

PUBLICATION

Q&A with Jennifer Keller, Susan E. Rich Award Recipient

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Abby Nix sits down with Baker Donelson's President and Chief Operating Officer, Jennifer Keller, for a candid and insightful conversation about leadership, legacy, and the unexpected turns of a career in law.

Abby Nix: Tell me a little about your life, including your journey to the legal field, Baker Donelson, and the role of chief operating officer.

- 1. Did you always want to be an attorney? Did you always want to be an employment attorney? What inspired you to take on a leadership role?**
- 2. How has your career been different than you imagined it would be?**

Jennifer Keller: I grew up as the daughter of an HVAC technician and a computer programmer. My dad did not go to college, but my mother did (and even went back in the late 1970s to learn about computers when they were first really being used broadly). My mom was a rockstar mom and corporate employee, and I knew that I wanted to contribute in a similar way. I was lucky that in high school, as I was beginning to form thoughts about my future in a concrete way, I got an opportunity to work for an asbestos/insurance defense firm as an asbestos file clerk. I went on to work for that firm for over seven years and learned a great deal about the practice of law. That solidified my interest in the industry. It also introduced me to Baker Worthington, Baker Donelson's predecessor firm. Given Senator Baker's significant contributions to the legal and political world, I quickly decided that it was my dream to work for the Firm.

I did not immediately know that I wanted to be an L&E attorney. I had gone to business school at UT, so I thought that meant I was supposed to be a corporate attorney. But, after my first summer as a summer associate, I decided that I wanted to litigate. At that time, employment law was really coming into its own, and it presented me the opportunity to learn an emerging area and build a practice that would allow me to use my business knowledge, interface with good clients to build deep relationships, and still litigate at least some of my time. It was a perfect fit.

Taking on leadership roles was really pretty organic. I didn't seek them or plan specifically for them, but I also didn't shy away from them. When my first Firm leadership role (as a practice group leader) went well and I found myself enjoying it, I began to think that it was something I wanted to continue to have in my life and career.

I never, in my wildest dreams, imagined myself being the COO of Baker Donelson. Of course, Baker Donelson has grown in ways I could not have known, and I have been given opportunities that I'm truly thankful for. So, my career really doesn't look anything like I imagined it, but it has definitely been better than I could have planned for myself.

AN: You were recently honored as the recipient of the Firm's Susan E. Rich Award, which is an award established in honor of the Firm's first woman shareholder, the first woman to be appointed as an

office managing shareholder and the first woman appointed to the Firm's board of directors. As the first woman in the Firm's C-suite, what does this award mean to you?

JK: It is an immensely meaningful award to me for a couple of reasons. First, Susan Rich is an amazing woman that I am lucky to have known and learned from. She did all of those things that you listed, but she is also a nice person who cares about other people. She's a good friend and a good mentor. She believes in building others up and in staying classy no matter what you have to do. So, to receive any award with her name attached is a true honor. Second, being the Firm's first female COO (and certainly not its last) has been a humbling reminder to me that I carry the dreams of future women leaders along with me in everything I do – just as Susan did when she had all those firsts in her time. So, I'm extremely appreciative of the award and intend to uphold the characteristics it is meant to embody.

AN: What – or who – has had the biggest influence on you, your career, or the legacy you want to leave?

JK: So many people have influenced my career along the way. There's no way to list them all here, but they include (and are certainly not limited to) Ben Adams, Jerry Stauffer, Steve Trent, John Harrison, Tim Lupinacci, Howard Baker, my mom, my husband, my daughter. But when I think about influence, I have to say that my faith has had the most direct influence on me as a person, my career development, and the legacy I desire to leave. While I don't always succeed, my goal is to live my life and conduct my career in a way that would be pleasing to God. I have certainly found that those principles are very consistent with success. Authenticity, honesty, treating people as you want to be treated, working hard, and learning from mistakes – those things will never go out of style.

AN: What is the most important lesson you've learned in your career (or life in general)?

JK: That's a really hard question. I think it's just that you can never quit learning. You can't stop learning after law school, after your first trial, after your first leadership role, after your first ten years of marriage or parenthood. We are now in a period in our industry and in our world of very rapid change. That requires even more willingness to learn, adjust, pivot. You have to get "ok" with that or it will truly drive you crazy.

AN: What are you proudest of in your life? (Career or otherwise.)

JK: First and foremost, I'm proud of my 33-year marriage to my high school sweetheart. That relationship is at the foundation of the other things I've been able to do. I'm proud of my daughter – the kind, good person she is and her pursuit of a career in ministry. I'm proud of my long career with the Firm, having been here since I was a Summer Associate. I'm proud of the long-term relationships I have with friends, clients, and my colleagues in the Firm.

AN: You've served in your role as COO since 2015, how has your perspective on how you approach the position changed since then?

- 3. Has this caused your personal or professional goals to shift?**
- 4. What do you think has happened in the last nine years that would most surprise your 2015 self?**

JK: I don't know that my perspective has changed so much as I have gained experience and comfort with most things that cross my desk, email, or phone on any given day. Certainly, in 2015, everything was new and in many ways daunting. I truly believe that the vast majority of issues or challenges can be resolved by bringing people together, listening, and finding a middle ground. That has proven true over the last decade.

I think the growth of the Firm would have most surprised my 2015 self. This past year, the Firm crossed the \$500M revenue mark, and I don't know that I would have predicted that – although I certainly would have hoped for it.

AN: What has been the most surprising part of your career?

JK: The most surprising has just been the opportunities I've been given to use my gifts and skills in ways beyond the pure practice of law.

AN: What has been the most rewarding part of your career?

JK: Without a doubt – the people. Baker Donelson has amazing people, and I've been lucky to work with so many of them throughout the years. I call many of them longtime friends, and I know without a doubt that they are on my team and would help me in any way they could if I needed it. I've had a number of challenges come up in my life throughout the 30 years I've been with the Firm, and the people in this Firm have always stepped up to support me, lift me up, and execute for me when I couldn't. I could not be more grateful.

AN: What is one piece of advice you would have for your younger self?

JK: Your daughter will be ok (even better than ok), even if you work full-time and remain dedicated to your career. Don't stress so much about that. She will benefit from seeing you succeed and will be proud of you.

AN: What is your biggest piece of advice for young professionals?

JK: Make sure you know what you are committing to when you take a job. Once you make the decision to take the job, work hard to fulfill those commitments.

AN: What would you describe as your "key" to success/what has helped you establish your legacy?

JK: Balancing very hard work with genuine care about people.

AN: What do you think businesses can do to help increase the retention of promising female leaders?

JK: Businesses can and should continue to give females opportunities to lead at all levels, allowing them to stretch and work up to bigger responsibilities. Business can be empathetic to the challenges facing promising female leaders (both in work and in their personal lives) and can work to find rational solutions without foregoing the need for high-level performance. Businesses can make sure that the successful female leaders they have now are mentoring those who are coming after – and that mentorship includes not just how to do your job but how to handle all the very real personal challenges that come with that.

AN: What does "Leaving a Legacy" mean to you?

JK: It really is all about what people think when your name is mentioned sometime in the future, after you are retired, or even after you have passed away. For me personally, I pray that mine will include leaving a positive impact on the Firm and the people in it, modeling a great marriage and true partnership with my spouse, being faithful and serving in ways well beyond my career, and being a supportive, loving mother and (maybe someday) grandmother.

AN: What do you think you will be most remembered for and/or how do you want to be remembered?

JK: Well, besides being the shortest law firm COO ever? Seriously, I love what Billy Graham said about legacy: "I think that a person's end ought to be better than his beginning. And I would like to be remembered as a person who was faithful to God and faithful to my calling and did it with integrity and with love."