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Feb 2015 E-newsletter Alumni Spotlight: Kira Y. Fonteneau (J.D.'05)

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Alumni Spotlight: Kira Y. Fonteneau (J.D.'05)



Name: Kira Y. Fonteneau

Title: 10th Judicial Circuit Public Defender (Jefferson County, Alabama)

Employer Name: The State of Alabama

Location: Birmingham, Alabama

Number of years in this position: 2

Georgia Law graduation year: 2005

Other degrees/institution/year: B.A./University of Virginia/1998

1. Why did you choose to attend the University of Georgia School of Law?

When I decided to go to law school, I had been working in Atlanta for four years. I did not want to be far from Atlanta but I wanted to attend a high-quality program. Naturally when I began researching schools, UGA stood out.

2. Who was your favorite Georgia Law professor? Why?

I cannot narrow it down to one. My two favorite professors were Ron Ellington and Rebecca Hanner White. I was fond of both of them because they were rigorous professors who drummed a high standard of performance into students. They are both the type of professors that inspired students to be the best through unyielding, high expectations.

3. What is your most memorable experience from your time at Georgia Law?

I think the most memorable experience for me was reading the first assignment for property class. We were assigned *Johnson v. M'Intosh*, 21 U.S. (8 Wheat.) 543 (1823). I remember reading the case and wondering what I had gotten myself into because it felt like I was reading a foreign language. Luckily, it got easier after a few days of class.

4. Where was your favorite place to study during law school?

When I was in law school, I spent a lot of time in the Alexander Campbell King Law Library distracting others.

5. What was your favorite thing about living in Athens?

I loved living in Athens because it is a great college town. I liked being a part of a community that was defined by the school I was attending, and I liked being immersed in academia.

6. What advice would you give to a current law school student?

Remember that the goal of law school is to teach you to be a lawyer and not to get you a particular job. Too often people think that if they do not get a certain type of job they have failed in law school. Anyone who learns the skills taught in law school can become successful, but we will all define success differently. It is important to give yourself the freedom to find your own path.

7. Please briefly describe your current position at the Jefferson County Public Defender Office.

I manage an office of 31 lawyers and 26 support staff. Each year, our office represents about 4,000 people charged with felonies and misdemeanors in the Birmingham Division of Jefferson County.

8. What do you enjoy most about your job? What is the most rewarding aspect?

I like that our office can actually make a difference in our community. In Jefferson County, most of our citizens' only conception of what a public defender is comes from what they have seen on television. It is interesting to see how what we do changes those conceptions.

9. What made you decide to be a public defender?

I fell into being a public defender. When I started my own practice, there was no public defender's office. So, when I built my law

firm, a significant portion of my practice consisted of criminal matters. I found the fact patterns interesting, and I liked having the opportunity to assist clients who might not have ever felt like there was someone who was willing to fight for them. When the opportunity to lead the new office came along, I wanted to be a part of ensuring that all people charged with offenses have an attorney who is willing to fight for them.

10. What do you do to handle the stress of your work? How do you relax after a stressful day?

I cannot think of many better ways to handle the stress of my work than going for a run. I cannot tell you how many problems I have solved during the solitude of a run.

11. What advice would you give to someone working in your field?

Do not be afraid of trials. Sometimes fear of what can happen to clients can make lawyers risk averse. As a result, we can get into the habit of finding compromises that reduce, rather than eliminate, potential harm. It is important to remember that some people need trials. If you do not understand why the person needs or wants a trial, you probably are not listening to their story well enough to represent their interests.

12. What do you enjoy doing during your free time? What are your hobbies?

When I am not at work, I spend time with my family, run and cook. These days, I am usually in training for a half-marathon. I also enjoy taking cooking classes and sharing what I learn with my husband and daughter.

13. What would you consider your greatest accomplishment in life?

I am most proud of being Sydney's mom.

14. What book/resource do you find yourself referencing the most?

The Alabama Code.

15. When you look out your office window, what do you see?

Birmingham is perhaps known for its painful history. However, in the coming years, it will be known for its promising future. As I look out of my window, I can see a thriving downtown where creatives, lawyers and executives coexist, all the way to our city's Southside, known for world-class medical research, craft beer and five-star cuisine and a brand new ballpark. Birmingham is a hidden gem that will not be able to hide its brilliance for much longer.