jan Hayden serve as a testament to the profound impact dedicated professionals can have within a firm and the broader legal community. Their diverse experiences and unique contributions have not only advanced Baker Donelson's reputation but have also provided invaluable mentorship and guidance to many young lawyers, including the authors of this article. The longevity and success of each of their careers are certainly attributable to their devotion to finding a work-life balance that "works" for them in the long haul. The stories of their journeys demonstrating dedication, leadership, and commitment to both professional and personal growth, underscore the enduring values that have shaped Baker Donelson into the institution it is today. Their departure may mark the end of an era, but the relationships they have built, and their sweeping influence will undoubtedly resonate for years to come.