



# One on One with Dona Kay Renegar, 77th LSBA President:

## *A Spirit of Collaboration*

Interviewed by Maggie T. Simar

**D**ona Kay Renegar, the 77th president of the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA), likes a challenge — which is a good thing as she is about to lead 22,000+ attorneys, all members of a mandatory bar association, into the future. Sitting across from her, you notice the fire this challenge lights in her. Dona is excited about this upcoming Bar year.

A member in the firm of Veazey, Felder & Renegar, L.L.C., in Lafayette, Dona grew up in Alexandria and then moved to Lafayette to attend the University of Southwestern Louisiana (now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette), receiving her BA degrees in both French and English, *magna cum laude*, in May 1988. She next earned her JD degree, *cum laude*, in 1992 from Tulane University Law School where her passion for helping those less fortunate took root.

Dona has served in many different roles with the LSBA. She was an original member of the Committee to Review Proposed Changes to the Louisiana Bar Exam in 2010 and continued her work with the project until the first test changes were instituted in 2012. She served on the Young Lawyers Division (YLD) Council from 1995-2007, chairing the Division in 2005-06. She was named the YLD's Outstanding Young Lawyer in 1999. She co-chaired the 2008-09 Leadership LSBA Class. In 2014, she received both the LSBA Pro Bono Century Award for her pro bono service and the Stephen T. Victory Memorial Award for co-authoring the *Journal* article on the Bar Exam changes. She has served on the Board of Governors and in the House of Delegates.

Her time in the House of Delegates, the LSBA's policymaking branch, was her introduction to state Bar service. She says that time was invaluable because it introduced her to other Bar leaders around the state and taught her about the sometimes diverging needs of LSBA members based upon the particular jurisdictions they represent and the most critical issues facing members in their practices around the state.

Dona Kay Renegar, the 77th president of the Louisiana State Bar Association, is a member in the Lafayette firm of Veazey, Felder & Renegar, L.L.C. She was photographed on the grounds of her alma mater, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. *Photo by Jay Faugot Photography.*



2005: Dona Kay Renegar, left, was sworn in as chair of the LSBA's Young Lawyers Division by then-Louisiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Catherine D. (Kitty) Kimball. Photo from LBJ Archives.



1999: Dona Kay Renegar received the Outstanding Young Lawyer Award from 1998-99 Young Lawyers Section Chair Steven C. Lanza. Photo from LBJ Archives.

**Journal:** What are the big overarching goals for your presidency?

**Renegar:** My first goal is for the Bar to be of service to all of the LSBA's members. This includes assisting our members in their practices with technological advances; establishing more diversity in Bar leadership; supporting young lawyers, solo practitioners and small firms; and addressing the very real needs of lawyers who are struggling with burnout, depression and/or substance abuse problems. My second goal is to support and increase access to justice for our citizens, both in the civil and criminal systems.

**Journal:** Can you tell us more about the technology that is available, or that you would like to make available, to our members?

**Renegar:** Not everyone is aware that the LSBA offers free videoconferencing services to its members. This helps lawyers save case-handling costs and avoids extensive or unnecessary travel. Also, the LSBA now hosts the Tech Center on our website with on-demand videos, including training videos for our

members.

I would like to increase and improve electronic access to court documents and paperless filings. This can be done by coordinating efforts with the Louisiana District Judges Association, the Louisiana Supreme Court and the Louisiana Clerks of Court Association to investigate the possibility of helping local JDCs provide electronic access to their files and accept electronic filing.

I also plan to encourage more CLE options to address technological advances, such as paperless offices, the implications of social media for attorneys and their clients, etc.

**Journal:** In your vision, what would more diversity in Bar leadership look like, and how would you accomplish that?

**Renegar:** I would like the LSBA leadership to look like a courtroom looks on rule day — diverse in all ways. Diverse perspectives are crucial to identifying issues facing our profession and crafting solutions to address those issues. I intend to accomplish this by asking members of the Board of Governors to identify leaders that they

see in their communities from a variety of backgrounds, practicing in a variety of fields, from a variety of practice situations (civil, criminal, solo, small firm, big firm, in-house, etc.) and asking them to serve on committees or sections, or, if time permits, in more time-intensive leadership roles.

**Journal:** What can the LSBA do to support young lawyers, solo practitioners and small firms?

**Renegar:** In addition to the access that the LSBA provides to training videos through the Tech Center, our YLD hosts the Bridging the Gap CLE program for newly admitted attorneys. This program includes LSBA Ethics School sessions which cover critical areas such as trust accounts, lawyer advertising, ethical pitfalls, etc.

We offer the Solo and Small Firm Conference, a two-day, low-cost conference dedicated to solos and small firms which offers both substantive and law office management topics.

The LSBA offers a Practice Aid Guide which covers all practical aspects of operating a law office. The 2017 version is complete and is available online.

The LSBA also offers the Four Corners CLEs, free outreach CLEs which highlight law office management in the four corners of the state. The LSBA employs two ethics counsel and practice management counsel who are available to members who need or want to consult with them.

In the last couple of years, we have created the Transition Into Practice (TIP) Program, a mentoring program that was recently opened for statewide participation.

**Journal:** We have all heard the grim statistics about lawyers, stress, burnout, depression and substance abuse. Tell us more about the LSBA programs that help members with these issues.

**Renegar:** Yes, unfortunately, lawyers as a profession experience a high rate of depression and substance abuse. Through the Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program (JLAP), the LSBA has made a commitment to provide confidential help for members suffering from mental health or substance abuse issues. The program has changed dramatically from its inception. It began as a lawyers-only substance abuse program but has developed into a broader program serving more

interests. I am proud to say the LSBA has made a lofty financial commitment to the program. It now serves both the bench and bar with a myriad of mental health and substance abuse issues. It is 100 percent confidential and, contrary to what some may think, the Louisiana Attorney Disciplinary Board is not associated with the program at all.

In addition to the financial contributions, JLAP also has begun proactive programming to take care of our members' mental health prior to it developing into problems that affect our practice or clients. This starts with our outreach to law schools. We have identified prospective attorneys as a group in need of tools to prepare them for the challenges of practicing law and to help them transition into the profession, and so the leadership of the LSBA has made a commitment to that group to help them succeed. We need to advertise our wonderful programs more. We are working on that!

**Journal:** Along those lines, in order to continue the success of our Bar Association, investing time and effort into future leaders is key and a wonderful (and very strategic) plan. Where does the Bar stand with the

mentoring program since its inception?

**Renegar:** The Transition Into Practice (TIP) program began as a voluntary mentoring program via a Louisiana Supreme Court order from 2013. In January 2015, two-year pilot programs were begun in the greater Shreveport, New Orleans and Baton Rouge areas. In February 2017, the Louisiana Supreme Court formally expanded the voluntary program to the entire state. Mentors earn CLE hours for their participation and mentees are given tasks related to an introduction into the practice of law which they must accomplish to receive recognition for completion of the program. Matches of mentors and mentees are made by the LSBA. The Louisiana Supreme Court hosts receptions at the beginning of each program with mentors and at the end of the program with both mentors and mentees. There is no cost for mentees to participate in the TIP program but they are required to attend the Bridging the Gap CLE, albeit at a reduced registration cost. Those interested in registering to be mentors or mentees can apply on the LSBA's website where they will find the qualifications for mentors and the obligations for mentees.



2003: Dona Kay Renegar, left, with Laura Sylvester at the Annual Meeting in Florida. *Photo from LBJ Archives.*



2016: A group of LSBA presidents, from left, Joseph L. (Larry) Shea, Jr., Dona Kay Renegar, Darrel J. Papillion, Richard K. Lefe and S. Guy deLaup at the Annual Meeting. *Photo by Matthew Hinton Photography.*



2017: Dona Kay Renegar at her alma mater, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Photo by Jay Faugot Photography.



2005: At the LSBA Annual Meeting in Las Vegas, from left, Clyde and Catherine D. (Kitty) Kimball, Dona Kay Renegar, and Tracy and Frank X. Neuner, Jr. Photo from LBJ Archives.

**Journal:** The TIP Program will undoubtedly aid our young colleagues who may have difficulty navigating the profession. What else is being done on the discipline side for those who may have made mistakes?

**Renegar:** While the LSBA offers some programming for our members who become the subject of a disciplinary matter, I think an equally important discussion is what the LSBA offers to our members to avoid the pitfalls of practice that may result in an Office of Disciplinary Counsel (ODC) investigation. In addition to the TIP Program, the LSBA's Member Outreach and Diversity team designs welcoming activities to create mentoring opportunities for the newest members of the Bar Association.

After an attorney becomes involved in our discipline side, the LSBA's Practice Assistance and Improvement Program offers "alternatives to discipline" assistance. The Attorney-Client Assistance Program is a voluntary program whose goal is quick resolution of minor complaints about lawyer conduct, such as lawyer-client communications, that do not rise to a

level of ethical violations triggering investigation by the ODC.

The Diversion Program provides a vehicle for lawyers who are guilty of minor misconduct to be diverted from the disciplinary process to an education monitoring program coordinated by the LSBA's Practice Assistance Counsel. This usually requires attendance at the LSBA Ethics School, held twice a year, and, if applicable, the Trust Accounting School which is offered once a year for those who have had disciplinary issues involving their trust accounts.

**Journal:** A lofty goal that I am sure the LSBA and you, in particular, will spend a great deal of time on. You mentioned that access to justice is also a priority for you. Can you tell us more about that?

**Renegar:** Access to justice has always been near and dear to me. I started my career working in the trenches of the Legal Service Corporation. The ability of our Bar to ensure not only criminal access to courts but also representation for our civil litigants is essential to our adversarial system. The LSBA has made

a commitment to our citizens to ensure competent access to justice by increasing funding allocations for self-help products like kiosks, phone banks, help desks, self-represented litigant kits and legal services organizations.

On the civil side, I plan on working with Valerie Briggs Bargas, president of the Louisiana Bar Foundation (LBF), to address civil legal aid issues including funding sources. (Louisiana is one of four states that provide no statewide appropriation or dedicated fee to civil legal aid.) A recent economic impact study using 2016 data showed that *for every \$1 invested in Louisiana's civil legal aid services, these programs deliver \$8.73 in immediate and long-term consequential financial benefits.* Val and I have already met about how to coordinate the efforts of the LSBA and LBF to best address the civil legal aid needs of our state in the upcoming year. We hope to continue to address this issue through the Access to Justice (ATJ) Commission committees investigating how to provide help to self-represented litigants navigating our legal system and, importantly, to those with modest means who do not qualify for free representation but

cannot afford the average market rates for legal representation.

On the criminal side, the LSBA has a Criminal Justice resource center on our website for attorneys who are appointed to represent indigent defendants. The ATJ Commission also has a Building Bridges Committee to connect the criminal and civil legal aid communities to strengthen Louisiana's justice system, and the LSBA hosts the Criminal Justice Summit to address the crises facing our members who practice in that field.

**Journal:** Wow, that's a lot of commitment to help people who need to access courts. How will you get the message to the members and the public of all that good work?

**Renegar:** We will continue to travel the state and let members know. We will continue our public service announcements and internal communication. The LSBA's website provides citizens with information regarding self-help services by parish. The LSBA's Legal Education & Assistance Program (LEAP) provides legal resources and information to the public and connects people with attorneys in their areas through "Lawyers

in Libraries" events because so many citizens in rural areas go to their local libraries for use of the computer to locate legal help. We also rely on our Member Outreach and Diversity team to inform the local and specialty bars of LSBA programs and increase the presence of LSBA leadership at events throughout the state. The members of the Board of Governors also relay information to their districts through constituent messages after each meeting.

One of the reasons I wanted to serve is because I wanted to give recognition to attorneys for the great work they do in their communities, careers and homes. It is important to me that we spread the news to the public of the good work and public service our members do. As we all know, it is an uphill battle to counter the sometimes negative public image of attorneys as a profession, but I have met so many of our members who are committed to access to justice and pro bono work, and I am happy to be out in the world raising awareness about the important community services LSBA members provide.

**Journal:** Communication, both within the profession and to the public,

is the key to success and you are a great person to spread that message. You are always so kind and friendly to everyone! How did you decide you wanted to be an attorney?

**Renegar:** I have wanted to be a lawyer for as long as I can remember. While a few professions briefly caught my attention and distracted me, such as psychology and marine biology, I always felt pulled to the legal field. I like to read and analyze materials, which, of course, is a large part of our job description. I was also drawn to the opportunity to help people through the legal system and was honored when they chose me to represent them. I am competitive by nature, so the adversarial system was a draw as well. I enjoy evaluating a case and making an argument. My mother likes to say that I turned bullheadedness into a career.

**Journal:** What kinds of cases are your favorites?

**Renegar:** I like to think on my feet so I like litigation, although I recognize it is not always the best course of action for my clients for many reasons. In the years I've been practicing, I have seen a decrease in litigation and a significant



2017: Dona Kay Renegar at the LSBA's Mid-year Meeting during the 50-, 60- and 70-Year Member Reception. Photo by Matthew Hinton Photography.



2017: Dona Kay Renegar at the Louisiana Bar Foundation's Gala with LBF President Valerie Briggs Bargas. Photo by Matthew Hinton Photography.



2007: Maggie Simar and Dona Kay Renegar at the Annual Meeting in Florida. Photo from LBJ Archives.



2005: Dona Kay Renegar with her mother Linda, left, sister Dana Renegar and brother Todd Renegar at the LSBA Annual Meeting in Las Vegas. Photo from LBJ Archives.

increase in alternative dispute resolution. I have been surprised at how much I enjoy crafting agreements for clients that can dissolve their disputes in creative and innovative ways.

I like the long-term relationships you develop with corporate clients as you get to know their business and become able to craft policies and forms that may help them avoid situations that resulted in litigation in the past. My business relationship with my clients over the years has been invaluable to my practice.

I do have vivid memories of a client I represented in removing her child from an abusive situation. The young girl chose some yarn and had her grandmother crochet a blanket for me. It's a prized possession of mine. I assisted another client in obtaining child support from her spouse. She and her daughter made me a 4-foot-tall Christmas stocking to thank me. Santa would be hard pressed to fill it.

**Journal:** I love hearing those stories about times at Legal Services. Those of us who work in that space know and understand it is sometimes a thankless job, but one that trains us so well. For

you to get recognition and praise is a special thing. Onto our final topic . . . Tell us a little about your feeling on the state of our profession and the future.

**Renegar:** The practice of law is the last profession that society has allowed to regulate itself. The public holds us in such high regard solely based on the profession we have chosen that we are allowed to discipline our own members. We are responsible for setting the qualifications of our members for admission to practice, their educational obligations to maintain that license, and administer discipline when their practice falls below the standards we have set. These obligations drive the programming of the LSBA in service to our members. The magnitude of that trust is tremendous and comes with great responsibility. It is our duty as a mandatory bar association to champion the success and accomplishments of our members both in their practices and in their communities, support our members who are struggling for any number of reasons, and discipline our members who do not adhere to our ethical obligations. Louisiana citizens have placed this trust in us, and our duty is to protect and serve them and

our members.

I believe the future of our profession rests solely in our hands. We must adapt to changing technology, address some of our citizens' lack of access to our judicial system, and harness the availability of legal forms and advice with a few strokes of the computer keys.

**Interviewer's Note:** Dona and I ended our visit with her speaking about what relaxes her. I would be remiss if I did not report on her passions and hobbies that some may find interesting (because I did). Anyone who already knows Dona will tell you she is an avid University of Louisiana at Lafayette fan. She hosts a long-standing tailgate party with several of her friends, and she loves watching ULL football and baseball. She has a passion for NASCAR, particularly driver Ryan Newman. She loves to garden and "get dirty" (a hobby she has had less time for since she became LSBA president-elect). She loves to travel and told me the story of her 18-day trip to Ireland with her parents. She loved the Irish, but, more importantly, she loved spending time with her parents. Always an ambassador of Louisiana culture, Dona brought along

several small bottles of Tabasco and canisters of “Slap Ya Mama” seasoning and distributed them to people she met there. Her stories about her visit were interesting and typify who Dona is — a kind, gracious and committed daughter, friend, and, by extension, attorney. As a friend of hers, I am excited to see her lead this association into the future because I know she will do great things!

*Maggie T. Simar has worked as a Family Court hearing officer for the past six years with the 16th Judicial District Family Court in St. Martin Parish. She received her BA degree in broadcast journalism in 1995 from Louisiana State University and her JD degree in 1998 from LSU Paul M. Hebert Law*



*Center. She was admitted to the Louisiana Bar in October 1998. She is a member of the Louisiana Bar Journal Editorial Board. She has served as District 3 representative on the Louisiana State Bar Association’s Young Lawyers Division Council. She also is active with the Junior League of Lafayette, the Lafayette Young Lawyers Association and other community organizations. (msimar@16jdc.org; 415 South Main St., 2nd Fl., St. Martinville, LA 70582)*

## Helpful Links to LSBA Services

Online links for LSBA projects, programs and services referenced in the interview.

- ▶ **Videoconferencing Services**  
[www.lsba.org/Members/BarCenterServices.aspx](http://www.lsba.org/Members/BarCenterServices.aspx)
- ▶ **LSBA Tech Center**  
[www.lsba.org/PracticeManagement/TechCenter.aspx](http://www.lsba.org/PracticeManagement/TechCenter.aspx)
- ▶ **Practice Aid Guide**  
[www.lsba.org/PracticeManagement/PracticeAidGuide.aspx](http://www.lsba.org/PracticeManagement/PracticeAidGuide.aspx)
- ▶ **Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program**  
[louisianajlap.com/](http://louisianajlap.com/)
- ▶ **Transition Into Practice (TIP) Mentoring Program**  
[www.lsba.org/Mentoring/](http://www.lsba.org/Mentoring/)
- ▶ **Practice Assistance Programs**  
[www.lsba.org/Members/PracticeAssistanceProgram.aspx](http://www.lsba.org/Members/PracticeAssistanceProgram.aspx)
- ▶ **Access to Justice Commission**  
[www.lsba.org/ATJCommission/](http://www.lsba.org/ATJCommission/)
- ▶ **Criminal Justice Center**  
[www.lsba.org/CJC/](http://www.lsba.org/CJC/)
- ▶ **Lawyers in Libraries Program**  
[www.lsba.org/LouisianaLawyersinLibraries/LouisianaLawyersLibraries.aspx](http://www.lsba.org/LouisianaLawyersinLibraries/LouisianaLawyersLibraries.aspx)



**2007: Miles Matt and Dona Kay Renegar at the Lafayette Bar Association’s crab boil. Photo from LBJ Archives.**



**2005: Dona Kay Renegar with former presidents of the Lafayette Bar Association at the LSBA’s Annual Meeting in Las Vegas, from left, Frank X. Neuner, Jr., Joseph R. Oelkers, Jr. and Joseph C. Giglio, Jr. Photo from LBJ Archives.**