



One on One with Shayna L. Sonnier, 83rd LSBA President:

On Career, Family and Continuing the LSBA's Mission

Interviewed by Valerie T. Schexnayder

Shayna L. Sonnier is an attorney in the Lake Charles firm of Veron Bice, LLC. She received a bachelor's degree in 2000 from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette and her law degree in 2003 from Dedman School of Law, Southern Methodist University. She was admitted to practice in Texas in 2003 and in Louisiana in 2005.

Sonnier served as 2022-23 president-elect and 2018-20 treasurer for the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA). She also served as the Fourth District representative on the LSBA's Board of Governors. She served as chair, immediate past chair, chair-elect, secretary and District 4 representative on the LSBA's Young Lawyers Division (YLD) Council. She also co-chaired the YLD's Wills for Heroes Committee.

She currently serves on the boards for the Louisiana Bar Foundation and the Louisiana Center for Law and Civic Education.

Sonnier has served as secretary, treasurer, president-elect, president and past president



of the Southwest Louisiana Bar Association (SWLBA) and is a past president of the SWLBA's Young Lawyers Section.

In her community, she is a member of St. Luke Simpson United Methodist Church, where she serves as secretary on the Church Council.

(Left and inset) Shayna L. Sonnier, 83rd Louisiana State Bar Association President. Photos by Chris Brennan Photo.



Shayna L. Sonnier and Stephen I. Dwyer at the ABA conference in New Orleans during the reception hosted at the Supreme Court.



Alainna R. Mire, 2020-21 LSBA President; Franchesca L. Hamilton-Acker, Acadiana Legal Service Corp; Shayna L. Sonnier, 2023-24 LSBA President; Dona Kay Renegar, 2017-18 LSBA President; and Tricia R. Pierre, LSBA Director of Member Outreach and Diversity, at the LBF Gala.

Schexnayder: First, I want to congratulate you on being sworn in as the sixth female president of the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA).

Sonnier: Thank you. I'm very excited and I look forward to working with you as Secretary this year as well. This may be a historic moment. I think this is the first time that a female secretary is interviewing the female president. I think we're both going to have a good time.

Schexnayder: I know that you've spent your entire legal career in Lake Charles. Are you originally from Lake Charles?

Sonnier: I grew up about 30 minutes north of Lake Charles in Ragley, Louisiana, which was a farming community. It's grown a lot since I left it — I won't say how many years ago — but Lake Charles was where I went when I needed to go to town. If you had to go or do anything, we came to Lake Charles. So, I am from around this area, but I didn't grow up in Lake Charles, so to speak. But I definitely wanted to return here for family and, to me, it's just where I felt at home.

Schexnayder: Where did you go to college?

Sonnier: I went to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL). Actually,

it was still called the University of Southwestern Louisiana when I began college. I was in the first graduating class of ULL in May 2000. It changed its name in January 2000. So, the majority of my college gear has a different college name than my diploma. After that, I went to Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, for law school. I went straight to law school after college.

Schexnayder: After attending and graduating law school in Texas and learning "common law," was it difficult to take the Louisiana Bar exam and practice here?

Sonnier: I took the Texas Bar exam immediately upon graduation in Texas. When I came back here to Louisiana, I took the Louisiana Bar exam. At the time — this was before laptops were commonly used — the way the bar exams were administered was very different. That struck me off guard. It wasn't so much that the rules were different, but it was that things were called something different. It took me a hot minute to adjust to that.

Schexnayder: What led you to a career in law?

Sonnier: I grew up on a farm in Ragley that my grandfather purchased back in the 1940s. He ended up putting it into a corporation and adding his dad and his

brother. My grandfather was the last of the three to pass away. When he passed away, some other family members wanted to exclude my grandmother and tried to take the whole corporation over and kick her out of her house. It was a very contentious thing. It went on for about 10 years. He passed away about three days after I turned 5 and I don't think they settled everything until I was 15. I spent a lot of my youth going into lawyers' offices and to CPA firms and hearing about all of it. It was a very emotional thing because they had been very close to their family when that happened. I just remember thinking, I don't ever want anyone to take advantage of my family like that again. And that's what made me get into law.

Schexnayder: That early experience left such a deep impression upon you that you entered the practice of law to help others so they wouldn't go through the same trauma that you went through.

Sonnier: Yes, that's it. It's sad. No one ever wants to need a lawyer, just like they don't ever want to need a doctor. But we all do at some point in our lives. Usually, it's not a pleasant experience when you need it because you need help. I wanted to be able to help people and, at the same time, be in a position to help my family should anything like that ever happen again.



Schexnayder: How would you describe your current area of practice?

Sonnier: I do a lot of estate planning and succession work. I also do some complex litigation, and oil and gas. It's a blend. I've done family law in the past, but I'm transitioning out of it to focus more on the other areas.

Schexnayder: That's wonderful. So, now you could help people like your grandmother.

Sonnier: Yes, I get a lot of satisfaction from the estate planning and succession work, especially for elderly people. They don't realize that they've been married for 50 years and just assume the spouse gets everything and they don't. They haven't done estate planning and then they're faced with shock and fear, with a lot of family dynamics involved. Because of what I've seen my family go through, I try to be very upfront with clients and offer my advice, "Look, I know y'all are really tight right now, but let's make sure we keep things on task and on target because, if you don't, you'd be amazed at what can tear families apart." When I meet with people doing estate planning, the goal is to make it as seamless and easy as possible on their children or their legatees when they're gone so there isn't a chance for all the animosity to build up.

Schexnayder: What do you enjoy the most about practicing law?

Sonnier: I enjoy being in a position to help people. I really, really do. I love meeting people. I'm very much a "people person." I've been very fortunate because my closest friends are other lawyers. I've met such a wonderful group of people in this profession that I can't imagine not having them in my life now. It's just been a well-rounded source of blessings.

Schexnayder: What advice would you give to a young lawyer?

Sonnier: I have so much to say that we may hit a two-hour answer to that question. I would say these are the top things. One, always be prepared. Do your research. Do your due diligence. Make sure that your clients can verify what they're telling you because sometimes they conveniently forget to tell you things that don't necessarily put them in the best light, which is a very natural thing. So, be prepared. Next, always be professional. Always treat people the way that you would want to be treated. You don't want to come out of the gate with an "off with their heads" mentality or just automatically go on the battlefield because that's not necessarily the way to get you where you need to be. Always maintain your professionalism because, in the communities where you work, you're going to work with those people and you're going to interact with them. It doesn't help your client to just burn bridges and be rude and difficult for the sake of being rude and difficult. I'm not saying there won't be times when you need to buck up and stand your ground, but you need to remember that it's not about you. You know you can do this job, you can do it well, and you can advocate for your client without being rude, abrasive and unprofessional. We have to get rid of the reason that people tell lawyer jokes. We just can't be that way.

Schexnayder: I know you have extensive involvement in local bar activities. What are some of your favorite programs in your local bar?

Sonnier: My local bar is the Southwest Louisiana Bar Association. One of my favorite programs is our Holiday Helping Hands Program, which is a young lawyers' program here. The legal community donates either money or gifts to

the children. We reach out to all of the schools, the schools identify the children who they think could benefit from the program, and the children fill out wish lists. Attorneys or members of legal communities directly sponsor those kids, get their wish lists, and buy the gifts for them. Or they give money and we have designated shoppers that use those wish lists to buy gifts. The presents are delivered to the schools via the counselors. The gifts are not wrapped so the parents can choose how the gifts are given. I'm not as big of a player in that program anymore, obviously, as I am no longer a young lawyer. Some of my fondest memories, though, are of delivering gifts to the schools. You are rolling bikes in and the counselors are tearing up, telling you that these kids would have gotten nothing if our organization had not done this. The program has grown so much since I was a part of it. The young lawyers really elevated it to the forefront and have won awards for it. My other favorite thing is our Bench Bar Program. I know other local bar associations do Bench Bar Programs and I hope they have as great an experience as we do but that is a big part of our local bar. We have a great turnout. We usually have a panel of the 3rd Circuit judges and a panel of our local judges. It's a great place to network and remind everybody that we're on the same team, even if we're across the table from each other.

Schexnayder: Those are two awesome programs. For the children, I'm sure that the need is great, especially after the devastating storms in Lake Charles in the last few years.

Sonnier: The young lawyers and our legal community really stepped up because of COVID and then the hurricanes. 2020 was just a very difficult year. And yet, I think they were able to help all of the kids sent to them. They did a really good job.

Schexnayder: You have also served in many roles in the LSBA. Have the prior roles and positions you served in prepared you to become LSBA president?

Sonnier: Being treasurer, obviously, and serving on the Board of Governors



Lawrence J. Centola III and Shayna L. Sonnier at the LSBA Annual Meeting and Summer School in 2013.



Carrie LeBlanc Jones, Adam P. Johnson, Graham H. Ryan and Shayna L. Sonnier at the LSBA Annual Meeting and Summer School in 2022.

both give you different perspectives. Being treasurer, I think, was very helpful because you get to see the money. You get to keep track of the budget, you know how much it costs to help our members. You know the programming that we spend the most on or programming that needs more money. I've gotten to know the staff very well, too, which I think will be a huge help to me as president. We have such an incredible staff and they do so much. The bar staff goes above and beyond all of the time and works harder than anyone probably gives them credit for. I hope to be appropriately appreciative and grateful for that because I've seen it all these years and I'm going to see it even more in the next year. I just can't say enough nice things about them. Through my time with the bar, I've met so many people. That's how you and I met originally, by serving together on the Board of Governors. The relationships that we have already formed are going to make you and I so much more effective in working together. I've previously served with Larry Centola, too. He and I were young lawyer chairs back-to-back and it makes for such a nice group because of these past working relationships within the bar. It will make us more efficient and more effective because we already know we work well together and we're going to get to do it at a higher level.

Schexnayder: I agree with you wholeheartedly that the employees and staff members of the LSBA are absolutely phenomenal.

Sonnier: They're experts in their areas. They are helpful. They're phenomenal and are truly an asset to our members.

Schexnayder: Absolutely. You mentioned before that you were chair of the Young Lawyers Section. Tell us a little bit about your experience as chair.

Sonnier: I enjoyed it and had so much fun as chair. Here's my history of how I got involved with the Young Lawyers Section. I was president of my local Young Lawyers Section at the Southwest Louisiana Bar. Joel Lutz was our district rep on the LSBA Young Lawyers Council. Joel's wife's family was from Pennsylvania. They ended up moving to Pennsylvania to be closer to her family and for their children. Joel recommended me to be nominated to replace him for his term. That's how I ended up originally on the LSBA Young Lawyers Section Council. I served with Valerie Briggs Bargas and Karleen Green, who was actually the one who appointed me. My first full year of service was under Valerie, and then I ran for secretary and moved up in the leadership roles. Typically, the Young Lawyers Section secretary moves up as chair-elect

and then as chair. When I was Young Lawyers Section chair, it was very busy. I know it's not going to be anything compared to what being LSBA president will be like, but it was very busy. I learned that, no matter how involved you are, you still don't know everything. I'm going into this knowing that I don't know everything. I'm going to have to constantly be learning and staying on top of stuff. I can't say enough nice things about our Young Lawyers Division, which changed from "Section" a few years ago and is a "Division" now. They work so hard, and they do a really good job and are always trying to improve and grow. I'm looking forward to working with Senae Hall (incoming Young Lawyers Division chair) in that aspect. Being a former YLD chair, we'll be able to boost each other up.

Schexnayder: What are your goals for the upcoming year?

Sonnier: I don't have any big, grandiose goals. But I do plan to continue the overall goals of the Bar Association. The Bar Association does so much for its members. Our whole entire focus is on our members. I know that you can't please everybody, but, really, that's our goal, to make sure that everyone is receiving as much benefit from the bar as they possibly can. My goal is to continue and improve on that, anywhere that



2016 SWLBA Officers: Shane Hinch, Hinch & Associates, PLC; Rebecca J. Hunter, The Johnson Law Firm; Shayna L. Sonnier; Todd S. Clemons, Todd Clemons & Associates; and Jay Bice, Veron Bice LLC.



Shayna L. Sonnier learning that she is the nominee to become the LSBA president-elect.

we can find improvements to be made and to make member awareness better. I know that's the goal of every single president who has come before me. But this office is so much bigger than the one person holding it for a year. The goal is always to build on and continue to improve what was done before. So, to the groundwork and framework that Steve (Dwyer) laid this year, I will build on and add to and help keep moving the ball forward and moving it higher. Those who come after me will continue to do the same thing. Access to justice is always going to be a focus. Our membership is always going to be my number one focus. Just saying "whatever else comes along," honestly, I'm a little hesitant given the last several years of uncertainty. I don't want to make any huge plans because I don't want to jinx myself, but I know that my goals are just to provide as much service and benefit to our members as we possibly can, make things as easy on them as we can, and then to keep access to justice moving forward because that's everyone's goal... to help.

Schexnayder: What is the theme for this year's Annual Meeting and Summer School?

Sonnier: I don't have a theme, but the Summer School has a theme. It's "Variations on a Theme: Rhythms of the Law." The Summer School organizers do such

a great job. That group of people, Judge Fredericka Wicker, Bob Kutcher, Minor Pipes and all the committee members, have done such an incredible job. They're going to put on this great programming and I'm going to get the thanks for that. But the thanks belong to them. They create all these catchy titles for all the CLES. They put so much into it, and they do it all year long. I was meeting with them at the last Annual Meeting about this Annual Meeting. I was like, "oh my gosh, we're already starting on the next one and we haven't finished this one." They're always working, and they are the unsung heroes. I give all the props to them and to the staff for coming up with all of the design and the logos. It's truly a team effort.

Schexnayder: What are you looking forward to most in the upcoming year?

Sonnier: I'm really looking forward to meeting more people. I know that might sound a little cheesy, but I do love to meet people. I'm going to travel the state and attend all the different openings of court that I can make. I know there may be some conflicts at times because of the calendar but I'm going to do my best, meeting everyone and making that actual personal connection and interaction. And that's what I'm looking forward to the most, getting to work with other people and see where we can improve

and get the feedback. I'm all about constructive feedback and doing what we can with it.

Schexnayder: Earlier in the interview, you mentioned your grandparents. Tell us something about your other family members.

Sonnier: My family is amazing. I'm very close to them and they are an amazing support group for me. I'm very blessed. It's all about love and support. They are going to be at the installation supporting me because that is what they do. They were all there when I was sworn in as treasurer and, as an adult, you realize not everyone has that core surrounding of safety and security and support. I can't say enough nice things about my family. I just love them with all of my heart.

Schexnayder: That's wonderful to hear. What are your passions and your hobbies? What do you do in your spare time?

Sonnier: I don't feel like I have a lot of spare time. But I do love to travel and I love to read. I love to spend time with my family and friends. Also, I'm not above binge watching shows on a streaming service. Sometimes I just need the mental break of vegging on my couch. In my spare time, I like to be very laid back and relaxed when I can, considering my job can be stressful at times.



Shayna L. Sonnier, Robert A. Kutcher, Barry H. Grodsky, Alainna R. Mire, Stephen I. Dwyer, H. Minor Pipes III, Joseph L. (Larry) Shea, Jr. and S. Guy deLaup at the LSBA Annual Meeting and Summer School in 2022.

Schexnayder: Where's your favorite place that you've traveled?

Sonnier: Every time I go somewhere, I say, "This is my favorite place." I'm serious. I would definitely go back to some of the same places I've been to before. I know a lot of people don't want to do that necessarily. I'm down for whenever I can go overseas. I've been to Ireland, Paris, Italy, Germany and Austria. I love every single one of them and thought, while I was in this place, I could totally live here. I would do those trips all over again. I also love to go to places that have tons of history. I'm very fascinated with that. Basically, I just love going to new places and experiencing new things.

Schexnayder: What place is your bucket-list trip?

Sonnier: Santorini, Greece.

Schexnayder: That's on my bucket list, too! Are you planning a trip to Santorini?

Sonnier: Well, you think I would have been there already, right? But I haven't. So, that's a goal. I don't really know why either. I have no real basis for that other than it looks pretty and I want to go. Of

course, I would make a pit stop in Athens because of the history there . . . yes, I need to go visit it.

Schexnayder: You mentioned watching streaming services on the weekend and being a binge watcher. Tell us more about that.

Sonnier: Yes, I prefer to watch shows on the streaming channels so I don't have to wait forever to see how it turns out. I am someone who likes to know what is going to happen next. I also like background noise. A lot of times I'll turn on a streaming service for stuff I've already seen while I'm doing other stuff. Fun fact, "The Office" was the program I binged during COVID. It was my first COVID binge when the shutdown first happened. I had never watched it before. I went on a trip right before COVID and my friends were all quoting the program. I didn't understand anything, so I watched it and now I understand.

Schexnayder: During the COVID shutdown, many people learned a new skill or started a new hobby. Did you learn a new skill, start a new hobby, or

do anything different during COVID that you've maintained?

Sonnier: I read a lot. I guess you could say I had more time to enjoy my favorite hobby.

Schexnayder: That's the end of this interview. Thanks for your time and we hope you have an awesome year as LSBA President.

Valerie T. Schexnayder is a mediator and arbitrator with Schexnayder Mediation Services, LLC, in Baton Rouge. She is beginning a two-year term as secretary of the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA) and as editor-in-chief of the Louisiana Bar Journal. She has practiced for more than 30 years with a large firm, a small firm and an international corporation and served as a LSBA Distinguished Access to Justice Pro Bono Fellow. She received a BBA degree in 1986 from Loyola University and her JD degree, cum laude, in 1989 from Tulane University Law School. (valschex@gmail.com; Ste. G, 17732 Highland Road, Baton Rouge, LA 70810)



LIGHTNING ROUND

The rapid-fire, lightning round: Quick - which do you prefer?

Schexnayder: Client meetings: Zoom or in-person?

Sonnier: In person. I just enjoy the in-person more, but I will do Zoom. Zoom has become much more of a prominent feature in what we do and that has given me some reassurance about the traveling that's going to be involved next year. But, being able to communicate face-to-face is necessary. If a client really needs to talk to me and look me in the face, I could do Zoom and still be there for them, but my first choice will always be in-person.

Schexnayder: Court filings: In-person or e-file?

Sonnier: We still do a lot of in-person filing here in the 14th JDC. I'm going to say I think e-filing is massively important because it's much more convenient for many people. I like to visit with everybody so I don't mind in-person as much.

Schexnayder: Court status conferences: In-person or Zoom?

Sonnier: Depends. I would say in-person, but I do like the option of doing Zoom if it's out of town, especially if you know it's going to be a 10-minute or 15-minute session just to get a trial date. Our family court judges here have turned to doing a lot of their pretrial conferences via Zoom. And that has made it, in my opinion, much more time-efficient because you're not leaving your office for an hour for something that should take 15 minutes. So, final answer, it's a mix. I'm equal on both.

Schexnayder: Laptop or desktop?

Sonnier: Both. I have a desktop for the office, but then I have my surface for travel.

Schexnayder: Coffee or tea?

Sonnier: Coffee. But I am drinking tea now, too. I used to not like it. I don't drink iced. But I like the bagged teas. I'm trying to warm up to that but definitely coffee.

Schexnayder: Coke or Pepsi?

Sonnier: Coke. All day over Pepsi.

Schexnayder: Hamburger or hotdog?

Sonnier: Hamburger.

Schexnayder: Potato chips or tortilla chips?

Sonnier: I'm going to go with tortilla chips because that usually means there's queso or some kind of guacamole. I'm all about that life.

Schexnayder: Magazines or books?

Sonnier: Books.

Schexnayder: HGTV or the History Channel?

Sonnier: Generally, History Channel, but I do watch HGTV, too. It depends on my mood.

Schexnayder: In movies: Comedies or drama?

Sonnier: I'm going to say comedies. I don't like movies that make you cry. I will not go to a movie if there's an animal that's the center of the movie.

Schexnayder: Paper or plastic?

Sonnier: Paper.

Schexnayder: Beach or mountains?

Sonnier: Beach. But, to be fair, I've never really experienced the mountains.

Schexnayder: Maybe you should put that on your bucket list.

Sonnier: I should! But the beach all way.