

President's Message

Q&A with 2017-18 LBF President Valerie Briggs Bargas

Interviewed by 2017-18 Secretary Christopher K. Ralston

Ralston: Tell us about yourself and your family.

Bargas: I am fortunate to practice with some of my favorite people in a firm we formed eight years ago. For the last 16 years, my practice has been



Valerie Briggs
Bargas

focused primarily on casualty and insurance defense litigation. There is very little downtime when a trial is always looming around the corner, but I look for ways to give back and, of course, I spend as much time as I can with my family. My husband, Trey, and I have been married for 13 years and we have three children, Briggs, 11; Anna-Marie, 9; and Reed, 5. The kids are involved in many extracurricular activities. I am grateful that Trey has a flexible schedule and is able to do the afternoon chauffeuring. Somehow we make it all work!

Ralston: How did you get involved with the Louisiana Bar Foundation (LBF)?

Bargas: I learned about the LBF when I was on the Young Lawyers Council (now Division) of the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA). I had no hesitation in becoming a Fellow and I was eager to be more involved.

Ralston: What role does the LBF play in promoting access to the justice system?

Bargas: In my practice, I am often defending individuals who can afford to litigate in the civil justice system. However, there are so many whose lives are negatively impacted because they do not have the means to hire a lawyer to assist them in handling simple civil matters. The LBF funds grantees who are giving Louisiana's most vulnerable citizens access to a system which they would otherwise be prevented from using. Some of the civil matters include representation of abused children,

domestic violence victims, and those who are victims of financial fraud. The impact on these individuals who receive these legal services is life changing. By vetting and regularly auditing grantees, the LBF ensures that quality and effective legal assistance is being provided.

Ralston: Can you tell us about the newly formed Access to Justice (ATJ) Commission and its role in the LBF's mission?

Bargas: Louisiana, through the LSBA and LBF initiatives, has had a strong and active presence in the access to justice community nationwide. However, it became clear that the individual states had been moving to a Commission model, which is thought to enable and give all stakeholders an active voice in ATJ efforts. The LBF and ATJ Commission work hand in hand to find more sustainable forms of income to support civil legal aid initiatives, current grantees, and to better fund Legal Services Corporations in Louisiana. In addition, the Commission works to keep abreast of any new civil legal aid issues and/or problems that may need a more consistent approach statewide. The goals include finding a consistent stream of income, prevent/limit duplication of efforts, and maximize the ideas and efforts of civil legal aid providers.

Ralston: Why is it so important to have consistent funding for civil legal aid?

Bargas: The LBF commenced its Civil Legal Aid Campaign two years ago in an effort to increase funding for grantees in the wake of low interest rates on IOLTA accounts, the base of the LBF's funding. The idea was that if grantees could be funded consistently year to year, then they would not have to spend time and effort looking for funding and being concerned that it may run out. The lack of consistent funding makes it very difficult for the civil legal aid grantees to hire and retain lawyers. We now have the Commission

to assist in the Campaign. Most recently, the LBF, at the request of the ATJ Commission, funded an Economic Impact Study to demonstrate the financial impact of providing civil legal aid in Louisiana communities. For every dollar invested in Louisiana's civil legal aid providers, Louisiana receives \$8.73 in immediate and long-term financial benefits. Serving the most vulnerable citizens in our state is the right thing to do, but the fact that it yields such a substantial return to our economy cannot be ignored.

Ralston: How can Louisiana lawyers help the LBF?

Bargas: Become a Fellow! I know that there are lawyers who work hard and find it difficult to fit in pro bono work. We have grantees doing amazing work across the state, but we have a very small number of lawyers who are Fellows of the LBF financially supporting the work being done. You can ensure that the civil legal aid providers being funded by the Bar Foundation are audited and reevaluated on a quarterly and yearly basis. Please make being a Fellow a priority this year!

Ralston: What are your goals and your vision as president of the LBF?

Bargas: The LBF leadership is currently working with the ATJ Commission to obtain a constant, yearly stream of income from a source in Louisiana. This is a priority for the LBF and the Campaign. In addition, I would also like to work with some of our grantees in ensuring that the services they seek to and do provide best fit their model, funding and expectations. I have been fortunate to audit several of our grantees and, through this process, have learned some organizations provide more effective services at a better cost. Providing our grantees direction and support is important. It validates the LBF's mission and gives our supporters confidence in the work that is being done.