

## President's Message

# Q&A with 2019-20 LBF President Amanda W. Barnett

*Interviewed by 2019-20 Secretary Alan G. Brackett*

**Brackett:** Tell us about yourself and your family.

**Barnett:** I am the youngest of four daughters. My father was an attorney and I spent many hours at his office, occasionally tagging along with him to court. He was a retired Army colonel and went to Louisiana State University Law School after retirement, graduating in 1970 and opening an office as a sole practitioner in Amite, La., where I grew up. Amite was a place that fostered inclusion and caring for, and knowing, your neighbor, values that have stayed with me.

I went to H. Sophie Newcomb College of Tulane University and then to Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center, where I met my husband, Barry Barnett. Our first date was a packed lunch on the steps of the “old” law school building across from the parade grounds, and Professor Baier came and sat down with us — that was 34 years ago.

We have four children — Katherine, a PhD candidate at Harvard; Lee, a PhD candidate at Johannes Kepler University in Austria; Marcus, a recent graduate of LSU; and Lily, a freshman at Rhodes College in Memphis. In 1995, we moved from the New Orleans area, leaving firms there, to come to Alexandria, where we raised our children. I joined Gold, Weems, Bruser, Sues & Rundell. Alexandria is home now. Since 2010, I have been general counsel for Red River Bank and Red River Bancshares, Inc. I’m lucky to be a part of a company that truly believes in being a good corporate citizen. My commitment to the Louisiana Bar Foundation is welcomed and supported.

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

**Barnett:** In 2008, at the Gold firm, I was involved in complicated litigation representing children with special needs and the right to a free and appropriate public education. During that case, I heard about Louisiana Appleseed’s project researching equitable

funding for special needs school children in various Louisiana school districts and I volunteered to work on the project. At that year’s Good Apple Gala, Mathile Abramson, a past LBF president and a former classmate

at LSU, asked if I was a Fellow. She explained the LBF’s role and mission and I became a Fellow, volunteering on the Central Community Partnership Panel. I am so glad I did. I love being a part of the LBF.

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

**Barnett:** The LBF’s role in promoting access to the justice system is hard to overstate — the LBF is the largest funder of civil legal aid in Louisiana. The LBF supports non-profit organizations providing free, civil legal representation to the indigent, law-related education to the public and administration of justice projects. Since 1989, the LBF has distributed nearly \$78 million to hundreds of Louisiana non-profit organizations. We serve as the fiscal administrator for Louisiana’s Child in Need of Care Program which provides free legal representation to children in foster care. We also administer the Louisiana Supreme Court’s Interest on Lawyers’ Trust Accounts Program.

**Brackett:** The LBF strives to provide consistent funding for civil legal aid. Why is this the LBF’s responsibility?

**Barnett:** The LBF’s mission is to “Fund Civil Legal Aid and Promote Access to Justice.” We have a concomitant responsibility to provide consistent funding to fulfill our mission. Much of our mission is carried out through our grantees. They desperately need consistent funding; without it, it is difficult for grantees to focus on providing civil legal aid and



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promoting access to justice. No entity can operate without reliable funding.

**Brackett:** So, you’re in an elevator with a Louisiana lawyer who isn’t an LBF Fellow. What do you say to that lawyer in a few floors to convince him/her of the need to support the LBF?

**Barnett:** I would recount how I became a Fellow, realizing that my time, efforts and contributions would have a greater impact as a Fellow. The LBF provides a platform to more easily provide legal assistance to the indigent than one can alone. We all have a duty to provide pro bono services in some way. Even if this duty is not always keenly felt, we recognize the responsibility.

I would mention the cost effectiveness of LBF donations. For every dollar invested in Louisiana’s civil legal aid providers, the state receives \$9.13 in immediate and long-term financial benefits, according to the LBF’s 2018 Economic Impact and Social Return on Investment study.

Lastly, I would discuss the fellowship enjoyed when meeting members across the state. We meet with a single-mindedness of purpose, helping the vulnerable of our state, not as adversaries, litigants, legislators or judges. LBF volunteers work together.

**Brackett:** When you look back on your term as president of the LBF, what’s the one thing that you hope stands out as the greatest achievement?

**Barnett:** After Katrina, I helped organize and staff legal help desks in the Alexandria FEMA shelters. I was struck by how difficult it was to get people in contact with available resources. Technology has advanced light years since 2005. It’s time for the civil legal aid community to take advantage of the digital revolution. I hope in this next year the LBF can successfully bring about the use of innovative technologies and digital initiatives to improve the statewide delivery of civil legal aid services.