

VALLEY LAWYER

SEPTEMBER 2016 • \$4

A Publication of the San Fernando Valley Bar Association


**Meet SFVBA's
New President,
Kira Masteller**

**The Afterlife
of Debts**

Earn MCLE Credit





A photograph of a forest path. The path is made of dirt and is surrounded by pine trees and a yucca plant. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day. The path leads into the distance, and the trees are lush and green.

By Michael D. White

Taking a Different Path: Meet SFVBA's New President, Kira Masteller

The lessons learned in the outdoors helped Kira Masteller trod the path less traveled from paralegal to president of the SFVBA. Masteller will begin her new adventure as the elected leader of the 2,000-member Bar Association following the installation of the 2016-2017 Board of Trustees on Thursday evening, September 22 at the Skirball Center.

TO SAY THAT KIRA MASTELLER, THE SFVBA'S incoming president, has taken a distinctly unconventional path to get where she is today would be an exercise in understatement.

Her English father and French mother, who fled France with her family at the beginning of World War II, married in Toronto in 1956; they came west, like so many others, for the opportunities and the warm weather.

"We settled in Southern California, except for four years in San Francisco," Masteller recalls. "My dad sold Smith Corona typewriters and the entire state was his region."

After a spell in Redondo Beach, the family settled in the San Fernando Valley, where Masteller attended Reseda High School and Pierce College. Throughout her childhood, she was encouraged to read every book she got her hands on and make the most of Southern California's iconic weather.

"My parents both came from a very foggy, wet, cold climate and when they came to California, they were constantly outside," says Masteller. "We were near the beach in the South Bay and we took full advantage of it. If I was reading a book, my mom told me to read it outside; it's the way I was raised."

With a father who was an avid athlete, Masteller and her brother constantly found themselves snow skiing, surfing, bike riding, skateboarding, camping, fishing, boating and waterskiing, to name just a few of the activities they participated in. "We were constantly outdoors and the love of it is still there," she says.

At age 18, she was attending Pierce and took a private course to earn her certification as a paralegal. Married two years later, she quickly had two children and in her early 30s found herself a single mom with a desire to pursue her dream of attending law school—a dream encouraged years earlier by the influence of two high school teachers who kindled an interest in the backstory of how the U.S. Constitution was crafted and what she calls "working for the community good."

Rather than trudging along the well-worn, seamless track from four-year college to law school, Masteller pursued her dream by opting out of obtaining a college-level undergraduate degree and, instead, took exams on the natural sciences, mathematics, English and social sciences over the period of a year.

It was "a complicated process" that earned her the equivalent of a bachelor's degree and the qualifications to apply to law school with the proviso that she score over 150 on the LSAT. She did and soon thereafter, was accepted to the San Fernando Valley College of Law. She attended law school at night while continuing her paralegal work during the day. Masteller graduated fourth in her class and passed the bar on her first try.



"I worked with a local attorney in Woodland Hills as a paralegal for eight years and then at the same office as a lawyer for four years," says Masteller. Today, she specializes in estate planning, trust administration, gift and tax planning, and probate as a shareholder at the law firm of Lewitt Hackman in Encino.

"When I first started as a paralegal, my very first job was in family law and I learned a lot about the psychology of working with individuals and family issues and received a lot of useful training on how to deal with the kinds of



“I come from divorced parents, so I found myself able to identify issues as they arose,” she says. “Not only do I have to recognize the practical accounting and legal issues, but the psychology behind the decisions that are being made and frame the entire picture not only in a personal perspective, but in a legal frame that will work. There are a lot of different things that we explore from the personal side and the legal side. I like that a lot more than being an attorney for a huge company that has no face, no personality.”

When you take the “big picture” approach, “it’s almost the function of a family to be dysfunctional,” she says, chuckling. “But, even though there are situations that I don’t find personally gratifying or make me feel uncomfortable, I feel like I’m being helpful and that adds personal value to what I’m doing. I like working with families and I enjoy working with people.”

A member of the SFVBA, both as a paralegal and as an attorney since 1997, Masteller, as the organization’s new president, wants to “give the members a voice in the direction the bar takes by implementing open forums and promoting communication with its leadership to promote ideas on how they can play a bigger part in its functions and activities.”

That approach, says Masteller, “can help us build a bar...one that they want,” a worthwhile, but challenging goal to achieve, she says, because “there’s only so much a voluntary bar can offer and it’s not something that stays the same. Over the last decade, we’ve really seen a change in what members do to research or reach out to other attorneys and, nowadays, much of that communication is electronic, not face-to-face like it used to be. So it’s a challenge to stay relevant, successful and value-added for every one of its members in today’s environment.”

How important is that face-to-face communication?

“There’s a lot of value to looking at someone in the eye and having the opportunity to communicate in ways other than words,” she says. “Energy...body language...maybe you get to display a sense of humor...maybe you get to share your empathy...your understanding and that you’re a good listener. I don’t think that individuals get that opportunity when they’re dealing only electronically and not face-to-face.”

One of the primary tools to foster that face-to-face approach is the Valley Bar Network (VBN), a relatively new, and highly regarded, SFVBA program aimed at giving Bar members the opportunity to “mix and mingle” and “develop a deeper level of communication and offer the chance to interact on a more personal level,” Masteller says. “It’s been very successful and genuinely helps our members share their experiences and refer business.”



issues that arise in family-related situations,” she says. “I wasn’t particularly aimed in that direction at the time, but when I moved on, I found that the place I’m at now was the best place to apply all that I’d learned: how people think about the money they earn and how that can impact their relations with family members.”

Along the way, Masteller unearthed what she calls “a natural aptitude” that gave her the wherewithal to understand the fundamental basic dynamics that make up virtually every family.



as a member of the Board of the California Prison Industry Authority. She also makes the time to volunteer at a legal clinic for a battered women's shelter in Santa Monica.

Looking back, she recalls, "Neither of my parents did what they really wanted to do in terms of career. Both my brother and I learned a lot from that and we decided that we should 'go for it,'" noting that, now into her 50s, with past experience as a marathoner and triathlete, she currently augments her chosen career with an Olympian roster of seasonal activities that includes water skiing, snow skiing, snowboarding, mountain biking and hiking.

Last year she climbed Mt. Whitney, with future plans to walk the backside of the mountain along the John Muir Trail.

Summing up her life experience, says Masteller, "all you really need to accomplish a goal is to show up with a good pair of socks, a good pair of shoes, and the desire to get the job done."

Perfection of results isn't the issue, "but if you show up and have the right equipment, you can do whatever you set out to do," says Masteller. "I've carried that philosophy through my career and taught it to my children. It's proved to be a really simple and tried and true philosophy for me." 🪵

Kira Masteller and the SFVBA's new officers and trustees will be sworn in at the Bar Association's Installation Gala on Thursday evening, September 22 at the Skirball Center. To purchase tickets and sponsorships, contact events@sfvba.org or (818) 227-0490, ext. 105.



Another is Women in Network (WIN), which Masteller founded in 2008 to help women attorneys meld "family time" with their professional lives. "We started to meet for lunch with seven women who were encouraged to each bring two friends," she says. "We've grown to 25 women meeting to discuss successes, failures, challenges, professional ethics, managing employees, marketing, and other issues. It's been very effective and very well received."

Masteller took her philosophy of community service to another level when, in 2010, then Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger named her to serve a four year term



Michael D. White is editor of *Valley Lawyer* magazine. He is the author of four published books and has worked in business journalism for more than 35 years. Before joining the staff of the SFVBA, he worked as Web Content Editor for the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority. He can be reached at michael@sfvba.org.