



## THE POWER OF SHOWING UP

By Leighann Ness, President

In a profession that constantly asks more of us, simply showing up can feel like an accomplishment in itself. There are seasons when energy is high and engagement comes easily—and others when attending one more meeting or event feels daunting. Yet it is often in those harder moments that showing up matters most and can be the most rewarding.

Participation *does not require perfection* or endless availability. It requires presence. When we show up—to a luncheon, a planning call, a CLE, or a board meeting—we strengthen not only LAW, but ourselves. Each connection made, each conversation shared, quietly reinforces that we belong here and that our voices matter.

LAW thrives because we continue to show up for each other. Board service, committee work, and attendance are not just acts of service; they are investments in this community. They remind us that we are part of something larger than our individual practices and that support is always within reach.

In this season of short days and less-than-ideal weather, know that showing up looks different for everyone—and that every effort counts. Your presence is valued. And by continuing to show up, we sustain the strength of this community and one another.

We have several events coming up in the New Year, and would love for you to join us! In particular, take a look at the recap below of our Parole Assistance Project that LAW kicked off at our Member Appreciation CLE this month and stay tuned for ways to become a part of the inspiring group of people involved in that work!



## **AN INTERVIEW WITH JUDGE WHITNEY HERMANDORFER**

*Judge Whitney Hermandorfer is a Circuit Judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit. She was appointed and confirmed to this position in 2025. Before joining the bench, Judge Hermandorfer was the Director of the Strategic Litigation Unit at the Tennessee Attorney General's Office. Prior to this, she was an associate at Williams & Connolly. Judge Hermandorfer also served as a law clerk to Justice Brett Kavanaugh while he was on the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, Judge Richard Leon on the United States District Court for the District of Columbia and Justices Samuel Alito and Amy Coney Barrett on the Supreme Court. Judge Hermandorfer earned her law degree from The George Washington University Law School (GW) and her college degree from Princeton University.*

*In this interview with LAW, Judge Hermandorfer shares her journey to the bench, her experience as a working mother, and the importance of respect and civility in the courtroom. This interview has been edited with permission.*

**Q: When did you first decide to become an attorney?**

**A:** I wish I had an eloquent answer, but I kind of fell into it! I was a college athlete. And originally, I wanted to be an orthopedic surgeon to help other athletes. But then I realized I wasn't wired to excel at math or science. Instead, I found my strengths were more geared toward finding connections between

different analytical concepts, reading, and writing — which is what lawyers do. After graduating from Princeton, I worked as a legal assistant for an attorney in New York City. He was a “jack of all trades” lawyer who did civil litigation, criminal defense, appellate work, etc. And he is still a dear mentor of mine. While working for this lawyer, I helped him handle a lengthy criminal case in New York County Supreme Court. Watching this attorney counsel clients and present in the courtroom, especially during his appellate arguments, made me think that being an attorney would be a wonderful career path. It sold me on going to law school.

**Q: You mentioned that you were a student athlete at Princeton — what sport did you play?**

**A:** I played college basketball. My sister also played college basketball at Belmont University. So, we are a big basketball family. In many ways, basketball has shaped my career. For example, the attorney I worked for in New York received a bunch of resumes for the legal assistant job that I applied for. But that attorney also played college basketball. So, when he saw that I played college basketball as well, that made my resume stand out. Same thing for then-Judge Kavanaugh. He is a huge hoops fan. And he hired me to be a law clerk and asked me to help coach basketball. So, basketball has been a big door-opener for me! It also taught me a tremendous amount about teamwork and self-discipline, both of which have been valuable in my pursuits as a lawyer.

**Q: Can you tell us a little bit more about your pathway to bench and any mentors who helped guide you through that process?**

**A:** Yes, absolutely. I have had wonderful mentors. Brad Clark, a professor at GW, helped me with the clerkship search. Lisa Blatt, an attorney at Williams & Connolly, who is a legend in her own right, also helped me. And then of course, General Skrmetti, the Attorney General at the Tennessee Attorney General’s Office, and former Tennessee Solicitor General Andrée Blumstein, were great sponsors during the years I was there and have continued to provide support since.

All the judges I clerked for have also been amazing mentors who helped me in different ways. I feel especially drawn to mentors who understand the challenge of balancing work and present parenthood. For instance, during my clerkship with Justice Barrett, I was a mother to young children. And so was Justice Barrett. It was very helpful to see how Justice Barrett balanced being both a present mother and a Supreme Court Justice. I still call her for advice on a range of topics!

So those are some of the legal mentors. But I also have many other supporters in my personal life, including a huge family support network here in Nashville. I have three daughters, so being able to rely on family support has been key to my success in the legal field. And my wonderful husband Greg has been an

amazing partner through the ups and downs of both my personal and professional journeys.

**Q: A lot of our members have children, including young children, and can relate to the challenge of balancing motherhood and a career. How have you approached that challenge in your own life?**

**A:** It's a day-to-day process. I try to be intentional about blocking out “no work time zones” and setting boundaries with work. But, as I'll tell anyone who asks, managing work-life balance is not always pretty. The other day, plans fell through such that I needed to bring my children to the office for a few hours. And they watched movies in the conference room while I worked—which they thought was pretty cool. This is what parenting-plus-work looks like some days. Sometimes, your plans fall through. But that's okay. Parenting doesn't have to be fully “right” or buttoned up at all times. Sometimes, you just have to have a sense of humor and give yourself a little grace.

**Q: And now for the selfish part. As a litigator, I am curious: do you have any tips for attorneys who find themselves arguing motions in your courtroom?**

Sure. It is really important to distill your case, your narrative, and your themes when crafting your brief. Good briefs set the table for oral argument. If you aren't able to explain why you should win your case to someone at the dinner table in two sentences, then you have not done enough work on your case to understand your best themes and framing.

Also, in terms of oral argument mechanics: just answer the questions that the judges ask. It may sound silly, but when a judge asks a question during oral argument, it's usually because that judge *really* wants to know the answer. A lot of times, attorneys do not want to be direct in answering the questions that judges ask. They are trying to think ten steps ahead and are afraid of setting up a precarious position for other aspects of their argument. But eventually, the judges will pin you down. So, it's much better to say, “yes, but—” or “no, but—.” Just give the answer and then explain the “why” behind it.

Also, I would advise attorneys to be respectful of opposing counsel. There's a saying that attorneys should attack arguments, not advocates. I think that saying is well taken. Sometimes, really snippy brief writing or oral advocacy detracts from the substance of the argument. Try to heed the difference between sharp, punchy, or clear writing and needless jabs.

---



Indigent Defense and Excellence in Advocacy

## **WHY TENNESSEE'S CRIMINAL COURTS NEED IDEA AND YOU**

by Dawn Deaner and Jodie Bell

Tennessee has a shortage of qualified attorneys willing to accept court appointments to represent people charged with criminal offenses when the Public Defender cannot take the case. This chronic problem has worsened over time for various reasons, including low attorney compensation from the State for such work. The current \$60/hour payrate does not even cover law office overhead, and when a case requires more time than compensation caps allow, lawyers eventually work for no pay at all. Further, the \$60/hour rate is a recent increase from \$50/hour, which was the rate for more than 20 years. In the most serious A & B felony cases, the State's cap is \$3,000. If the case is declared extended/complex, the cap becomes \$6,000. Thus, the most a lawyer can be paid to represent someone on the most serious charges (other than first degree murder) is \$6,000, including if the case goes to trial. To compare, the federal appointed counsel rate is currently around \$175/hour with no caps, and it is regularly increased.

These realities drive conscientious and experienced criminal defense lawyers to stop taking appointments of Tennessee's indigent accused. They also might encourage lawyers who stay to accept too many cases to make ends meet. Meanwhile, no one oversees the quality of representation people receive, and the judges responsible for making the appointments are pressed to meet a huge demand with shrinking options. No one wins, and those who suffer the most are people in jail charged with serious offenses whose lawyers do not meet minimum standards of effective representation.

As lawyers witnessing this routine injustice for years in Nashville, we realized we must do better. Lawyers are responsible for how our courts operate and for addressing systemic inequities within them, especially when our government falls short of its obligations. That's why we started the IDEA Pilot Project in Nashville a year ago. IDEA stands for Indigent Defense and Excellence in Advocacy. It is a Pilot Project addressing disparities in the services people receive in Nashville when they are charged with a crime and cannot afford to hire a lawyer. IDEA is hosted and managed by the Choosing Justice Initiative ("CJI"), which is a non-profit, founded by former Metro Nashville Public Defender

Dawn Deaner, dedicated to providing a more compassionate and equitable justice system in Tennessee. CJI offers comprehensive legal representation for people charged with criminal offenses who cannot afford to hire a lawyer as well as other impactful programs connecting lawyers with vulnerable incarcerated Tennesseans, like youth sentenced to life in prison.

IDEA launched in late 2024 with \$400,000 in funding provided by the Metro Council. In 2025, the Council approved another \$500,000, which the Mayor included in his budget. Most of the money is used to supplement the pay appointed lawyers receive from the State on serious felony case appointments. For example, for the most serious cases (A/B felonies and murder cases), IDEA pays lawyers an additional \$125/hour on those cases, so combined with the State's \$60/hour, a lawyer is paid \$185/hour. Also, IDEA does not impose caps, so if lawyers cap out in State compensation, they will still make \$125/hour from IDEA funding. IDEA funding also pays for investigation services in cases pending in General Sessions Court, which is a critical component of a meaningful defense that the State refuses to fund.

IDEA's mission is to ensure people facing the most serious charges in Nashville are represented by qualified, capable, and zealous lawyers when the Public Defender's Office cannot take their case. But, while funding from the local government or private donations to pay lawyers reasonable compensation is helpful, funding alone is not enough. IDEA needs more lawyer participation and awareness! IDEA has 30 participating lawyers, and it needs at least twice that number. Getting there will require a pipeline to train and mentor new lawyers interested in indigent defense. It will also require more seasoned lawyers with criminal defense experience to join the IDEA panel and take an appointment or two per year. Finally, IDEA is asking LAW members living and working in Nashville to educate people in their circles about how important the right to counsel is to fairness and equal justice, and how IDEA protects that right. Awareness leads to action!

To learn more about the problems associated with appointed counsel in Tennessee and to take action to help vulnerable Tennesseans, visit [cjinashville.org](http://cjinashville.org).

---



## **Board Member Spotlight: Vada Newman**

Q: Where are you from? Tell me about your path to practicing law.

**A: I am a Nashville native!**

**The law found me. When I started college at Middle Tennessee State University, I planned to be a teacher. My academic advisor told me that I had to pick a minor. I was a big history nerd, so I chose political science, and I fell in love! I decided to switch my major and set my sights on law school.**

Q: What do you do professionally, and what is your favorite part of your job?

**A: I practice at The Law Offices of John Day, where I represent clients in personal injury and wrongful death cases across the state. My favorite part of the job is helping people pick up the pieces after life-altering events. It is gratifying to help my clients navigate those difficult times.**

Q: Why did you join LAW?

**A: I believe that it is crucial to champion other women. Laura Baker, a former LAW president, suggested that I join LAW to connect with a community of lawyers focused on supporting women in the profession.**

Q: Describe yourself.

**A: Cat mom. Movie lover. Morning person. Wine appreciator.**

Q: What do you enjoy doing outside of work?

**A: am an extrovert with introverted hobbies! I love to cook and enjoy being surrounded by friends and family for a good meal. I love hosting – and most of all, planning – themed parties and movie marathons. I practice yoga and spend lots of time at the movie theater. This year I have seen 109 movies!**

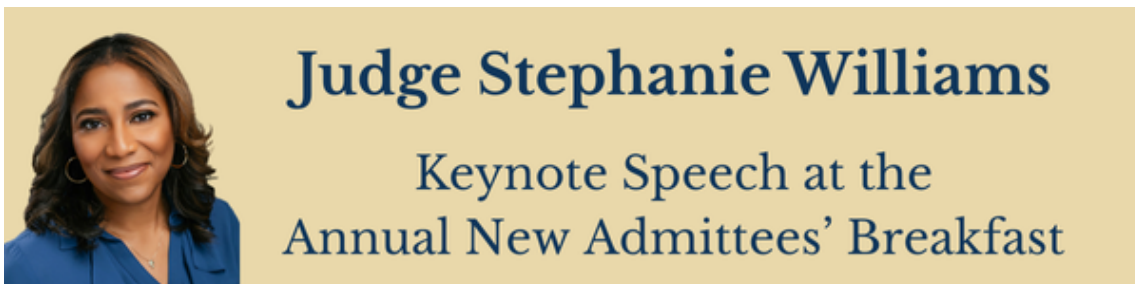
Q: It's a Saturday night in Nashville, what are you up to?

**A: I prefer to do all my activities during the day! By Saturday night, I am probably curled up on the couch with my fiancé, watching a new show, and eating takeout.**



## **GET TO KNOW NEW LAW MEMBER JASON GICHNER WITH FIVE QUICK QUESTIONS**

- 1) Undergraduate school/degree and law school:
  - *Colgate University B.A.*
  - *Vanderbilt University Law School*
- 2) What are some of your favorite things about Nashville?
  - *The Ryman, Robert's Western World, and Centennial Park*
- 3) What is the thing you enjoy best about your job?
  - *Getting to work with people fighting for something that they care about.*
- 4) What is a piece of advice you would give to a new attorney?
  - *Be brave and kind.*
- 5) What is your favorite restaurant in Nashville?
  - *Baja Burrito*



## **JUDGE STEPHANIE WILLIAMS DELIVERS THE KEYNOTE SPEECH TO NEW ADMITTEES AT LAW'S ANNUAL BREAKFAST**

To our new admittees, congratulations on your impending admission to the Tennessee Bar. You've crossed a line that few people ever do. The long,

grueling nights studying and preparing for class, the endless readings, the indescribable stress of passing the bar exam, and your relentless pursuit of perfection—as a student—are all behind you.

You are now transitioning into long, grueling nights preparing for trial and billing hours, more endless readings, the indescribable stress of obtaining a good outcome for your client, and the same relentless pursuit of perfection—as a lawyer. And for that you are to be celebrated and commended.

But seriously, take that in for a moment. You are a lawyer and from this day forward, you hold something extraordinary — the ability to change lives with your words, your reason, and your courage. You are also now the official lawyer for your friends and family members who view you as an expert in every area of the law, regardless of what your actual practice area is.

As your keynote speaker today, I feel compelled to share a few things about myself that I think you should know.

I went through law school in a very non-traditional way, juggling single parenthood and commuting from Nashville to Knoxville to attend law school at UTK—Go Vols!

After graduating from law school in 2002, I worked in a small firm, primarily practicing family law. I transitioned from there into my own practice, still dedicated to family law. In 2014, I began to serve as the Special Master in the Fourth Circuit Court of Davidson County, a family law Court, under the leadership and direction of my dear, beloved friend and mentor, the late Judge Philip E. Smith. I now have the honor and pleasure to serve as the Judge of the Fourth Circuit Court and have done so for a little over a year. So, my legal career spans over 20 years.

My children are now grown, ages 31 and 29; I have two grandchildren, ages 6 and 2; I have no pets; I like to read; and my faith is my foundation. Oh, and I am 51 years old. Of all the things I just told you about myself, the most important, right now at least, is that I am 51.

Now at 51, some people will say, “You are still a baby.” To you, I am truly grateful and say, “Thank You!” Others will refrain from calling me old, but they may give me a sweet *bless your heart* smile and say, “51? Oh wow! You certainly don’t look 51!” Okay well....thank you?... I guess that’s a compliment. And people like my younger doctor tell me that, and I quote, “At your age, it’s a good thing to run certain tests and do various screenings.” To her I say... nothing. I just give her that “look” and think about a lot of things I’d like to say, kinda like I do in court sometimes. That said, I’m still cool enough to know what 6-7 means, which apparently is absolutely nothing!

In any event, the reality for me is, at 51, I am getting older as evidenced by the fact that:

- I wear readers (which are always within reach),
- I am a super early riser,
- any event that starts at 8:00 p.m. is too late for me to attend,
- I find naps to be treasured gifts,
- staying up late is any time after 9:00 p.m.,
- I put two spaces between a period and the beginning of a new sentence, and
- I'm increasingly concerned about what the parking situation will be when I go anywhere.

If you don't understand any of that, just keep living!

But also, I find 51 to be a bit of a turning point in my life. It's a season of reflection and an acute awareness of my mortality; an awareness that one day what I have to say won't matter anymore. That younger generations are on my heels, waiting to take over the world and my role in it; that time is a precious commodity and how I use that time is what matters most. It is a call to Live My Legacy with everything I do, to take nothing for granted, and to make the most of each day.

So, while I'd love to share with you tips to being a great lawyer, I'm more compelled to share with you something much deeper: tips to living your best life, and living a *meaningful* life while engaging in the practice of law. This includes fostering and building community among your peers and colleagues, fostering and building healthy relationships outside of work and professional settings, with friends and family members, and living your legacy, beginning right here, right now, today.

## **BUILDING COMMUNITY IN THE LEGAL WORLD**

I will be honest with you, while very rewarding, your work as a lawyer can at times be difficult and exhausting. There will be days when the hours stretch too long, when clients demand the impossible, when justice feels like a mirage shimmering on the horizon. You'll question your path; you'll question whether you are correctly analyzing a case or advising your client properly. You'll wonder whether you're making a difference. You may become overwhelmed. You may even be tempted to take the easy road and just close a deal at any cost to collect the check.

But that's not why you chose this profession, is it? You chose this profession because something in you believed in the power of fairness. You believed that words could protect the weak, that rules could shape society, and that truth was

still worth chasing. That belief, along with the community you build with colleagues and friends in the legal world will be your *fuel*.

Being involved in professional organizations like the Tennessee Bar Association, the Nashville Bar Association, the Napier-Looby Bar Association and LAW, just to name a few, is where you will find true friends, support, and mentorship among colleagues. They are who you can call and lean on when you need extra help, encouragement, and a reminder of why you matter and why your work matters. They will speak to you from their learned and lived experiences in the law. They will challenge you and help you grow throughout your journey. You will be able to learn from their mistakes, while receiving kindness, grace, direction and support from them when you encounter challenges and your own mistakes (and trust me, that will happen).

These relationships are essential to your success and your well-being as a practitioner. Please do not isolate yourself as a practitioner in law. Build a community, take advantage of the many bar-related events, and make friends. You are now a member of a unique club; however quirky it may be at times. Immerse yourself in its culture and cultivate long-lasting relationships.

And also, be a mentor. Each generation of lawyers rises because the one before it reached back to lift them. Be that hand for someone else.

Because at its core, the law is not about paperwork or precedent. It's about people, how they are treated and how we treat them. It's about relationships.

Every case file represents a human being, whether it's a business owner, a family, a victim, a dreamer. Behind every statute is a story about what we, as a society, decided to value. Never let the technicalities make you forget the humanity, not only in your clients but in your colleagues who you will find on the other side of the case. Get to know your colleagues and treasure them.

## **BEING PRESENT FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS**

The relationships and community you build in the practice of law are just a beginning to living your best life as a legal practitioner. The relationships you foster outside of the legal world are even more important and they demand and deserve your dedication, time, and attention. Your relationships and the time you spend with friends, spouses, significant others, children, and aging loved ones should be cherished and intentional.

There will always be another hour to bill, whether YOU bill it or not.

In contrast, a child's first words and first steps only happen once. There is an expiration on the sweet voice of a child; there is an expiration on the time you

can spend with siblings, parents, grandparents, and other family members; there is an expiration on the *quality* of that time you spend with them.

Do not let these moments and life events pass you by. Be present for your loved ones and embrace the here and now.

Even in this moment, you are being celebrated for a major accomplishment and milestone in your life as you will officially be sworn in later this morning. Take the time to embrace this moment. Nothing else is more important right now. I'm sure you have plans tomorrow or even later today. Some of you may even have work responsibilities. But that can and will wait. Take time to partake in this experience in a meaningful way with your family and friends.

In addition to fostering and maintaining healthy relationship at home, be involved and impactful in the community. You will have opportunities to serve on boards with missions that are important to you. Take them! Your input and contribution are quite valuable to boards and organizations all over the city. Your impact will extend beyond the office or courtroom to allow these entities, their missions, and the individuals they reach, to be better served.

Because when you strip it all down, being a lawyer is more than representing clients for pay. It can mean standing in the gap between chaos and order. Between power and vulnerability. Between what is and what should be. Whether you are being paid as retained counsel or offering your talents and experience to a cause that is close to you.

Think about that: You have the privilege of helping write the story of justice in your generation.

That's not a job. That's a calling.

## **LIVING YOUR LEGACY**

It's been said that the best lawyers approach cases with their endings in mind. To do this, you must decide at the outset what you want to see happen—how do you want your case to end? Once you do that, the path you'll take to get there will come into focus. Your steps along that path will be well defined. You'll be calm, relaxed, and in complete control of yourself and your case.

And sometimes, as your case develops, your desired end may change too. That's all right. If your desired end changes, you simply adjust your path to get to your new end. What's critical is that at any time along the way, you know exactly where you're going. You always have your end in mind.

One day you may reach your 51-year-old epiphany, as I have. You will recognize that what you do should have meaning, and you should be intentional

and mindful about what you leave behind for future generations. You will begin not only to practice law with the end in mind, but to live life with the end in mind.

So, I ask you this question: if today were your last day, what would you be remembered for? What would be your legacy?

We often think of a “legacy” as something we leave after we’re gone: a will, a name on a building, a foundation. But legacy isn’t just what you leave behind, it’s what you live right now. Legacy is not about possessions; it’s about impressions. It’s not about what people will say when you’re gone; it’s about how you make them feel while you’re here.

Every day, we’re writing our story and our legacy with our words, our work, our relationships, our choices.

Another thing about legacy, it isn’t reserved for presidents, inventors, or billionaires. Every teacher who inspires a student leaves a legacy. Every parent who models kindness leaves a legacy. Every friend who listens when no one else will leaves a legacy. Just think about the people who have shaped your life. Most of them probably didn’t realize they were shaping your future. But they did, simply by being present.

That’s the hidden power of legacy: it multiplies quietly.

Like seeds planted in a garden you may never see bloom. Your words, your kindness, your example, these are the seeds. And one day, someone will grow and bloom from them.

There’s a difference between leaving a legacy and living one. To leave a legacy means to focus on how people will remember you. To live a legacy means to focus on how you impact them now. Living your legacy means showing up—for your friends, your colleagues, your family, your team, your community, and your clients—with purpose, passion, and consistency.

Legacy begins with character. People may forget your words, but they’ll never forget your example. Integrity doesn’t always make you popular, but it makes you permanent. When you choose honesty over convenience, humility over ego, service over self, you’re building a foundation for a legacy that outlasts your lifetime. At the end of our lives, people won’t remember our job titles or possessions. Again, they’ll remember how we made them feel.

- Were we kind?
- Were we encouraging?
- Did we listen?
- Did we love well?
- Did we play well?

You might never know how far your influence goes. A kind word today could inspire a young person to chase their dream. A small act of generosity could change a family's future. You can't control the ripples, but you can choose to throw the stone.

So how do we live a legacy intentionally?

- **Ask yourself daily:** “What will people remember about how I showed up today?”
- **Prioritize people:** People are our greatest resources.
- **Serve something greater than yourself:** Legacy grows when your purpose extends beyond personal gain.
- **Be consistent:** Great legacies are built over time—one day, one choice, one act of courage at a time.

So, live your life as if every word, every choice, every gesture is a seed for the future—because it is.

Let's not just leave a legacy in our work in the law — let's live one. Let's be the kind of people whose lives whisper long after our voices are gone.

**Thank you for your time and attention today. And again, Congratulations! I look forward to seeing you in court soon!**

*Note: Judge Stephanie Williams delivered the keynote speech at LAW's 48th Annual New Admittees' Breakfast on November 4th, 2025.*



# NETWORKING WITH INSBANK, LAW'S EXCLUSIVE BANKING PARTNER

On November 12, 025, INSBANK hosted a Happy Hour for LAW members at their Green Hills location. Attendees enjoyed great food, drink, and conversation. Thank you so much to INSBANK for hosting this lovely event!



**INSBANK**  
CELEBRATING 25 YEARS

## Introducing: The L.A.W. Philanthropy Account

- 🔑 Earn competitive interest rates
- 🔑 Donations made to LAW on your behalf
- 🔑 Personal & commercial financial guidance

**WE REST OUR CASE.**

[LEARN MORE](#)

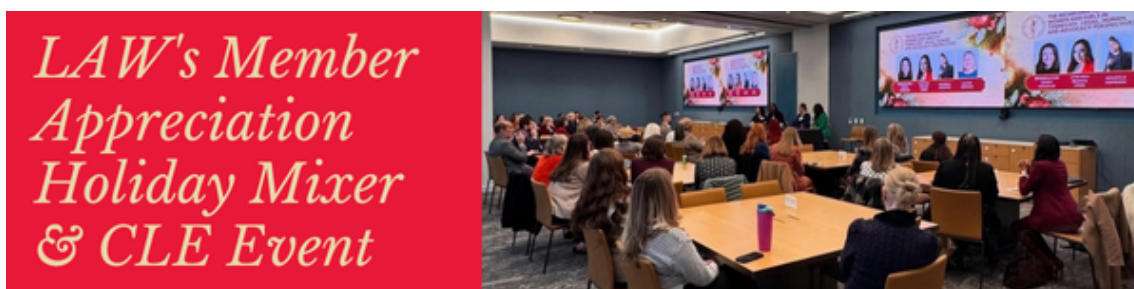
**FDIC** FDIC-Insured - Backed by the full faith and credit of the U.S. Government

Click on the INSBANK [landing page](#) to learn more about the INSBANK LAW Philanthropic Account and the partnership between LAW and our Exclusive Banking Sponsor, INSBANK.



**LAW'S SPEED NETWORKING EVENT WAS A SUCCESS!**

LAW, the Nashville Hispanic Bar Association, and the Nashville Bar Association Diversity Committee organized a speed networking event in November that was a huge success. Polsinelli hosted, and participants brought all their openness and enthusiasm! It was great to see such energy and curiosity in every conversation. We shared participant contact info for those who did not opt out of that service so participants could continue the discussions, explore collaborations, and strengthen the connections because we know that, sometimes, the most meaningful opportunities grow from the shortest conversations. A single follow-up message can spark a new partnership, open a door, or inspire a fresh idea. We're excited to see where these connections lead and hope to make this an annual event!



## **LAW'S MEMBER APPRECIATION HOLIDAY MIXER AND CLE EVENT**

The Member Appreciation Program and Holiday Mixer at Bass, Berry & Sims on December 10 featured two interrelated panels that explored the impact of incarceration in Tennessee and the critical role of advocacy, support, and second chances in both the release and parole processes.

### **The Incarceration of Women and Girls in Tennessee: Legal, Human, and Advocacy Perspectives**

**Moderator:** Jenny Charles

**Panelists:** Cyntoia Brown Long, Sparkle Johnson, Kathy Sinback

Moderator Jenny Charles facilitated an open and candid discussion on the experiences of incarcerated women and girls in Tennessee, joined by Cyntoia

Brown Long and Sparkle Johnson, both of whom were incarcerated at a young age, and Kathy Sinback, who has dedicated her professional life to advocating for women and girls across the state. Ms. Sinback previously served as Court Administrator of the Davidson County Juvenile Court, where she first met Ms. Brown Long and became part of her early support system.

Ms. Brown Long and Ms. Johnson spoke powerfully about the role of faith in sustaining hope during their incarceration and in believing that their lives could be different. After serving lengthy prison sentences, both women have successfully reintegrated into society and left their former lives behind. They emphasized, however, that reentry was not without significant struggle and that their success would not have been possible without strong support networks.

Both panelists described the necessity of severing ties with their past lives and resisting the pull to look backward. They spoke candidly about the challenges of reentering a world that had changed dramatically during their incarceration, as well as the long-term effects of institutionalization. The panel also highlighted often-overlooked consequences and challenges of incarceration. By way of example, Ms. Brown Long described years of inadequate or nonexistent dental care and shared that she has since undergone extensive dental procedures to address the lasting harm caused by years without proper treatment.

Since their release, Ms. Brown Long and Ms. Johnson have dedicated their lives to supporting others facing similar circumstances. Each has founded nonprofit organizations, Superwomen, Inc. and Epic Girl, focused on empowering, mentoring, and advocating for women and girls impacted by the criminal justice system. These organizations also emphasize providing practical necessities and support that can make the difference between successful and unsuccessful reentry.

The panel underscored not only the profound human cost of incarcerating women and girls, and often overlooked factors that lead to their incarceration, but also the transformative impact of advocacy, community support, and second chances.

## **The Changing Landscape of Life with Parole in Tennessee and How to Help**

**Moderator:** Angie Bergman

**Panelists:** Ben Raybin; Eric Alexander; Dawn Harrington; Erica Duggan

The Tennessee Board of Probation and Parole is required to submit an annual report to the Governor and General Assembly summarizing its activities. According to the FY 2024–2025 report, hearing officers conducted 12,099 parole hearings, while Board members conducted 721 hearings. The hearings included 5,567 initial parole hearings, 4,997 parole review hearings, and resulted in 2,448 parole release certificates statewide.

Against this backdrop, Ms. Bergman moderated a discussion with the panelists on how parole works in Tennessee and how attorneys can meaningfully participate in the process, even without criminal defense or litigation experience.

## **How Parole Decisions Are Made**

Under Tenn. Code Ann. § 40-28-117, parole may be granted only if there is a reasonable probability the offender will live at liberty without violating the law and that release is not incompatible with the welfare of society. In making that determination, the Board considers factors such as the nature of the offense, criminal history, time served, institutional conduct, program participation, and community support or opposition.

The Board also looks to average sentences and percentages of time served for comparable offenses, an approach that drew skepticism given that these benchmarks are effectively shaped by the Board's own historical parole decisions.

## **Structure of the Board and Hearings**

The Board consists of seven gubernatorial appointees serving staggered, renewable six-year terms. Not all members participate in every hearing. Depending on the offense, a parole hearing may be conducted by a single Board member or a designated hearing officer.

Parole hearings take place at the institution where the offender is incarcerated. Hearing officers and board members review extensive materials, including the offender's parole file, institutional records, release plan, testimony, social and criminal history, disciplinary record, program participation, and risk-assessment instruments such as the static-99R. Statements from institutional staff, family members, community supporters, and victims may also be considered.

Following the hearing, the presiding official issues findings and a recommendation. The full Board then votes to grant or deny parole. Most cases require three affirmative votes, while the most serious offenses require four, pursuant to Tenn. Code Ann. § 40-28-105(d)(4).

## **The Role of Attorneys**

Offenders in Tennessee do not have a right to appointed counsel at parole hearings, but attorneys may be retained and can appear with the offender. As the panel emphasized, parole advocacy does not require trial skills or criminal defense experience. The process is structured, the rules of evidence do not apply, and effective advocacy centers on preparation, clarity, and narrative.

An attorney's role may include helping the offender craft a coherent narrative, develop a viable release plan, and focus on the factors most important to the Board, which is especially valuable given how difficult it can be for incarcerated individuals to objectively assess their own cases. Attorneys may present prepared statements and assist the offender in preparing opening remarks, responses to Board questions, and closing statements.

## **Outcomes and Ongoing Concerns**

If parole is granted, the offender must complete any Board-ordered programming and obtain approval of a release plan before being released under TDOC supervision. If parole is denied, the denial period generally does not exceed six years, during which the Board may recommend additional programming.

A recurring theme of the panel discussion was the disparity inherent in the parole system. Even model inmates, individuals who have demonstrated genuine rehabilitation and now mentor others within the prison system, are frequently denied parole. Despite these frustrations, many continue to support fellow prisoners preparing for hearings, underscoring both the shortcomings of the system and the profound impact of meaningful advocacy.

## **How to Get Involved**

Lawyers can play a critical role in parole advocacy, regardless of practice background, by helping incarcerated individuals present their best possible case and by partnering with community organizations to support successful reentry. Effective advocacy often lies in not only understanding the law, but presenting the human story behind it.

For many individuals facing the parole board, the presence of a prepared, thoughtful advocate can make a tangible difference in a process where the stakes could not be higher.

If you are interested in learning more about advocating for individuals appearing before the Board of Parole, please reach out to [kayce@law-nashville.org](mailto:kayce@law-nashville.org).



## *Second Chances:*

*Women, Sentencing Reform, and the Path to Parole in Tennessee with Special Guest, Cyntoia Brown Long*





---

## IMPORTANT DATES:

### Coming in 2026:

- **February 12, 2026, 5:30pm:** Book Club featuring Numbers Up by Johnisha Matthews. This is a joint event with the Napier Looby Bar Association. Location TBD.
- **February 24, 2026, 1:30pm to 4:30pm:** LAW Day on the Hill. This will be a come-when-you-can kind of event at the Tennessee Legislature with multiple meetings, tours, and informative sessions throughout.
- **March 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup>:** Suff: The Musical. LAW is partnering with the NBA so that members can experience this musical at TPAC together. Tickets to the show will be available for either March 4 or 5 at 7:30pm. More details are forthcoming, including an associated CLE opportunity that will have live and on-demand options.



**LAWYERS' ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN  
MARION GRIFFIN CHAPTER, NASHVILLE**

*Special Thanks to Our Annual Sponsors*

**EXCLUSIVE BANKING SPONSOR**



**EXCLUSIVE DIGITAL SPONSOR**



**GOLD SPONSORS**



**SILVER SPONSOR**



**BRONZE SPONSORS**



**SUPPORTER SPONSORS**



# **2025-2026 LAW BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

## **EXECUTIVE BOARD**

Leighann Ness, *President*

Shundra Manning *President Elect*

Jessica Lim, *Secretary*

Morgan Bernard, *Treasurer*

Ellen McIntyre, *2nd Year Director*

Princess Rogers, *2nd Year Director*

Kennedy Krieg, *1st Year Director*

Victoria Gentry, *1st Year Director*

Tony Orlandi, *Archivist*

Carrie Daughtery, *Archivist*

Hollie Parrish, *Newsletter Editor*

Jorie Zajicek, *Newsletter Editor*

Jenny Charles, *Interim Newsletter Editor*

Vada Newman, *Interim Newsletter Editor*

Andrea McCoy, *Interim Newsletter Editor*

Courtney Orr, *Immediate Past President*

## **COMMITTEE CO-CHAIRS**

### **NEW ADMITTEES' BREAKFAST**

Courtney Orr, Kennedy Krieg

### **COMMUNITY RELATIONS**

Abby Sparks, Lisa Wyatt

### **DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION**

Chicoya Smith, Jerice Glanton

### **HEALTH AND WELLNESS**

Victoria Gentry, Lori Glenn

### **JUDICIAL APPOINTMENTS, ELECTIONS AND AWARDS**

Katherine Fischman, Catherine Moore

### **LEGISLATION AND LITIGATION**

Olivia Park, Emily Sanders

### **MARION GRIFFIN WOMEN'S SYMPOSIUM 2025**

Victoria Gentry, Corey Harkey

### **MEMBERSHIP**

Margaret Dodson, Ann Claire Butler

## MENTORING/MEMBER DEVELOPMENT

Erika Stinnett, Stephanie Gibbs

## NETWORKING

Crystal Armstrong, Chambre Malone

## PROGRAMS

Jenny Charles, Tony Orlandi, Emily Warwick, Rachel Rustmann

---

## **SUSTAINING MEMBERS**

*Anne Arney ~ Kristi Arth ~ Gail Ashworth ~ Katherine Austin ~ Catie Lane Bailey  
~ Laura Baker ~ Cindy Barnett ~ Lisa Bashinsky ~ Annie Beckstrom ~ Margaret  
Behm ~ Jodie Bell ~ Kaley Bell ~ Angie Bergman ~ Melissa Blackburn ~  
Rebecca Blair ~ Trudy Bloodworth ~ Claudia Bonnyman ~ Jan Bossing ~  
Amanda Bradley ~ Hunter Branstetter ~ C. Branstetter, Jr. ~ Mary Brewer ~  
Louise Brock ~ Taylor Brooks ~ Ann Butler ~ Sheila Calloway ~ Rose Cantrell ~  
Tracey Carter ~ Cindy Chappell ~ Jenny Charles ~ Lisa Cole ~ Jennifer Cook ~  
Brooke Coplon ~ Patricia Cottrell ~ Jan Margaret Craig ~ Nancy Crawford ~  
Chelsea Curtis ~ Carrie Daughtrey ~ Martha Daughtrey ~ MC Davis ~ Rebecca  
Demaree ~ Jacqueline Dixon ~ Margaret Dodson ~ Jennifer Eberle ~ Sherie  
Edwards ~ David Esquivel ~ Anne-Marie Farmer ~ Kimberly Faye ~ Marcus  
Floyd ~ Mel Fowler-Green ~ Ginette Garza Brown ~ Victoria Gentry ~ Summer  
Geyer ~ Stephanie Gibbs ~ Elizabeth Gonser ~ Emily Gould ~ Shellie  
Handelsman ~ Jesse Harbison ~ Corey Harkey ~ Morgan Hartgrove ~ Emeline  
Hebert ~ Lisa Helton ~ Leesa Hinson ~ Kyonzte Hughes-Toombs ~ Anne Hunter  
~ Courtney Hunter ~ Danielle Johns ~ Julie Jones ~ Robin Kimbrough Hayes ~  
Ann Knuckles Mahoney ~ William Koch ~ Marian Kohl ~ Keelin Kraemer ~ Nina  
Kumar ~ Christie Laird ~ Lauren Lamberth ~ Rachel Lawson ~ Kim Looney ~  
Lesli Love ~ Ellen Lyle ~ Nancy Maclean ~ Shundra Manning ~ Anne Martin ~  
Amanda McClendon ~ Joanna McCracken ~ Ellen McIntyre ~ Mary Morris ~  
Marlene Moses ~ Patricia Moskal ~ Barbara Moss ~ Ann Murphy ~ Karen Neal  
~ Leighann Ness ~ Alistair Newbern ~ Christina Norris ~ Tony Orlandi  
~ Courtney Orr ~ Erica Penley ~ Iakmal Perera ~ Brant Phillips ~ Bart Pickett ~  
Erin Polly ~ Sara Anne Quinn ~ Candice Reed ~ Caraline Rickard ~ Donna  
Roberts ~ Jennifer Robinson ~ Aileen Rose ~ Abby Rubenfeld ~ Marissa Russ ~  
Rachel Rustmann ~ Amber Rutherford ~ Maria Salas ~ Julie Sandine ~  
Elizabeth Scaglione ~ Brooke Schiferle ~ Marie Scott ~ Lindsey Sexton ~  
Lindsey Shepard ~ Cynthia Sherwood ~ Dianna Shew ~ Kristen Shields ~ Emily  
Shouse ~ Rebekah Shulman ~ Elizabeth Sitgreaves ~ Joan Skrzyniarz ~  
Kristian Smith ~ Janna Smith ~ Laura Smith ~ Shannon Smith ~ Rachel Sodee  
~ Leslie South ~ Abby Sparks ~ Joycelyn Stevenson ~ Erika Stinnett ~ Mariam*

*Stockton ~ Jane Stranch ~ Kathleen Stranch ~ Scott Tift ~ Elizabeth Tipping ~  
Jim Todd ~ Emily Todoran ~ Martha Trammell ~ Aleta Trauger ~ Mary Walker ~  
DarKenya Waller ~ Brian Walthart ~ Emily Warth ~ Elizabeth Washko ~ Kasi  
Wautlet ~ Bernadette Welch ~ Carolyn Wenzel ~ Jude White ~ Karen Williams ~  
Devon Williamson ~ Sheree Wright ~ Tyler Yarbro ~ Mandy Young ~ Gulam  
Zade ~ Violet Zhang*



## **Lawyers' Association for Women**

PO Box 150532, Nashville, TN, 37215

This email was sent to {{contact.EMAIL}}  
You've received this email because you've subscribed to our newsletter.

[Unsubscribe](#)

