



PROFILES *in* PRACTICE

Photos by Sarah Mayer



ALIA ABDI

Alia M. Abdi, an employment attorney with Nilan Johnson Lewis in Minneapolis, has always been intrigued by the idea of law. As an undergraduate student at St. Cloud State University, Abdi took an “Introduction to Law” class with a professor who was a retired attorney—the first person Abdi met who had experience in the legal profession. “The class was so interesting. I just wanted to do homework for that class! I was just fascinated and knew that this is where I should be heading.”

That same professor encouraged Abdi to take the LSAT and apply to law school. She did, ending up at the University of Minnesota Law School, where she graduated in 2017. She immediately began working at a local plaintiff’s firm.





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Abdi knew she wanted to explore employment law after her first wage-an-hour case. "Employment is important to people's livelihoods, their identities." Abdi found she could make an impact through labor and employment work. She found a home at Nilan Johnson Lewis. "I'm really grateful to have a job I love. Most people dread Monday mornings, but I find myself excited to hit the ground running and get back to getting things done."

Practicing employment law also incorporates another passion of Abdi's: equity and inclusion. As a black female attorney, Abdi understands the importance of being seen and heard. "Talking about diversity is one thing, living it is very different," she notes.

On a personal level, Alia goes out of her way to make people of color feel welcome within the legal community, whether it's taking them out to coffee or simply making a point of engaging with them at a networking event. "People forget how important it is to get connected, how hard that is to do when you're new," she said. "Building that network is so important to your overall success. I had someone do that for me, and I'd like to think I'm doing that for others—another friendly face welcoming them to the Minnesota legal profession and cheering them on to succeed."

Currently, Abdi co-chairs the Diversity and Inclusion Committee for the Federal Bar Association. This year, one of the committee's initiatives is to increase pipeline efforts for diverse students to go to law school. "It's hard to have diversity if you don't have many diverse people coming out of law school. That is why we are focusing

on offering scholarships and mentoring opportunities to students of color, both during and after law school," she emphasized.

Abdi encourages those navigating the legal profession to be confident in who they are and stay present in every situation. She recalls attending events where she was the only attorney of color or the youngest person in the room. "It's easy to be a fly on the wall," she said. "Don't do that. There's a lot of value you bring because you've got this different perspective that no one else in that room has. Whatever your diversity is, there is a place for you, but you need to be confident enough to be present."

Outside of work, Abdi focuses on her relationships with family and friends. She's especially proud of the relationship she has with her son. "I'm proud of how close we are and the relationship we have. And I'm lucky to be surrounded by supportive family and friends," she noted. In the limited free time that parenting and working as a lawyer allow, she enjoys trying new restaurants with her husband and son, going to the gym, and reading for pleasure. "Any time someone says, 'Oh this is a really good book, nothing related to the law,' you can sign me up to read it," she joked.

At the end of the day, Abdi said all she wants is to be the best attorney she can be. "My goal is to continue doing the work I love and finish my career being proud of what I did."



by Bethany Lenderink

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Bethany Lenderink graduated from Bethel University with a degree in English Literature and Writing. Lenderink is a Communications Specialist with the Minnesota State Bar Association and the Hennepin County and Ramsey County Bar Associations.

EDER CASTILLO

You should get to know Eder B. Castillo. In all likelihood, you'll see his name on a ballot very soon.

"My dream is to be President of the United States," Castillo confided during a recent interview. And with a big smile, charming affect, and thoughtful demeanor, that seems entirely plausible.

Castillo was born in Brownsville, Texas, with extended family on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. After following seasonal agriculture work for about a year, his parents moved to Minnesota for manufacturing jobs, and Minnesota has been his home ever since.

An only child for 13 years, Castillo grew close to his extended family in Minnesota, which included a large cadre of cousins. He recalls his childhood fondly, with birthday parties, piñatas, and riding bikes among his earliest memories. He credits his mom with instilling a deep belief in his own worth and skill during this time, reassuring him of his intelligence and ability to do anything he puts his mind to. His father, who works physically demanding jobs, has motivated Castillo's work ethic. "If he can do it . . . then I can surely get up and work hard," Castillo explained.

But Castillo also experienced heartache at a young age. When he was in elementary school, several members of his extended family, some of whom were as close as siblings, were deported almost overnight. "That was just such a loss for me," Castillo said. "To lose an uncle and an aunt and to lose three cousins overnight, it . . . really shocked my system and really made me question how fair the system is." At the time, the deportation



felt entirely arbitrary to him. “They definitely weren’t criminals or anything like that, that there was a safety issue for them to be in this state or in this country.” This negative experience with the law impacted him deeply and personally, with emotional echoes to this day. Little did he know that soon not only would he be the first lawyer in his family, but also he would be arguing on behalf of an immigrant client before the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals.

But law school was not on Castillo’s mind until high school, when, as he recollects, a civics teacher wrote a list of presidential candidates on the board. “He just asked a very simple question, which was, ‘How many of these people do you think are lawyers?’” The teacher then circled the majority of the names. Castillo, who long wanted to fight for the underdog, took a lesson from this. “If you want to be a leader, and you want to be equipped to lead, law school is one way to do that.” Castillo’s path was set. He quickly enrolled in every public speaking class he could and set his sights on law school.

After majoring in political science and communications at the University of Minnesota, where he enthusiastically participated in mock trial, Castillo attended the University of St. Thomas School of Law. He knew he wanted to be a leader, and St. Thomas’s ethos of “leadership through service” appealed to him. Castillo quickly made a name for himself and received several accolades through St. Thomas’s Immigration Appellate Clinic, Moot Court team, and student government.

But leadership in its most honorable form is a means and not an end, and Castillo knows what he is fighting for. His aim—formerly fixed on equity for the Latino community—has grown to creating a more equitable community for all. He may not be able to change the whole world, he admits, but he can use service to improve lives in Hennepin County and Minnesota. Since graduating, Castillo has served on Chaska’s Human Rights Commission, where he helped spur his hometown toward justice for the whole community.

Castillo cut his legal teeth in criminal law, where he still practices today. He credits Hennepin County Judge William H. Koch for giving him his first legal job and his moot court coach Zuri Balmakund-Santiago for encouraging him to clerk at the Hennepin County Attorney’s Office. Now an assistant county attorney for Hennepin County, where he prosecutes complex financial crimes, Castillo regularly gives community presentations on criminal law. He feels that a well-prosecuted criminal case is achieved through fairness and empathy for both victims and the criminally accused. In his opinion, a good prosecutor really wants “a fair outcome” from the case resolution.



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Indeed, Castillo’s legal philosophy is rooted in his sense of fairness. He derives morality, in large part, from his faith as a Christian. Specifically, he admires Jesus’ sacrifice for the welfare of others, which in Castillo’s opinion “was made without any sort of a pre-judgment towards others’ beliefs, behaviors, decisions . . . and so for me, I’ve got one life and I’ve got to make it count. If I’m a Christian, I’ve got to make it count for as many people as possible. For me, my way to model Christ is to model the way that he loved others.”

Castillo explains that he wants to invest his life for the betterment of others, without judgment. He admires legal practitioners who show their authenticity and humanity, recalling the time he saw Judge Koch reassure a child witness before her emotionally taxing testimony. “That was a really eye-opening moment,” he said, “that a judge would be willing to step down from the bench like that.”

A recent graduate himself, Castillo also has a message for law students of color—he has first-hand experience with “imposter syndrome.”¹ He encourages law students of color to surround themselves with people who know the student’s strength and worth, to combat the pernicious self-doubt that so many feel. Indeed, being yourself is, in Castillo’s opinion, vital for success. After all, speakers and leaders are more persuasive when they are authentic.

¹ Imposter syndrome involves feelings of self doubt, personal incompetence and a persistent, internalized fear of being discovered as a ‘fraud’, despite your education, experience, and accomplishments.



by Nora Huxtable

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Nora Huxtable is an assistant public defender for the State of Minnesota and an associate at Smith Law in Grand Marais. She has a background in journalism and is a former on-air personality at Minnesota Public Radio. Her free time is mostly spent outdoors, including volunteering with Cook County Search and Rescue.

SINLORIA MACRAE

When I met Sinloria Macrae, I quickly realized she possesses wisdom and experience well beyond her years. While Macrae is a recent law school graduate, now practicing at Meagher & Geer, she has traveled the world and been mentored by a number of Minnesota's finest legal minds. She is undoubtedly an up-and-comer in the profession and one who will surely do great things in her career.

Macrae's family is originally from Sierra Leone, but they immigrated to the United States and were living in the Washington D.C. area when she was born. Several years later they settled in Hastings, where Macrae grew up. Macrae's family and upbringing have had a significant influence on her life and career choices. When she was young, she often felt like a liaison between the different cultures in her life, leading her to pursue a career in advocacy. Growing up she was fascinated with the law on television and her focus on advocacy convinced her to become a lawyer.

Reflecting on the influence of her upbringing, she describes herself as preferring a community-based lifestyle and that she is drawn to organizations with strong communities, opining that just as it takes a village to raise a child it "takes a village to continue on your career." While she has already achieved much, she remains grounded by her family and friends, with whom she loves to share adventures.

Macrae attended the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. She completed a double major in English and sociology, but the most important thing she learned was leadership skills. At college, she was selected as a National Bonner Leader Scholar, a national scholarship program focused on developing future leaders. Through this program she was placed at a community site with the goal of fostering the growth of community-based social justice awareness. She also served as the vice president of the Witness Me Club, which focused on sexual assault awareness.



During college, she spent a semester studying abroad in South Africa at Nelson Mandela University. While she was able to visit the entire country, her most memorable experience was visiting Nelson Mandela's jail cell. She continued her focus on social justice, working and teaching at a local elementary school.

Macrae enrolled at the University of St. Thomas School of Law. In making her decision on which law school to attend, Macrae was drawn to St. Thomas's mission-centered approach to legal education as well as its top-ranked mentorship program. She stayed busy in law school, serving as the president of the Black Law Students Association. She also served as a senior editor of the Journal of Law and Public Policy.

While at law school, Macrae had the opportunity to work as a research assistant for the Hon. Justice Alan Page and for Dr. Artika Tyner. As a 1L, Macrae performed legal research for Justice Page's speech following his retirement from the Minnesota Supreme Court, a speech in which he gave context and definition to the conversation around the resurgence of racial tension in the United States. During her 2L year, she worked with Dr. Tyner to research a now-published article about the collateral consequences of mass incarceration and how the disproportionate rate of incarceration of African Americans has a more profound impact on their lives than the lives of non-African Americans. From these research experiences Macrae gained invaluable role models in the law, plus she learned the importance of humility, patience, and being detail-oriented.

During law school, Macrae also was an extern for the Hon. Tanya Bransford of the Hennepin County District Court. Like many law students participating in a clerkship, she learned a great deal about legal writing. Macrae also was impressed by Judge Bransford's control and presence in her courtroom, an invaluable model for a future litigator.

After her 1L year, Macrae participated in the Twin Cities Diversity in Practice program. There she was paired with Meagher & Geer and 3M, spending her summer working for both. Through this experience she developed an appreciation for employment and corporate law. At 3M, she also developed confidence in her growing legal skills and an appreciation for creativity in preparing presentations for nonlawyer officers in the company. Macrae was also selected as a Target Law Scholar in 2019, gaining more experience working with Target in the litigation, employment, and

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compliance groups.

After graduating from St. Thomas in 2020, Macrae turned her focus to her practice at Meagher & Geer, where she is a civil litigator, focusing on commercial litigation, construction, products liability, and legal malpractice defense. Of her practice areas, she has learned the most from her legal malpractice work, including the need to focus on the details and have humility in practice. She is very extroverted, enjoying her work with clients and other attorneys. Macrae's favorite part of being a lawyer is the challenge of learning new skills.

To Macrae, humility is a key part of being a successful attorney. The law "is a service profession." Similarly, she believes that being confident is a key to success. To her, this means not just being confident that she knows the right answer, because sometimes she doesn't. Rather, Macrae values the confidence that comes from knowing that she has the right tools, resources, and mentors to find the right answer.

While she is still settling into the practice of law, Macrae also has her eyes on the future. She hopes to continue the types of leadership roles she had in law school by joining boards and committees focused on social justice. She also plans to expand her legal skills through pro bono work and community involvement. Regardless of what she does, and which organizations are lucky enough to have her, it is clear that Sinloria Macrae has much to offer to the profession and that she has a very bright future.



by Samuel M. Johnson

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MICHAEL DITTBERNER



Family law practitioner Michael Dittberner takes a unique approach to his legal practice that leaves many in awe of his talents and abilities. Not only is he gifted to handle and study the intellectual complexities of legislation and legislative reform, but he is also incredibly kind, compassionate, and relatable. Michael loves the practice of family law because he gets to connect with clients on a personal level while they are in the midst of trying times, while also participating in legislative reform to modernize the statutes to which his clients are subject.

Michael was born and raised in Minnesota, and he is the first attorney in his family. He was inspired to pursue a legal career at a young age after living through the events surrounding the Watergate scandal. He was fascinated by prosecuting attorneys and was acutely aware of the political issues of the time. Michael has long contemplated constitutional law arguments and followed Supreme Court cases. He attended Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, where he earned dual bachelor's degrees in political science and sociology. He also completed an undergraduate internship at the White House during the last year of the Carter Administration where he was exposed to politics outside of the academic setting. Michael realized that many of the politicians he was surrounded by were attorneys, and he decided to attend law school at William Mitchell in St. Paul.

Shortly after graduating from law school in 1984, Michael was hired as an associate attorney for a general practice law firm in downtown St. Paul, where he was introduced to the practice of family law, simply because younger attorneys in the firm were typically assigned to handle the divorce and post-decree files. At the time, the entire emphasis of family law was on litigation. He learned the ins and outs of family law through on-the-job training and was exposed to the legislative process when his boss, who had previously been a state senator, would bring him to the Capitol to lobby. Through these experiences, Michael learned about the public policy side of family law, which he has participated in consistently ever since.



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In the late 1980s, Michael joined the Minnesota State Bar Association's Family Law Section as a member of its Amicus Committee, where he dealt with blockbuster Supreme Court cases, which fascinated him. He also worked with the Family Law Section Legislative Committee on public policy issues. Through his participation on these committees, Michael was hired away from his first law firm position to his current firm: Linder, Dittberner, Winter & McSweeney, where he is now a shareholder.

Over the course of Michael's career, he has observed progression in family law procedures and legislation. For example, when Michael was a new lawyer, there was no expedited process for child support proceedings. After the administrative process for child support proceedings and the Minnesota Child Support Guidelines were adopted, courts were able to provide more uniformity in child support obligations and preserve court resources, rather than using the traditional court process. Another significant improvement he has realized is an increased emphasis on using Alternative Dispute Resolution methods, such as mediation and early neutral evaluations, rather than litigation. He has also seen changes to laws, such as custody and parenting-time statutes, which have become much more child-centric.

As laws change, Michael has found it crucial to maintain competency in his practice area. Michael stays abreast of newly introduced

legislation as a fellow and the co-chair of the Legislative Committee of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML), Minnesota Chapter. He also collaborates with his colleagues that are similarly passionate about family law legislation. Michael reads the Minnesota Court of Appeals and Minnesota Supreme Court decisions that are released each week, and he keeps track of when the Supreme Court grants review of specific cases.

Much has changed in the family law profession throughout Michael's career, and he is hopeful that the field will continue to progress and modernize with the times. Like most areas of law, Michael believes there will always be room for improvement in family law. He participates in legislative reformation where he can. An example of this is his involvement with the Minnesota Bar Association's Family Law Section, where he has devoted significant amounts of time to discussing legislative matters. Michael is specifically interested to see how the laws pertaining to parentage and reproductive technologies, spousal maintenance, and antenuptial agreements reform to adapt to modern times. He has faith in the collegiality of the legal profession, and particularly among family law practitioners, to come together and collaborate on reformed legislation.

The organizations that Michael volunteers with contribute to legislative reformation as well as progression in the legal field. Michael serves

as the co-chair of the Minnesota Lavender Bar Association (MLBA), which works to promote equality and justice in the legal profession and the LGBTQ+ community in Minnesota. The MLBA provides support for LGBTQ+ attorneys through mentorship and networking opportunities, as well as opportunities to earn continuing education credits by attending annual conferences. He values supporting bar affinity groups that celebrate diverse and minority attorneys.

In addition to Michael's participation in organizations such as these, he also presents the Case Law Update at Minnesota CLE's Annual Family Law Institute and is a member of the Minnesota Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) where he helped put together the annual case law report. Additionally, he is the co-author of Chapter 23 of the MN Child Custody Deskbook: Custody Labels and Parenting Plans: Requirements, Consequences and Options. Michael is also certified as a family trial law advocate by the National Board of Trial Advocacy (NBTA), a nonprofit organization that certifies specialists based on high standards of competence and integrity. Michael's contributions to Minnesota's evolving family law landscape are impressive and invaluable—to say the least—and he is a genuinely kind and caring practitioner.

by Chelsea Barr

AMANDA HARRINGTON

In many ways, the role of program manager of Be@School, a program of the Hennepin County Attorney's Office, is the kind of position Amanda Harrington dreamed about when she first started her career. "I learned pretty early that I wanted to do something to help people," Harrington recalls. However, it was a true professional journey that put her in a position to serve Hennepin County's most vulnerable population—its children.

Harrington grew up in Stillwater with an eye toward living in the Twin Cities. She started down that path by enrolling at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul. Not knowing exactly what "helping people" would look like for her, Harrington took a position at a women's chemical health treatment facility. "It was hands-down the hardest job I've ever had in my entire life," Harrington remembers. However, the experience awoke Harrington to a desire to focus her service efforts away from adults and instead toward helping kids.

Harrington joined CornerHouse Interagency Child Abuse Evaluation and Training Center in Minneapolis as a program assistant. CornerHouse, an accredited children's advocacy center, supports children and families through the disclosure, investigation, and legal processes associated with child abuse. "That cemented for me that I love working with kids," Harrington says.

At CornerHouse, Harrington observed law enforcement, social workers, and attorneys all working together in service to children. This gave her the opportunity to consider potential career paths. "But I wasn't quite sure what I would do with a law degree," Harrington remembers. Conversely, Harrington knew that as a social worker, she would be able to provide children a space to be heard and supported through therapy services.

Harrington decided the next step was to become a social worker. She earned a Master of Social Work from the University of Minnesota in 2006 and took positions with St. David's Child Development and Family Services, Northside Child Development Center, and Lee Carlson Center for Mental Health &

Well-Being before finally joining Minneapolis Public Schools as a school social worker in 2009.

However, Harrington recalls, "I always had this nagging voice in the back of my head that something was missing." Through her work with Minneapolis Public Schools, Harrington was exposed to special education law and compliance. That experience opened Harrington's eyes to areas of legal work that impacted children. She realized that having a law degree might equip her to help even more people. After working as a social worker for almost 10 years, Harrington decided to go to law school.

Harrington started at the University of St. Thomas School of Law the same day her son started kindergarten. Harrington met the challenges that come with being a single parent, working as a social worker, and attending law school. That meant, among other things, that Harrington had little time to pursue extracurricular activities. However, during the summer, when she did not have classes, Harrington clerked at the



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Hennepin County Attorney’s Office. “It was really hard, but I did it,” Harrington proudly reflects.

After graduation, the Hennepin County Attorney’s Office hired Harrington to a full-time position in Juvenile Prosecution. The prospect was demoralizing for Harrington at first. “I had spent my whole career focused on protecting kids and now I was going to be putting them in jail,” Harrington remembers, “but then I learned that is not actually what the job was about.” It turned out the position was a great fit for Harrington. “I quickly realized that the juvenile justice system was sometimes the only way that certain kids and families were going to get the resources they needed,” Harrington says.

Eventually, Harrington decided that her background as a social worker would also be a valuable skillset for the Child Protection Division. She applied and was approved for that move. However, once there, the Hennepin County Attorney’s Office asked Harrington if she would be interested in being the program manager for Be@School, a truancy prevention program that seeks to address barriers to school attendance. “When you get that kind of invitation, you don’t say, ‘no,’” Harrington laughs, “but I secretly wanted it anyways, so I was super happy.”

As part of her job, Harrington is responsible for big-picture ideas for what the program should be. One of her first priorities was to survey agencies, contractors, and families to measure whether the program aligned with its mission. “When I was a social worker,” she shares, “there were new initiatives where no one asked any of the social workers how the initiative would

actually play out.” As a result, Harrington is committed to involving those voices in any change.

What Harrington particularly likes about the role is that she is serving a whole system that supports children. “As a social worker for Minneapolis Public Schools,” she reflects, “I saw children and families in crisis moments and what it looked like for families to experience systems that are confusing and not necessarily helpful.”

Harrington says her social work experience has also put her in a unique position to empathize with those social workers and other providers that act as a liaison between children, families, and county programs, such as Be@School. “I know that social workers are not just sitting at their desks all day taking calls from families about attendance,” Harrington says. “And this understanding helps me when I am then working with and training schools in how to meet some of our program requirements.”

As Harrington joyfully shares, “I am serving all students in Hennepin County, not just a certain geography, type of school, or type of student.” However, in addition to her work as program manager, Harrington also works on child protection cases on a limited basis. She also serves as a member of the Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers Board of Directors, and she is an at-large director on the Minnesota Association of Black Lawyers Board of Directors. She appreciates that she is in a job that allows her to work for the public good while practicing law. “I think this is the right path for me now.”



by Megan Bowman

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ZAC MCFARLAND

Black? White? Football player? Lawyer? These are questions Zac McFarland has asked himself since he was a young kid growing up in St. Cloud, Minnesota. “It’s kind of just my own story. So, it seems like maybe it lacks a little bit of that luster,” said McFarland as he reflected on his young life and humble upbringing.

Born in Denver, McFarland moved to central Minnesota when he was three months old. Growing up, he had a desire to play professional football. This desire drove him to work hard in the weight room, which helped him excel in high school sports and on the gridiron at St. Cloud Tech High School. While in high school, McFarland was elected “governor” to the Boys State program and later participated in Boys Nation and a trip to Washington, DC.

During this period in McFarland’s life, his goals and career direction changed. This transformation came with Barack Obama’s presidential campaign. “I identified with Obama more than I had identified with any other public figure because of how similar his story was to mine.” McFarland continued, “He was like me. Half black. Half white. Raised with his mom and his grandma.”

“I get to put the same type of dedication and continued refinement into my craft—into my technique—into my abilities that I would as a professional football player with my stance, or my routes, or my work in the weight room.”



While visiting the White House, McFarland had a chance to meet President Obama. McFarland described in detail the moment President Obama entered the East Room filled with eager high schoolers. It was the “first and only time that I’ve ever really felt that somebody famous was an actual human being,” he said. McFarland continued, “He had the softest, most perfect handshake I’ve ever had in my life. It was like shaking the softest but firmest cloud.”

Following high school graduation, McFarland’s life journey led him to St. John’s University, where he played left tackle for the Johnnies. After working hard at St. John’s, his life led him south to Iowa for law school. “I thought I was going to go to the University of Minnesota. I was dead set that I was going to be a Gopher, and then Iowa just came in with a better scholarship offer.”

After three years of living the Hawkeye life, McFarland returned to Minnesota. “I always knew I was going to come back here,” said McFarland. “I’m through and through a classic Minnesota guy. I will always be a Gopher fan. I always wear Minnesota stuff,” he said.

As a successful attorney and litigator, McFarland recalls how he has translated football skills to the courtroom. “You know I still am a pro,” said McFarland. “I’m just a different kind of professional now . . . I get to put the same type of dedication and continued refinement into my craft—into my technique—into my abilities that I would as a professional football player with my stance, or my routes, or my work in the weight room.”

Just as he did as a high school and college football player, McFarland seeks to improve himself as an attorney. His hard work and efforts have given him opportunities to appear before the Iowa Supreme Court as a student oralist while in law school and the U. S. District Courts for the Northern and Southern Districts of Iowa and the U. S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit. He credits his prior athletic experiences for giving him the motivation to write better briefs and the ability to tell a story on behalf of his clients. “I take the overall purpose and break that down into smaller, more individual elements,” said McFarland.

McFarland also credits his ability as an attorney to learning the skill of advocacy and to being very outspoken. “I think a big part of who I am as a person is wanting to communicate and to be understood, he said. “That’s great; for what I do as a litigator is to create and develop and tell a story. Whether that’s oral or whether that’s written.”

McFarland has an overall goal of continuing to develop and to become a better person. Soon he will transition from the life of a large-firm attorney to the role of law clerk for the Hon. John R. Tunheim, Chief U.S. District Judge, District of Minnesota. “Being a lawyer, which I never even knew was an option for me, and finding out more about myself and more about the profession are what I want to do,” said McFarland. He continued, “I get to talk about my story and then talk about how we bring more people like me into our group.”



*by Aaron
Frederickson*

Mr. Frederickson is the founder of MSP Compliance Solutions, which is based out of Minneapolis/St. Paul. He has nearly two decades of legal practice experience in the areas of workers’ compensation, personal injury, and Medicare/Medicaid compliance. His passions also include assisting low income persons via pro bono legal representation.

CRESSTON GACKLE

For Cresston Gackle, starting his own firm was a risk. But it was a risk he knew he had to take.

Gackle, a native of Bettendorf, Iowa, knew he wanted to be an attorney for a long time. “I originally had the idea in high school when I was involved in the debate program,” he said. “It wasn’t until college that I really decided on it. The paths out of a political science program are pretty straightforward, and, of those, law was the best fit. I viewed it then, as I do now, as the most substantive, direct, and practical way to help people and change things.”

After graduating from law school in 2016, Gackle clerked for a district court judge for three years, “A long time,” he noted. When it came time to decide what was next, he faced “one of the most difficult decisions of my life.”

“I thought about it for a full year,” he said. “I had a business plan, and I revised and edited it many times, I talked about it with a lot of people, and, ultimately, I made the leap. The decisive factor was that I needed and wanted a little more control over my clients and cases than I thought I would get at a firm.”

“There were a few people in my life who thought it was a fine idea, and several more people who thought it was a crazy idea—never to be tried,” he added with a laugh.

More certain than the idea of starting his own firm was the idea of what kind of law he wanted to practice.

“I found the area of law that I really wanted to practice while I was a student attorney at the University of Minnesota Child Advocacy and Juvenile Justice Clinic. Child-related law, whether family or juvenile, struck me as the most important area of law because these cases not only affect how kids’ lives are going but also these cases reverberate throughout their lives.”



“Attorneys and would-be attorneys from diverse backgrounds not only need mentorship and a pathway to the law but also they need to be asked, ‘What can we do to make this better?’”



Practicing on his own has had its own obstacles. Like most attorneys, Gackle said finding the right work-life balance is a perennial challenge.

“If I don’t set boundaries, no one will,” he said. “It’s hard, but I have to acknowledge for myself that sometimes I don’t have the ability to do what’s asked by clients, potential clients, and courts. I try very hard to maintain at least some open time, and it doesn’t always work out, but I’m setting regular vacation time and I’m not compromising on that. To maintain my quality of work product and maintain my ability to be a strong advocate, I have to reserve a little time to myself.”

The emotionally charged nature of Gackle’s work—child protection, visitation, custody matters, and other family law issues— can be taxing.

“There have been many cases that have kept me up at night, when I couldn’t stop thinking about them or couldn’t cool down as quickly as I wanted to,” Gackle said. “I think two things help me. One is that there has to be a boundary, and for me, that boundary is I am going to do everything to help this person and work with all the legal mechanisms I can, but ultimately, I am not going to live that person’s life. Two is that many times in family court and especially in juvenile court, a lot of people are working together—from the bench to guardians ad litem to social workers to parent attorneys and child attorneys—to repair the family system. It can be contentious, but I make my best contribution, and I try to remember that others are making their best contributions, too.”

That confidence in the legal system has served him well.

“We, as lawyers, are trained to make the very best arguments we can, and that can temporarily bring us into conflict with each other,” he said. “But the ultimate goal is fairly clear in juvenile court—to return things in a safe way with as minimal court involvement as possible to the way things were.”

Faith in the legal system, though, doesn’t mean Gackle doesn’t see things that can and should change. One of those things is diversity and representation, an area where Gackle joins the chorus of voices saying change is encouraging, but too slow in coming.

“If it is changing, it is unfortunately not changing fast enough,” he said. “We knew this was a problem 30 years ago. We knew this was a problem, frankly, 50 or 60 years ago. Under-representation on the bar and the bench is horrendous. There are some initiatives that are small, but are gaining traction. The prison-to-law-school pipeline program is promising. Twin Cities Diversity in Practice is doing some excellent work. But right now, these efforts seem small compared to the magnitude of the problem. Attorneys and would-be attorneys from diverse backgrounds not only need mentorship and a pathway to the law but also they need to be asked, ‘What can we do to make this better?’”

“And they need to be asked every step of the way, from initial interest to IL summer to first law job through the next. Otherwise, our profession will continue to provide ladders for some and chutes for others.”



by Will Ashenmacher

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Will Ashenmacher is a licensed attorney, former journalist, and communications manager in the Minneapolis office of Ballard Spahr. In his role, he works across the national firm’s seven Western offices to find and further stories about Ballard Spahr’s attorneys, work matters, and firm culture. Will volunteers with the University of St. Thomas’ ThreeSixty Journalism program. He lives in the Longfellow neighborhood of Minneapolis with his dog, Kitsu.

ELIZABETH KELLY



When Beth Kelly speaks with law students and mentees, she encourages them to seek their own path, “Don’t listen to what others say you should be doing, follow what you want to do. Don’t do something because the system is telling you to.” As Kelly has demonstrated in her career, charting your own professional path can lead you to some interesting and fulfilling places.

Currently, Kelly is the housing project attorney with Volunteer Lawyers Network, but her career started doing very different work.

After graduating from St. Olaf College, Kelly did not want to go grad school until she felt excited about learning and writing again. After college, she worked and volunteered abroad in Poland and Northern Ireland. She then got a job as a customer service rep and realized that to be challenged and engaged in her work, it was time for more schooling. She attended law school at the University of Oregon. While she enjoyed the rigor of law school, she never felt the big firm track was for her. “That was never what I wanted to do. And I was very clear on what I wanted to do, but it put me in a position where it was not easy to get good advice,” she said. Kelly acknowledges that law schools now provide more diverse guidance to students, but it was a bit different during her time in school, “I was a little bit on my own.”

After clerking for a federal judge in Las Vegas, Kelly moved back to Minnesota and took a job with the Office of the Monitor where she worked on class action litigation for Black farmers. While she enjoyed the work, the job ended when the litigation finished, and she didn’t know what to do next.

“Don’t listen to what others say you should be doing, follow what you want to do. Don’t do something because the system is telling you to.”



She thought she needed to do some “real legal work” and she got a job with the Minneapolis City Attorney’s Office. After working with the city for five years, Kelly has gone on to work as a prosecutor, associate general counsel for the Minnesota Department of Corrections, and managing e-discovery for another law firm. While she never had an official “landing spot” for her career, she enjoyed the experience and learning more about what she wanted out of her law career. “It was about finding where my next step was, but not having a long-term goal of where I would end up,” she said.

Her varied career path has benefited her in her current role at VLN, where she has a variety of responsibilities. “A lot of things I’ve done have come together,” she said. “By prosecuting I have a lot of courtroom experience. I’ve managed caseloads from numerous different jobs. I’ve done a lot of training of others, and mentoring lawyers. I get to do all of those things in my current job. I wasn’t thinking that when I took this job, but once I started doing it, I thought I know how to do this courtroom stuff, I knew how to do X, Y, Z. It’s just kind of come together very nicely.”

Kelly started working at Volunteer Lawyers Network in June of 2020. Even though she’s worked remotely the entire time, she loves working at the organization and she has found a passion for housing law. She’ll appear in housing court on behalf of clients, mentor attorneys on trials, lead trainings on evictions to nonlawyers, and run the Ramsey County Housing Court clinic, as well as eviction expungement work.

With a looming crisis due to evictions, Kelly encourages other attorneys to take part in pro bono work, especially related to housing. One easy way for attorneys to get involved is through eviction expungements. Minnesota law makes it difficult for tenants to remove an eviction from their record—even if their case is dismissed. “The moment an eviction is filed against [a tenant] it is on the court record unless the court expunges it. Even if the landlord dismisses the case before if it is even heard by the court, there’s still an eviction listed on the tenants record for tenant screening purposes,” said Kelly. This can often affect a tenant’s ability find quality housing in the future. “An attorney’s help can greatly increase the success of an eviction expungement even getting before a judge, due to the minute administrative requirements,” said Kelly.

However, Kelly mentions that attorneys can provide pro bono help fairly easily, “Volunteering on an eviction expungement is a finite task that doesn’t drag on, [and] as such is a nice way to provide service to a person in real need that fits into a busy lawyer’s schedule.”

When Kelly isn’t working, she enjoys spending time with her family: husband, daughter, stepdaughter, and dog, Holly.

Even though Elizabeth Kelly hasn’t had the traditional career path of a lawyer, she wouldn’t be doing anything else. “I love being a lawyer. I find it engaging and challenging and I’m intellectually interested and challenged by the work that I do.”



by Satveer Chaudary

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Mr. Chaudhary is an immigration attorney in Minneapolis, specializing in criminal defense of noncitizens and complex immigration circumstances. He lectures frequently on immigration topics and writes an immigration blog at immigrationqa.com. He also offers consultations to attorneys representing noncitizens in any matter of the University of St. Thomas School of Law.



CAMILLE BRYANT

Camille Bryant's job title is public defender, but she views her role as problem solver and change maker.

As an assistant public defender for Hennepin County, Bryant provides legal counsel to low-income clients charged with crimes. She has over 15 years of experience in the role, including representing juveniles charged with delinquencies and persons involved in child protection actions.

Law is Bryant's second career. After studying chemical engineering at Clemson University, Bryant came to Minnesota to work as an engineer at 3M. After a few years, she decided it was time for a career pivot. "I wanted a profession that was more about people, less about things," she said. At first, she considered becoming a midwife. "Midwifery appealed to me because of the magic of birth," she said. But when she learned that none of her undergraduate credits would apply to the requirements for a midwifery masters program, she explored other options.

Bryant decided law school was the right direction and she enrolled in Hamline (now Mitchell Hamline). Attending law school as a single parent was challenging. "For a long time, I felt like I was on my own, trying to figure things out," she said. She has since mentored law students to help them navigate the profession.



“I am also intrigued by the interplay of might and compassion, how and when one versus the other leads to change.”

Bryant’s engineering background influences how she practices law. “I think like an engineer first, a lawyer second,” she said. “Both professions are primarily about problem solving. Both require the ability to collect relevant information, determine the applicable rules, and think creatively about how to apply those rules without breaking them in order to obtain a desired outcome.”

According to Bryant, the most important trait for an effective public defender is the ability to see and hear clients without presumption or judgment. The job can be frustrating at times. “My biggest challenge is feeling as though I will never be able to do enough to disrupt the flow in the cradle-to-prison pipeline,” she said. She is passionate about making positive changes for this population.

Bryant serves on the board of The Bridge for Youth, an emergency shelter for young people experiencing homelessness. “It provides a stable and supportive place for youth in crisis to connect to services,” she explained. “I am interested in disrupting harmful cycles. The Bridge works to do just that.”

Social change starts with listening and having conversations. Bryant is the visionary behind a project called Deep Listening for Social Change. “Deep listening is about listening for understanding and connection,” Bryant explained. “It is listening to understand and be fully present with what is happening in the moment without trying to control or judge it. It should be easy, but it is not.”

Her commitment to social justice is why Bryant writes about racism and criminal law for Buddhist Justice Reporter and she chairs the legislative committee of the MSBA.

Bryant’s passion for social change is inspired in part by Mahatma Gandhi and Genghis Khan. “I am interested in individuals who make things happen as outsiders—from unexpected, atypical paths,” she said. “I am also intrigued by the interplay of might and compassion, how and when one versus the other leads to change.”

In her free time, Bryant enjoys live music and theater. Pre-covid, she and her adult daughter had planned a trip to Broadway, but it was cancelled due to the pandemic. She looks forward to the return of live shows. Cedar Cultural Center is her favorite performing arts venue.

Bryant also likes to travel. During law school, she studied abroad in Italy and it remains her favorite tourist destination; however, there are other places she would like to experience, such as Machu Picchu. “I have a long travel wish-list,” she said.

At home, Bryant enjoys cooking. “I like trying new dishes and I have a few Thai-inspired stir fries that I make,” she said. When her daughter visits, Bryant will cook her daughter’s favorites.

She enjoys being outside, gardening or hiking. “Nature is my most consistent antidote for stress,” Bryant said. Growing up in South Carolina, however, she isn’t a fan of Minnesota winters. “The main goal I set for myself in the winter is to spend some time outside every day in whatever way I can convince myself to.” Despite the cold, she enjoys learning new winter activities and looks forward to trying ice fishing and snowshoeing one day.

In the meantime, Bryant will continue her quest to be a problem solver for clients in the justice system and a catalyst for positive change in the community.



by *Lisa Buck*

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Ms. Buck practiced corporate law in Minneapolis and was an adjunct professor at William Mitchell College of Law. When she isn’t writing for the Hennepin Lawyer, you can find her behind the lens at Lisa Buck Photography.

A professional portrait of Christy Vu DePasquale, a young woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark blue blazer over a light pink top. She is smiling and has her hands clasped in front of her.

CHRISTY VU DEPASQUALE

Christy Vu DePasquale currently works as an attorney at the Autism Advocacy & Law Center, providing specialized assistance to individuals needing unique solutions, but her journey to the legal profession started on the west coast.

DePasquale grew up in Orange County, California with her parents and two sisters. It was during her time at the University of California, Irvine that she decided to go to law school. This decision was fueled by her enduring fascination with the law. Prior to starting law school, she received some words of wisdom from a former boss that have stuck with her to this day. He told her, “Part of being a good lawyer is being able to form good arguments and write good arguments. It doesn’t matter how loud you are.” DePasquale, who had always been a bit of an introvert growing up, found power in these words, and kept them with her as she headed up the coast to Washington state where she attended Gonzaga University School of Law.

While in law school, DePasquale kept herself busy. She went above and beyond the traditional J.D. program and opted to participate in Gonzaga’s JD/MBA program. When asked how she landed in the dual program, DePasquale responded, “It was kind of by accident.” The school was having an information session which included lunch, and DePasquale, like many law students, was tempted by free food and attended. After hearing about the benefits of a dual program, she decided it was the right opportunity for her. While most law students savor a less hectic summer schedule, DePasquale worked full time at a clerkship, while taking her MBA courses in the evening. She described her law school time as, “a jam-packed three years.” Though DePasquale’s current position doesn’t utilize her MBA skills, she finds it is a helpful tool to have in her toolbox and she knows it will be beneficial as she progresses in her career.

Even though she carried a full academic load, DePasquale was involved with extracurricular activities in law school. She was a member of the Student Bar Association, participated in Moot Court, played on the law school intramural softball team, was a Gonzaga Law Student Ambassador, and still made time to attend Gonzaga basketball games.

DePasquale particularly enjoyed her position as a student ambassador. In this role, she gave tours, organized admissions events, and was the first point of contact for prospective students.

After law school, DePasquale and her now husband discussed their long-term goals. They knew they needed to find a city that catered to both their careers. Beyond that, they were interested in finding home in a welcoming place known for having a high quality of living. That's how DePasquale found her way to Minnesota, taking a position with the Autism Advocacy & Law Center.

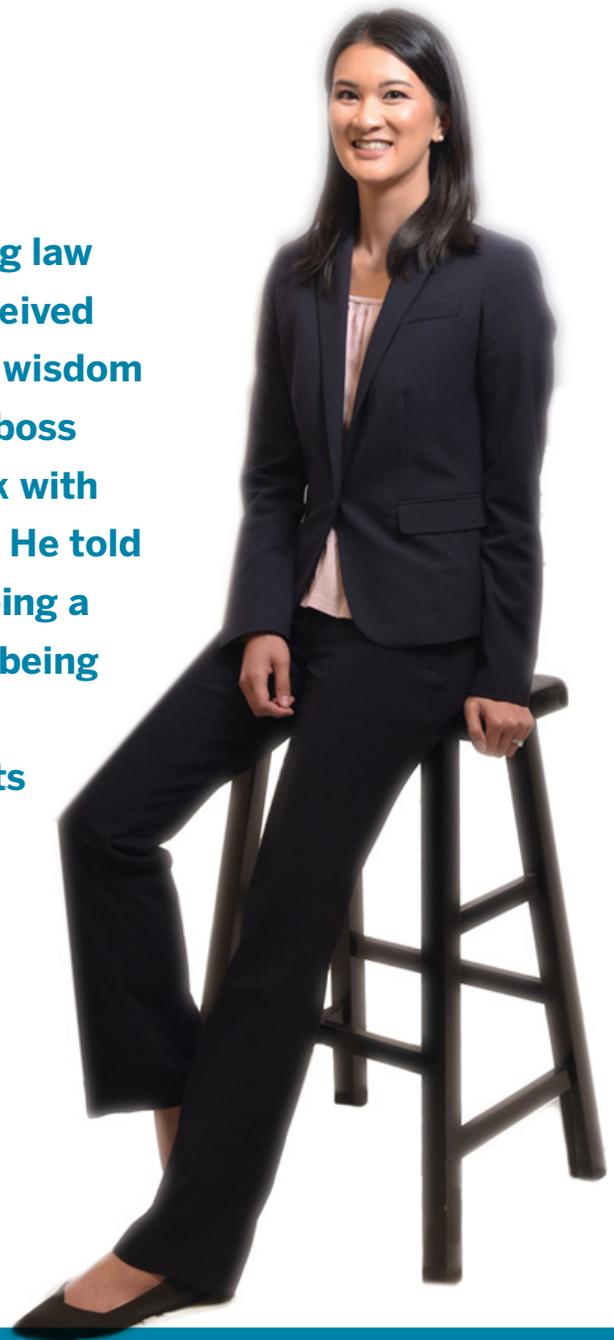
It was a big transition for DePasquale to move from sunny California to chilly Minnesota. This transition was made even more challenging by the fact she moved into her new home in March 2020, right at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. DePasquale said her initial transition to the state was difficult because of all the shutdowns. Her new job was helpful, however, offering her a safe place to work in the office as well as flexibility to work from home when necessary.

The Autism Advocacy & Law Center is a small, private law firm that specializes in assisting individuals and families with special needs. This includes family law cases, estate planning, guardianship, social security, and a variety of other issues. In general, the goal of the firm is to help people navigate legal issues when the solution they need may be different than typical legal needs, based on the special needs of their family. DePasquale and the Autism Advocacy Law Center have developed a niche practice area providing specialized services to a population that needs unique solutions.

DePasquale greatly enjoys working with all of her clients; finding effective solutions to meet their needs. However, DePasquale noted, this line of work can become quite emotional—both as clients navigate challenges and when they finally reach resolution in their cases. DePasquale said that her inclination toward introversion is an asset in these situations. Specifically, it has helped her remain calm no matter the situation which, in turn, helps her effectively assist her clients.

DePasquale has also found a home within the Hennepin County Bar Association. She joined the New Lawyers Section and is currently acting as the Co-HCBA/MSBA New Lawyers Section liaison. Since the initial move, about eighteen months ago, she has enjoyed getting to meet new people and greatly looks forward to the day she can explore all that Minnesota has to offer. For now, she is content with playing in recreational sports leagues with her husband.

Prior to starting law school, she received some words of wisdom from a former boss that have stuck with her to this day. He told her, “Part of being a good lawyer is being able to form good arguments and write good arguments. It doesn’t matter how loud you are.”



by Kenzie Gerber