



Natasha Nazareth

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MSBA member Natasha Nazareth is Of Counsel to McMillan Metro, P.C. in Potomac, MD, and has served as General Counsel to a University of North Carolina system campus, as well as a variety of large and small independent schools. Her passion for education helped shape much of her decision making throughout her career, and recently Ms. Nazareth shared her journey in an interview with the *Maryland Bar Journal*.

FORGING A NEW PATH

➔ Describe your professional journey.

Each step of my career has involved two aspects: making connections with lawyers and other professionals who truly enjoy what they do, and following my passion to make a difference in the lives of others. It has been the authenticity of relationships with others and self, along with the willingness to chart my own course, that has created a series of interesting opportunities for me to thrive as a lawyer.

I started out with Legal Aid of North Carolina representing poor children with disabilities needing access to education, healthcare and safe homes. I started a holistic civil advocacy program which relied on referrals directly from judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys and juvenile court counselors. At the time, that kind of collaboration

was highly unusual. Several large foundations were willing to fund my office to develop a model which we replicated with federal funds. I grew quickly as a lawyer and ended up supervising other lawyers in just a couple of years. Raising money, administering the program, and offering training on special education and other disability law were part and parcel of the job. Every case felt successful because my clients had nowhere to go but up.

As I started my own family, I realized I wanted to make a more systemic impact and began working as a student disability specialist for the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics, which is a premier public boarding school. I then became their in-house general counsel, which allowed me to branch into governance, business, finance, employment, contracts, construction, and all the other non-student legal needs of a state agency.

During this time, I also taught legal research and analysis to first year law students at North Carolina Central University. Teaching kept my law practice fresh and vice versa. Teaching students to really be open to other perspectives and practice cognitive flexibility every day helped my own practice. It's so important for us as lawyers to continue to have an open mind each day.

Just before my 40th birthday I took a sabbatical to plan and launch a boutique solo practice to represent independent schools. As part of my business plan, I became licensed in Maryland and DC and sought out mission-focused schools which valued my integrative approach to general counsel services. As is true for so many professionals in their 40s, these were the years that I finally felt I had come into my own. I stopped worrying that my path was different. I stopped viewing non-legal work as "mission creep" and finally embraced the concept that being able to juggle the one-off legal matters my clients brought me along with non-legal management responsibility was the highest-value work I could do.

➔ Describe your current practice.

I represent individuals and businesses in the areas of corporate and business, employment, and education law and litigation. As an experienced lawyer with additional background in both teaching and administering human resources and learning support programs, I give clients a unique perspective grounded in a growth-mindset. Just like many of my for-profit clients, my schools are striving for the best mix of services, facilities and employees to generate sustainable and diverse revenue.

I have walked a different path than most lawyers. Instead of starting in a larger private practice then going in-house, I find myself in a traditional firm for the first time as I start the third decade of my career. I raise up that difference into a strength: broad experience as in-house general counsel brings a different value-add to my clients. I know how business owners think because I've worn the management hat and the lawyer hat.

➔ Is there one accomplishment you're most proud of in your career?

In 2016 Erskine Bowles became president of the University of North Carolina system, prompting a merger of the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics into the UC system. I had the great fortune to co-lead the process: building support among faculty for the change, negotiating the deal, drafting a comprehensive legislative package, and revamping all of the governance policies for both the school's board of trustees and the university system's board of governors. The

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role brought together my strengths in thinking holistically, creating systems to improve performance, and relishing the challenge of uncharted waters. Erskine brought an exciting and sometimes exhausting pace to UNC – for me it was a growth opportunity that I couldn't have predicted.

➔ What role should the MSBA play in the professional lives of attorneys?

A key strength of a bar association lies in the ability of an individual attorney to invest their time wisely and hit three birds with one stone: knowledge, relationships and marketing. I know when I attend an MSBA bar event in person, I can be confident that I have leveraged all three aspects. MSBA should also continue to help diverse attorneys become and stay connected to one another and our chosen professional field. Inclusivity in programs and services is essential to the MSBA being the best organization it can be.