

PUBLICATION

A Look at the Past as We Dream of the Future: Ten Years of Baker Women

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It would be easy to focus on what Baker Women has accomplished in the last ten years. I think it's safe to say it's a lot – being recognized in the top twenty-five in *Working Mother's Magazine* (now *Seramount*) our first woman in the C-suite; being listed as a best workplace for parents in *Fortune Magazine*; an innovative Family Planning and Support Leave Policy; achieving top ten in *Seramount's* 2023 Best Law Firms for Women and Diversity; and more. But again, that's what would be easy. Instead, the Firm's Women's Initiative Leadership Team arrived in D.C. invigorated. Charged. Ready to tackle whatever would come our way. So naturally, we dreamed of the impossible.

September 18 and 19, 2023, marked the first time in ten years our leadership team met in person. Sure, we have monthly meetings where we can virtually see and update each other, but there's something about the energy in the room when we are all present and working together in real-time.

As a third-year associate, I only know the Baker Donelson (and the legal profession) of today. I only know of the Baker Donelson with a woman COO; where half our practice group leaders are women; and where women are embraced and celebrated. To me, Baker Donelson is personified by these women. The women who blazed a path for young associates like me – who made it so we too can have a seat at the table, even at the head of the table. When I think of a law firm, I have an entirely different vision than that of the women who came before me, but it is because of these women that to me the word "impossible" doesn't exist.

This idea of achieving the impossible was a theme of the retreat, echoed by our keynote speaker Betsy Broun. Ms. Broun reflected on a successful career as the Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Ms. Broun, like the women and men who make up Baker Women, is a fierce trailblazer. She is the longest-serving female director of the Smithsonian Institution, serving in her role from 1989 until 2016. Ten years ago, she was at the height of her career. And much like at this most recent retreat, an inspiration to the members of Baker's Women's Initiative. Ten years ago, Ms. Broun spoke to the Women's Initiative leadership team about what she had built at the Smithsonian. The Baker team was able to walk the halls of the Smithsonian and see physical evidence of her accomplishments. Perhaps it was Ms. Broun's presence and legacy that inspired Baker Women to reach for these goals we achieved in the last ten years.

But now, ten years later and retired, Ms. Broun was reflective. She had the benefit of hindsight and the ability to look back on her successful career and acknowledge the struggles; the times she faced adversity; even times of failure. She noted the importance of having distant ambitions to carry you through those times of failure. When one idea doesn't pan out, there is still more to dream of; more to do; more to achieve. One failure does not define a career, and Ms. Broun's legacy is more than illustrative of this fact.

Ms. Broun's insight was impactful on all in the room, including Rusty Gray. Rusty has been a staple to Baker's Women's Initiative serving in various capacities, most recently in developing our Family Planning and Support leave, and in the Pathways to Leadership Committee. Rusty was in the room ten years ago when Ms. Broun first imparted her wisdom to the Women's Initiative Leadership Team. Rusty also recognized the sense of reflection in Ms. Broun's most recent discussion with the Baker team. He noted that with someone as successful as Ms. Broun, it's easy to assume that there was only smooth sailing in her career. But that is not

the case. He stated Ms. Broun taught him, "You've got to stay with it and do what you believe in, and good things will happen."

As a fixture of the Women's Initiative, Rusty can testify to all good things that have happened for Baker Women in the last ten years. When I asked him how he would describe Baker Women in one word, he replied "transformative." And as a member of the Women's Initiative Leadership Team since the last retreat, Rusty has seen this transformation from the very beginning. He described the women's initiative as something that doesn't just strengthen our women attorneys but strengthens our entire Firm. To him, the Women's Initiative is a selling point of our Firm; it's not just an initiative but the very core of our Firm.

Rusty is not the only fixture in the Women's Initiative. In fact, he noted that while we have doubled in size, many people in the room that day were part of the original team ten years ago. I met Amy Mahone, another Women's Initiative Leadership member who was at the first retreat ten years ago. I was able to share with her that I had heard her speak during a class in the fall semester of my first year of law school. I recall her speaking about how much she loved her co-workers and the work she did. Her compassion and authenticity echoed in each word regarding the admiration she felt for her coworkers: her team. At the time, as a student just barely out of college and fresh to law school and the legal profession in general, I could not imagine a job where I appreciated and admired my coworkers in the way that she described. And now, years later, I was able to tell her that I get it. I see the sense of belonging that Baker Donelson and the Women's Initiative fosters. The words that she used all those years ago are the feelings I experience each day in my office.

I also got to spend time with my own mentor – Caldwell Collins – the woman who believed that I could be a leader in the Women's Initiative. Caldwell is an advocate and a champion of those around her – whether it be as backup dancer during karaoke or during the more serious moments like participating in mock hearings before a colleague and friend has an argument before the Tennessee Supreme Court. Caldwell's mentorship and friendship is the perfect depiction of Baker Women – steadfast and unwavering. Unsurprisingly, she too was at the same retreat ten years ago and like me, a young associate. She was a pioneer of the Women's Initiative we know today, including our parental leave policy. Now, ten years later, as a shareholder, Caldwell is a mentor to Baker associates – lighting the way through the obstacles she's already faced while still dreaming of ways to make the future brighter. As Ms. Broun said, it's important to have distant ambitions.

And distant ambitions were at the forefront of our minds as we dreamed of the next ten years. We didn't focus on the past and what made us the force we are today but rather shifted our attention to what will make us groundbreaking tomorrow. We shared the hopes for each of our committees and realized that these dreams would best be accomplished together with collaboration and teamwork. We acknowledged the need for understanding and bridging generational divides. Rather than just sit in the comfort of familiarity, we also acknowledged room for growth and a need for diversity. And again, rather than sit in the feelings of success from our retreat and time together, Baker Women went to work, getting started on putting these plans into action. Not even a week after our retreat, we expanded our team to better reflect our goals and the future of Baker Women. Because while Baker Women has accomplished a lot in the last ten years, we still have more to do.

If the past ten years showed us anything, it's that when we dream big enough, we can achieve the impossible. Though we know the hard work it will require, we also know that together, we can conquer anything. And when times are tough, we will remember the wise words of Betsy Broun: "When the going gets tough, you just dig in deeper." So, in these next ten years, Baker Women will dig deep and do the impossible.