

LIFE IN THE LAW

Kathie Vieser Bianco*
(From: *Rivier Today*, Spring 2010)

Rivier alumna and trustee Linda Johnson '81 is a prominent attorney who has truly worked her way to the top.



(PHOTO BY JODIE ANDRUSKEVICH)

Most of us have some idea of what we want to do for a career by the time we graduate from high school—and 30 years later, most of us are doing something completely different. But **Linda Dakoulas Letheren Johnson** can look back on a part-time job in high school at a law firm as the first step in a career path that has led her to the top of a profession for which she has enormous passion. And her success in that career has given her the opportunity to create a life in which people—her family, her colleagues, her clients, and the community—are her first priorities.

Encouragement to continue her education

A partner in the law firm McLane, Graf, Raulerson & Middleton, Johnson is currently chair of the firm's Employment Law Practice Group and its Education Law Group, a long way from the support positions she held early on. One of those positions, as a legal secretary for the late attorney Augustine "Gus" McDonough, led her to an estate planning class at Rivier, which then led to additional classes in the paralegal studies program—all with the encouragement and financial support of her boss.

"To my knowledge, through his years of practicing, Gus paid for seven or eight other employees to attend college classes," says Johnson. She was able to graduate from the Rivier program in four years through a combination of evening and day classes. "Long before flexible work arrangements became the workplace vogue, Gus allowed me to flex my hours so I could take classes needed for my major, and make up any lost work time when I could, such as weekends or longer work days." She graduated in 1981 as valedictorian of her class.

By that time, Johnson knew she would attend law school, encouraged by both her boss and by the late Rivier instructor Margaret Flynn (in whose honor Johnson later established a scholarship). She graduated from the Boston University School of Law in 1984, after which she taught classes in advanced civil litigation at Rivier, and in 1988 was elected treasurer of the New Hampshire Bar Association, its first-ever female officer.

Finding her fit in the field

In 1992, Johnson joined the McLane firm, where some early work involved education clients. "I found that I especially liked doing school work," she says. "It's very nice to work for clients who do the right things for the right reasons." Her practice areas extended to employment law in addition to education law, and she began to earn honors from her peers in areas such as civil rights, children's advocacy and gender equity.

Her work at McLane includes assisting clients in keeping current with workplace regulation laws and with helping leaders and employees in both corporate and educational settings distinguish boundaries and standards of behavior in a society where rules change quickly and can be different within work and school settings than they are outside. "Our efforts are not just responsive, in the sense of defending litigated matters," she says, "they are also geared to be very proactive in helping businesses to stay informed and develop practical strategies to understand and implement necessary changes." She is an in-demand speaker on these subjects, representing her firm before students, employers and professional associations throughout New Hampshire and nationwide.

Within her own firm, Johnson has participated in efforts to create flexible work hours, better work-life balance and expanded family leave benefits. She was also one of the first partners at McLane to be granted a reduced hour, flexible work schedule. Flexible work scheduling is a cause to which she is particularly dedicated because of her own life experiences, not only in her early days balancing work

and school but later, when she suffered the loss of her first husband and became the single mother of a toddler and a newborn. “Fortunately for me, a strong family and friend support network helped me through some rough times,” she says.

People, perspective and priorities

Johnson has served on Rivier’s board of trustees for several years, both earlier in her career and now, since 2006. “I see my role as assisting the board to help the College continue the same good programs, school culture and governance that has been its strength through the years,” she says. “The board and administration are constantly forward thinking about where the school is now, and where it should be going in the near- and longer-term future.” Having been involved with Rivier in several capacities, she has had the opportunity to see the institution’s growth from both the inside and outside. “What was good about the College has stayed the same, and things that have changed have been positive changes to keep pace with the needs of students and demands of society.”

In addition to her service to Rivier, Johnson is an active volunteer in the community, having worked with such organizations as Manchester 2000, Junior Achievement, and Makin’ It Happen. She currently serves as a “Big Sister” to a 9-year-old girl named Jacquelyn, whom she describes as a “delightful young lady.”

Even with a fulfilling career and community activism, Johnson’s first priority is her family. Her husband, Tony Johnson, is football coach and athletic director at Bishop Guertin High School in Nashua: “One of my favorite pastimes is to be sitting in the stands at Stellos Stadium,” she says. Her son, Doug Letheren, is a graduate of the Juilliard School and a professional dancer with the Batsheva dance company in Israel; daughter Katie Letheren is a senior at New York University. Because she still lives in her hometown of Manchester, Johnson is fortunate enough to enjoy time with her sisters, other extended family members and old friends. She enjoys skiing and travel, and hopes to incorporate more world travel into her life over the coming years.

“I am living my dream,” says Johnson, and she considers her time attending Rivier as integral to both her professional and personal development. “I didn’t just attend classes there,” she says. “The mission and culture of Rivier of being dedicated to ‘transforming hearts and minds to serve the world’ has become a part of who I am. I hope I am living that mission in my own life.” ■

* **KATHI VIESER BIANCO** is a freelance writer from Long Island, New York, specializing in higher education and consumer marketing. The winner of multiple awards for both nonfiction and fiction writing, she holds a bachelor's degree from Northwestern University and master's degrees from New York Institute of Technology and the City University of New York-Queens College.