

PUBLICATION

Spotlight: Signature HealthCARE and Associate Counsel Melissa Gruner

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Tell me a little bit about yourself and your career path. What led you to Signature HealthCARE?

I am a litigator through and through. I started my career at the Louisville, KY Public Defender's office because I wanted to try cases. I transitioned my practice to civil defense for many years as a partner at a national law firm where I developed my niche for long term care work. Transitioning into the legal side of health care felt very natural to me after originally starting college as a pre-med student.

Signature HealthCARE reached out to me in 2017 and presented me with an opportunity to become in house counsel but still litigate the Kentucky cases – it was a perfect fit. I wouldn't want to do or be anything else.

Tell me about Signature's efforts during the pandemic?

Signature's efforts during the pandemic were nothing short of heroic. What our company accomplished during the pandemic in retrospect feels like it would have been impossible to pull off. However, we did it. Even our in-house legal team drove supplies to rural facilities while employees in our home office were volunteering at facilities in the height of COVID. We put goody bags together for every single stakeholder. I wrote hundreds of thank you notes. The CDC and CMS guidelines were constantly changing, sometimes daily, and we stayed on top of each new policy and guidance. Everyone on the Signature team did everything possible to help our residents, going above and beyond their own job responsibilities – I have never been prouder of our company.

What was it like in those first few months after the pandemic hit?

That time in long term care was a unique experience, while the jobs of some slowed down or ceased, ours ramped up to the busiest we have ever been. We were juggling this with the fact that most of us also had children who were sent home from daycare or school during the busiest times in our career. I have a nine-year-old daughter and I became painfully aware I was not cut out to be a school teacher. The common mission of keeping our residents safe drove us to dig deep and find the strength to do what needed to be done.

What's an accomplishment you are most proud of that Signature has done in the last year?

We recovered more than 11,000 patients and staff who were diagnosed with COVID. We celebrate those recoveries together as a team with our battle cry – "Signature Strong."

Do you have a mentor or serve as a mentor? If so, tell us why mentorship is so important?

Lynn Fieldhouse, the General Counsel, Chief Litigation-Risk Officer for Signature is my mentor. Lynn has been at Signature more than a decade and I was hired to join her team. Even as our Chief Litigation Officer, she will get her hands dirty without hesitation. Like me, she is a wife and a mother who attempts daily to balance work and home. Lynn models for all of us that the Signature way is that residents and the stakeholders that care for them are our first priority and our job is to serve them.

What advice would you give to your younger self just finishing up law school?

I would tell myself upon law school graduation "Melissa, your career path may not go as you have envisioned it, keep an open mind and don't stress out about it. The twists and turns lead to amazing opportunities. And, it is critically important to build relationships from the beginning – relationships lead to opportunities and enrich the quality of your career."

What advice would you give other moms trying to balance it all?

Remember it truly is a "balance" and you are not going to be able to do everything at 100 percent all the time. There are certain days when your family must be cared for and there are other days that your time must be dedicated fully to work. Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it, both at home and at work. Outsource what you can at home so you can spend more quality time with your family. Having a family makes you a better professional, so don't see having a family as a deficit to your career, see it as an asset, because it is. COVID helped us move forward substantially in this area, because most people, men and women alike, had families in the background of Zoom meetings. It humanized us to one another and that helps us work together to get more accomplished.

Bags of Sunshine

During the months of April and May, Baker Donelson collected "Sunshine items" or yellow-colored treats and goodies to be distributed to our friends at the Signature HealthCARE Nursing Home in Madison, TN. The "Sunshine items" will be collected and stuffed into bright yellow bags by the Firm's BakerCares Committee members and delivered to Signature Madison. The hope is to bring a little "sunshine" to residents at the nursing home.

Interviewed by [Christy Tosh Crider](#).