

Katy McGinnis: Roles of a Lifetime

When Katy McGinnis ('06) was elected city commissioner in Belle Isle, FL in March, she became Barry Law School's most recent alum to be elected to public office. It's just the latest in a succession of roles that McGinnis has deftly handled – in law and in life – since graduating from Barry ten years ago.

Civil law attorney. Public defender. Felony lead attorney. Mediator. Marathon runner. Wife. Mom. And now, city commissioner. McGinnis can certainly check "all of the above" as she reflects back upon her journey.

It started in southern Florida's Delray Beach, where McGinnis' mother – a practicing attorney – was a role model for her young daughter. "I knew I wanted to be a lawyer my entire life," McGinnis says. "Beginning at the age of 12, I spent my summers working in my mother's law office learning how to practice law."

When it came time to apply for college, McGinnis knew that law school was definitely in her future. She selected Trinity College in Vermont for her undergraduate degree – "because I was a skier," she admits – with her sights set on law school in Vermont. However, by the time she earned her bachelor's degree, she realized she missed Florida and didn't like being so far away from her family. She applied to a number of law schools closer to home, and was accepted into several. But Barry Law stood out to McGinnis.

"Being from south Florida I was very familiar with Barry University and its great reputation," she says. "And my religious roots made Barry Law School very appealing." So back to Florida she came, with a new academic life centered around Barry Law's Orlando campus.

During her first semester at Barry Law, Katy met her future husband, Adam McGinnis. "We sat next to each other during Professor Birdsong's Criminal Law final," she recalls, "and we have been together ever since." They married in 2006, and Katy also subsequently played an important role in Adam's successful 2012 campaign to become elected as a Criminal County Judge in Orange County.

But meeting her husband wasn't the only memorable outcome of McGinnis' time at Barry Law. After earning her J.D. she leveraged her Barry Law experience to launch a successful legal career.

Thanks to her mediation internship at Barry, McGinnis was offered a job in the mediation department at the Orange County Courthouse. As an in-house mediator there, she conducted more than 1,500 civil mediations. Also, over the next several years she earned three legal certifications ... as a Court Appointed Parent Coordinator, a Florida Supreme Court Certified Family Court Mediator and a County Court Mediator. Next, she spent five years as a Public Defender, trying more than 85 felony, misdemeanor and juvenile trials. McGinnis' leadership skills eventually enabled her to become the felony lead attorney, supervising four other attorneys.

After the birth of her daughter presented her with yet another new role as a mother, McGinnis decided to take a break from criminal law and pursue a different career path ... the art of civil law. Today, she is an associate attorney in the Orlando office of Cole, Scott & Kissane, P.A. – one of the largest law firms in Florida which was recently voted one of the "Best Law Firms" in US News and World Reports for 2016.

McGinnis' current areas of practice are primarily focused on general civil litigation. She also represents Fortune 500 companies in multi-million-dollar insurance defense cases. And, she has discovered there are a large number of people in her firm with connections to Barry Law.

"I am impressed by the number of Barry interns and graduates that currently work here," she says. "People are hired based upon recommendations from attorneys throughout our firm, so that speaks well for how highly Barry alumni are regarded."

In addition to her legal career, McGinnis is now just weeks into her new role as an elected public official – a role which originated with her concerns about maintaining a high-caliber educational environment in her city.

"When our daughter, Lily, was born," she says, "we moved to Belle Isle because of the great schools. Then I heard about some changes that might be coming."

In particular, McGinnis wanted to protect a highly-rated charter school which the mayor and several city commissioners had founded. When she learned of some possible changes that were being discussed for the school in light of the mayor and those commissioners stepping down, McGinnis decided to run for office. "I was also interested in increasing the diversity of the city commission by adding another woman to the city's leadership," she says.

McGinnis launched her campaign and spent many weeks knocking on more than 1,200 doors ... over half of the homes in the city. Her opponent was a longtime resident who had been highly visible in the community – a former air traffic controller who helped to direct Belle Isle's annual Christmas boat parade. Election day was held on March 15, the same day as Florida's presidential primary, so the result was decided amid an exceptionally high voter turnout. Despite being a lesser-known first-time candidate, McGinnis won the city commission seat with 51% of the votes. When she took office on April 1st, she also became the second female commissioner, achieving her goal of adding diversity to the commission.

Today, through the prism of the many roles McGinnis has held since her time at Barry Law, she has some advice and a number of tips for current and future students.

She urges first-time students to "begin building your reputation your first day of your first year. Every time you attend class, the things you say and the things you do will reflect on you. And remember that your reputation follows you everywhere. Make sure it's a good one."

"Also remember that the legal community is a very small world," she adds. "You will constantly come across people you went through Barry Law with, and you never forget what kind of students they were and how they behaved."

McGinnis also strongly encourages Barry students to "take advantage of the internships that are offered. Getting your foot in the door as a student can lead to a door opening up when you graduate," just as an internship at Barry led to McGinnis' job as a mediator at the Orange County Courthouse.

Additionally, McGinnis has some advice for Barry Law' newest graduates. "Stay in Orlando," she says. "There are so many Barry alumni in this community who will want to help you succeed. The friendships

and connections you make at Barry follow you forever ... they will help you in court, can help you in life, and could even help you get a job.”

McGinnis’ final tip is for attorneys just starting out in the legal profession. “Apply to work at a Public Defender or State Attorney’s office,” she says. “It is the best training you will ever receive and you will be immersed in the legal community.”

And what about her role as a marathon runner over the past ten years? “I have finished ten marathons and have completed more than 25 half-marathons ... before I had a baby,” McGinnis laughs. “Now I run 5 K’s with a jogging stroller!”

Running for office – and winning – is indeed just the latest leg on Katy McGinnis’ journey.