

Tapping her way into the LBA:

Meet Kristen Miller, our new Executive Director

By LBA President Deena Ombres



After a six-month national search, the Louisville Bar Association is excited to announce the selection of Kristen Miller, a University of Louisville Brandeis School of Law graduate and Louisville native, as its new executive director, effective November 8, 2021.

I sat down with Kristen for a Q&A-style interview about her future with the LBA—much like she did with me for the January issue of *Bar Briefs* when I was incoming LBA President, so it was fun to turn the table and ask her the questions this time.

Would you tell us a little about yourself?

I am a born and raised Louisvillian—I grew up way out Bardstown Road, just past Fern Creek. My parents wanted some peace and quiet and a little bit of land, and back then there were more cows than people on our one-lane road.

I went to high school at Manual where I was in the communications magnet program. I was a pretty active student—I was a cheerleader for all four years and editor of the school paper my senior year (shout out to *The Crimson Record!*), which had one unintended benefit—after two years of 6 a.m. bus rides and my parents having to drive me 20 miles from home to downtown for hundreds of practices, games and events, there was no question I was getting a car when I turned 16. My grandmother passed down her 1984 Oldsmobile Omega—my entire cheerleading squad could fit in it.

After high school, I went to Western Kentucky University for journalism. I really don't think there's a better journalism school in the country, and it's right in our backyard. My instructors were all former practitioners, and the class sizes were much smaller than the larger schools I considered, so you could really get individual attention. It was absolutely the right choice.

As soon as I got there, I begged the newspaper advisors to give me a chance to start writing for *The College Heights Herald*. I did some general assignment reporting as a freshman, then I was a bi-weekly columnist my sophomore year. Thank goodness this was pre-internet—if you could Google my adolescent ramblings today, I think I'd die.

I also got involved in the Student Government Association (SGA) right off the bat. I thought it was pretty cool that there was a real opportunity for students to work together and make a difference for others on campus, and I wanted to be a part of it. That was, however, not very popular with the newspaper folks. At some point

I had to decide whether to run for office or stay with the paper, and at that time, my heart was with student government. So, I

quit the paper and ultimately became president of the student body. It was an exciting time in postsecondary education—I'm dating myself here, but Governor Paul Patton was pushing his Higher Education Reform Act, and he asked the student body presidents from all the state universities to be a part of it. We testified in front of a joint House and Senate committee in Frankfort, we toured around and spoke to different groups, we lobbied our fellow members of our university Boards of Regents and Trustees. It really sparked my interest in public policy.

What made you decide to go to law school after majoring in communications?

Law school had always been in the back of my mind because I'd been interested in the law, one of my favorite classes in my major had been Constitutional Law and I was obsessed with First Amendment and media law issues during journalism school. I hadn't given it real consideration until my advisor in the journalism department mentioned it to me one day. He realized I was going in a different direction from my peers—my internships had been mostly in broadcast, not print, and I obviously had an affinity for student government that was pulling me away from following a traditional journalism career path. So, he told me about a student he'd had years before who had gone to law school after she graduated. It felt like he had just legitimized something I wasn't sure made sense to anyone else but me.

I also think the more I got involved in student government work and the public policy work related to the Governor's reform package, the more confident I became that I wanted to pursue a legal education. I knew I wanted to go to graduate school, and of all the options in front of me, law school just seemed to be the right choice. I knew it would give me a foundational education that would apply no matter where I decided to go or what I decided to do with my life.

Did you know that you didn't want to follow a traditional legal career early on?

I'd say I knew pretty early on that I wouldn't pursue a traditional legal career. Like I said, I was really more into law school for the education—learning how to think analytically, understanding the legal processes that affect our daily lives, assessing information and crafting a cogent argument based on careful consideration of facts—those were all skills that I knew would be useful no matter where my career took me.

By this time I was already working full-time—I was one of those crazy night school people. I had been offered a job in Governor Patton's Communications Office after school and I absolutely could not turn it down, so I was commuting to Frankfort every morning and driving straight to school every night. It was exhausting, but being in Frankfort was an eye-opening experience, for reasons both good and bad. Regardless, it taught me that I wanted to stay in public service.

I did a short stint at a local PR firm as I was finishing up school, and after graduation I went to work as a staff attorney for Judge Bill McNulty when he was on the Court of Appeals. He was so good to me. The first opinion I wrote for him was for a denial of an ineffective assistance of counsel motion. It was possibly the most well-researched and thorough ineffective assistance opinion I could have possibly written, and he read every word—then explained to me that I would see hundreds of them during my time with the Court, so I should probably get right to the point. He called me “perky.” We both knew he didn't mean it as a compliment, but that was somehow part of his charm.

During this time, I also started volunteering for the Louisville-Jefferson County merger campaign, and after that passed, I began volunteering for Jerry Abramson's campaign to become the first Metro Mayor. When he was elected, I was invited to join his administration and I ended up staying in Metro Government for more than a decade. I loved it—I got to use my legal skills on occasion, and I was in public service. It was the best of both worlds for me.



What interested you in the LBA executive director position?

The LBA has always meant a lot to me as an organization. When I first graduated from law school, one of my professors (the fantastic Susan Duncan, now Dean of the University of Mississippi School of Law) was serving as chair of the Public Service Committee, and she asked me to be on her committee. I was a brand-new graduate who had barely gotten her first job as an attorney, and suddenly I had been welcomed into the LBA and offered the opportunity to meet and work with other attorneys to do good for others. It felt like I had just been invited to officially join the local legal community. I was so grateful, and I truly enjoyed it.

But I think the primary thing that interested me in this role is that I believe the organization's best days are still ahead of it, and this is precisely the time for us to lay the foundation that will make that a reality.

As I see it, we're sitting right now at a couple of crossroads—on the micro level, professional organizations and other associations built around commonalities or interests are navigating a world where membership is no longer an obligation. When I came out of law school, you joined your local bar association. That's just what you did, it was almost an expectation. We don't live in that world anymore. We need to prove ourselves to our members. We need to show them why being a member of the LBA is a benefit to them in some tangible way that positively affects their lives. And we can't just fulfill their current needs, we need to anticipate what their next needs will be and have a plan ready to fulfill those, as well. It's a change in thinking that's happening at membership organizations all across the country, and it's time for us to point the LBA in that direction, as well.

On the macro level, we're also part of a community that is thinking a lot differently about itself than it used to, and the LBA needs to be a part of that conversation. We can't abdicate our responsibility—our membership is made up of the civic leaders who help set the community's priorities, the legal minds who make, defend and uphold the laws, the businesses large and small that sustain our downtown community, the gatekeepers who have the power to swing open the doors of justice to everyone, equally. We would be squandering our potential if we didn't play an integral role in helping this community become what we all know it can be. And that's a pretty exciting opportunity.

What are your goals as LBA executive director?

In the short-term, I think we can use a little refresh. I'd like to update how we present ourselves, from the way we use social media to the way our website connects with members and viewers to even how we interact with our downtown surroundings as an office and an organization.

Over the long-term, I want to see the LBA become a "community center" for anyone and everyone in the legal profession, regardless of membership status. We are here to advance and support the profession, and if we do a good job of that, those folks who aren't members will begin to see the value in the services we provide and join the ranks. I also want us to do a better job of building partnerships outside of our organization, whether that be with community groups who share similar goals or who can help us achieve our priorities, or with other bar associations who could benefit from our resources. And I want to talk to the community a lot more about what we do—I think we spend too much time telling ourselves that we're doing great things instead of facing outward and asking our community what it needs from us.

Finally, our greatest strength is the collective power and knowledge that comes from our membership, and there's so much we can do to put that power to good use on behalf of our community and on behalf

of our own members. But we can only do that if we grow and sustain the membership—we have to give folks lots of reasons to be a part of the LBA. We have to provide services that will help them achieve their own personal and professional goals. We have to build and maintain an organization they can be proud of, that they respect and that earns the respect of our community.

How do you think the purpose of the LBA has changed since you and I first joined and where do you see its future for both new and "experienced" lawyers in the community?

I think years ago the LBA was kind of like your college alumni association. It was something people joined almost as a matter of course, so even if the benefits to you personally were somewhat negligible, you likely signed up anyway. But we don't live in that world anymore. People have busy lives, they have personal interests they want to develop, they can access professional development content anytime and anywhere they want it. So, our charge becomes determining what we can do for our members that they can't do—or can't do easily—for themselves. If we can step into that void and provide services that make our members' lives easier or better or more interesting, then we'll be successful.

In contrast, I think our more outward-facing purposes of promoting justice and respect for the law and improving public access to the judicial system have never been more timely. In years past, that probably meant encouraging bright students to consider going to law school, celebrating foundational legal documents like the U.S. Constitution or working to publicly counteract negative stereotypes about the legal profession. And those things are all still important. But I think in today's world, promoting justice and improving public access to the judicial system means much more. We need to better understand how we can promote justice in a city where what happened to Breonna Taylor has called so much about our local institutions into question for many of our citizens. As we prepare for a wholesale overhaul of our local courts with every single judicial position on next year's ballot, how do we improve public access to our judicial system in a meaningful way so voters can make well-informed decisions? I don't think there's ever been a time when we needed to lean more into our purpose than right now.

What are the biggest challenges the LBA faces in the next decade?

I think one of the biggest challenges will be finding ways to successfully bridge generational divides. The things that are important to attorneys who've been in practice 25 or 30 years look different from the things that are important to me, and the attorneys who are just entering the profession have their own completely different set of priorities. We need to find a way to provide value to members across that entire spectrum without alienating anyone in the process. We cannot try to convince ourselves there's a one-size-fits-all solution out there, because it doesn't exist.

And I think remaining relevant to both our members and our community will require a new level of dedication and focus from all of us. We need to be constantly looking for what's next, what problem is on the horizon that we can begin to tackle today, where can we provide value, what side of history do we want to be on when it comes to issues that demand our input? We need to

seek out opportunities to be part of the process and not wait for those opportunities to come to us. And if we do something well, by all means, we need to take the time to celebrate it. But the next day we need to be back at it again, looking for the next chance to make a difference.

What is your favorite law-related book and/or movie?

I feel a little pressure to pick something more serious, but I'm going to say *Legally Blonde*—and not just because it's funny or lighthearted, or as Judge McAnulty would have said, "perky." I appreciate its message about how you don't have to change who you are to do something you love.

We've all probably had the experience at some point in our lives where you felt like you had to contort yourself into something you weren't to fit others' ideas of who you should be. Some folks may have even had that experience with the LBA—but my goal going forward is for us to welcome members not in spite of who they are, but *because* of who they are. Life is too short to be anyone but your unique self, and that should never be used to hold you back from achieving your goals. I'd rather be in a room full of people with diverse experiences, perspectives, opinions, backgrounds and worldviews than a room full of carbon copies. So, whether that means breaking a case wide open because you know the cardinal rules of perm maintenance or something much larger, I think the world can use a few more people like Elle Woods, who are unapologetically themselves and really passionate about what they do.

What is one thing about you that would surprise folks to know?

I love to tap dance. I can't say I've done much of it recently, but I danced for 15 years as a child, and I took a tap class in college. A few years ago, I dusted off my taps and took an adult class at the Louisville Ballet School. It's fantastic exercise, and I think it must be a little bit like being a drummer (which is something else I also want to learn to do someday)—when you hit a difficult combination just right, and you hear all that glorious noise, there's no better feeling in the world. ■





LBA Night at

Rabbit Hole

Distillery

