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Of Serendipity and Rubik's Cubes: How Jeannie Frey is Bringing an In-house Perspective to the ABA's Business Law Section

Interviews and Profiles





Jeannie Frey

CHIEF LEGAL OFFICER AND GENERAL COUNSEL

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IRVING, TEXAS, USA

CHRISTUS Health Chief Legal Officer and General Counsel Jeannie Frey had been practicing law for almost a decade before she decided to become actively involved in the American Bar Association (ABA). Although she had previously held leadership positions in a state women's bar associations a then-senior associate at a law firm, she thought the ABA would help her bring her practice to the next level, by engaging with other attorneys from across the country. Despite not knowing anyone else there, she took a deep breath, and attended her first ABA Annual Meeting.

After checking out different groups and listening to a lot of interesting discussions, she was drawn to the Nonprofit Organizations Committee of the Business Law Section. At the time, she was representing nonprofit healthcare providers as an outside counsel. She turned to the person in the chair next to her and started a conversation with a lawyer nearly twice her age. He had been the co-editor of the first edition of the *Guidebook for Directors of Nonprofit Corporations*, which had been published years earlier. He needed to revise some sections and add new chapters for a second edition — and he also needed a co-editor. Frey agreed to help, kicking off a relationship with the ABA that continues to this day.

The in-house perspective

In mid-September 2020, Frey will become chair of the ABA's Business Law Section. It is the culmination of years of work volunteering with the ABA. She co-edited much of the second edition of the *Guidebook for Directors of Nonprofit Corporations* while on the commuter train between the suburbs and her office in Chicago. "I would also work on it on weekends when my kids were taking naps and late at night

"It was a labor of love." After that, she wrote and edited chapters for several other books on nonprofit governance, management, and other legal issues published by the ABA, including the *Guide to Nonprofit Governance in the Wake of Sarbanes-Oxley*, and *Nonprofit Management and Governance*. This led to greater participation in the ABA Business Law Section, including becoming the committee chair for the Nonprofit Organizations Committee.

Now, Frey is poised to be the first in-house lawyer in over a decade to chair the Business Law Section. She hopes to increase the visibility and participation of in-house lawyers. The Business Law Section has a number of in-house counsel who are involved in different leadership positions, and Frey believes that the in-house counsel perspective adds value to the work of Section and the ABA. Frey encourages her team, and all lawyers, to find a bar association that can help spur professional growth.

Voluntary bar associations, like the ABA and ACC, are often viewed by in-house counsel as nice to join — but unnecessary to advance legal careers. Frey argues that's the wrong way to think about it: "Long ago I realized that my organization didn't always have the budget to fund my bar association trips. But I knew that the professional and leadership experience I could gain from my bar activities could be incredibly valuable in the development of my career. I realized that time and money spent on bar association activities was a true investment in my career, as much if not more so than the purchase of a good suit or a 'power' bag for my papers and laptop."



Solving the health law Rubik's Cube

Like many lawyers, Frey didn't arrive in her field by following a straight line. When she graduated from law school, health law wasn't regarded as a dedicated practice area. Initial interest in litigation faded, and she found she was attracted to securities law. She enjoyed the business side of things, a fact she attributes to her accountant father, and joined the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) in Washington, DC, working in the General Counsel's Office of the Enforcement Division, where she represented regional SEC offices as they pressed for enforcement action. "It was a wonderful job with a lot of great people, but then I reconnected with my college boyfriend," she recalls. They married and moved to Colorado, and then to Chicago. "Leaving the SEC in Washington was probably not the smartest career move, but it made sense at a personal level," Frey reflects. She and her husband recently celebrated their 31st anniversary, and have two children.

Moving from Denver to Chicago for her husband's work, she happened upon the chance to join McDermott, Will & Emery's health law department, which was looking for an attorney with a transactional background to work on healthcare deals. She relished the fact there were more women involved in healthcare work as lawyers and in the client healthcare organizations, and found the work stimulating. "It is just a fascinatingly complex area because of all the regulations, federal and state, that govern healthcare issues, including in the transactional setting. They're all meant well, but don't always sync up with each other, or with the best interests of patients," she explains. "I thought it was like solving a Rubik's Cube."

Continuing a tradition

As the CLO of CHRISTUS Health, an international, faith-based nonprofit health system, she leads a legal department of 35, including 15 lawyers. The legal department supports about 60 hospitals, including care facilities in Mexico, Chile, and Colombia. CHRISTUS has about 45,000 employees working across those facilities, which in the United States are primarily located in Texas, Louisiana, and New Mexico.

Frey joined CHRISTUS after 14 years in-house, having left private practice to become the first general counsel office for a client Chicago-based healthcare system. She made use of organizations like the Illinois Association of Healthcare Attorneys and the Illinois Hospital Association, and networking opportunities with other GCs, to figure out the in-house role. “It turned out to be one of the greatest growth opportunities of my career because I had to determine how to best meet the organization’s wide range of legal needs, and react to new legal issues as they arose,” she says. At CHRISTUS, she is continuing a tradition of healthcare that begin with three Catholic Sisters from Lyons, France, who arrived in Galveston, Texas, to start Charity Hospital, the first Catholic hospital in the state. As GC, she feels responsible for protecting this legacy by ensuring the legal department is staffed with the best people to support the entire organization. “The importance and responsibility of continuing these institutions, and providing needed healthcare services to their communities, is pretty strong,” Frey emphasizes. “It’s a challenge — but a very motivating one.” She also enjoys developing and working with a team of attorneys and other professionals to serve the organization’s legal needs and create a leadership pipeline for the future.

Getting to know... Jeannie Frey

HOW DO YOU LIKE TO SPEND YOUR HOURS WHEN YOU’RE NOT WORKING?

Sometimes, with the amount of work I have, there is just enough time to pack things up, have dinner, and do a little more work at home. My time with the bar association also takes a lot of time. It’s really my main area of community service right now. When we moved to Texas from Chicago two years ago, we landed in a great community, with a lot of local spirit and small businesses, including a year-round farmers market. My husband is actively involved in several volunteer organizations and activities, so I get to know more about the community through him. I’ve been an avid fan of Broadway musicals all my life and enjoy periodic trips to New York City or catching Broadway touring company shows in Dallas. Also, having grown up in New Orleans, I am a big Saints fan, and was delighted to find that the local stations carry Saints games more often than in Chicago. Otherwise, I just enjoy being outside when I can, going for walks with our dog or a bike ride. Our children are now adults, but we enjoy the times when we can connect and spend time with them.

DO YOU HAVE ADVICE FOR IN-HOUSE LAWYERS WHO ARE JUST STARTING THEIR CAREERS?

I encourage them to get involved in some form of bar association, whether it’s a general state, local, national, or international bar association, or a specialty bar association for lawyers with certain practice areas, backgrounds, or practice settings. Just do it, and get involved where you can. Write an article or a book chapter, speak on a CLE panel, or discuss the impact of current developments with other lawyers with similar and different practice experiences. Contribute to the profession and be a force for needed change in laws and regulations. Support participation by young and other diverse lawyers. Take a leap and invest in your career.

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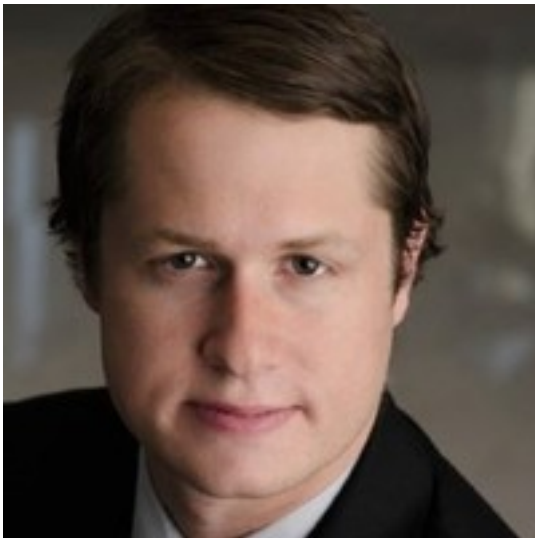
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