

Christina Brown is This Year's Gary L. McPherson Outstanding Young Lawyer of the Year

BY BRENDAN BAKER



With her dedication to helping her clients and to highlighting the human aspects of one of our most contentious current political issues, Christina is the epitome of a hardworking, socially engaged Colorado attorney.

Christina Brown is a Maryland native, but years of working on political campaigns led her all around the country. While supporting the 2008 Hillary Clinton campaign in Iowa, Christina took a weekend off to visit Colorado for the first time. As she traveled down I-76, a terrible thunderstorm kicked up, blowing giant tumbleweeds across the road. Driving into this chaos, Christina was struck with a sudden resolve: “I am going to live here!” And so she did.

Moving initially to Boulder, Christina worked for Jared Polis as an immigration constituent advocate, focusing particularly on education. She saw the roadblocks people ran into during the immigration process and noticed a lack of oversight to the immigration agencies. Her desire to help fix a broken system convinced her to go to law school. Unlike many future attorneys, Christina saw a specific legal need that she wanted to address, went to law school to focus on that, and actually managed to keep that focus throughout law school and beyond.

Getting to Work

After graduating from the University of Denver Sturm College of Law in 2013, Christina began working in the removal defense area of immigration law. She soon leapt on an opportunity to volunteer helping women and children held in immigration camps at the border in Artesia, New Mexico. She had intended to stay there just a short time, but she was hired by the American Immigration Council as the lead attorney on the project after three months. “It’s like standing

on a beach and watching a bunch of people drowning, and then being like, ‘Well, I can save as many as I can in a week, and then I’m just going to leave.’ And I couldn’t. So I just stayed. I called my husband in Colorado and said ‘I can’t come back just yet.’”

She spent the next eight months managing hundreds of asylum cases and pro bono attorneys, first in New Mexico and then in South Texas. During this time, she was prominently featured in a *New York Times Magazine* article, in which she described the poor conditions and impossible choices faced by her immigrant clients and contacts. “I was overwhelmed and sad and angry. I think the anger is what kept me going.”¹

After that, she took some time off. “The talk about self-care is not just talk,” she says, although her interpretation of “taking time off” included continuing to do appellate immigration work from home back in Colorado.

She relaunched her private practice in 2016 with a focus on defensive asylum and has been doing that ever since. She just hired her first associate and has two offices, in Fort Morgan and Denver. Her firm handles everything except employment immigration law and primarily focuses on Mexican and Central American clients who have sought asylum since 2014. Her firm also does a lot of community and pro bono work.

Fighting the Good Fight

She has been chair of the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) Colorado Asylum

Committee for the last three years, helping address due process issues in immigration courts and giving guidance to AILA members. “Getting into immigration law, we didn’t really think that we needed to be constitutional scholars, but these days you do!” Christina points out. “We provide mentorship support for people who want to help asylum seekers but don’t necessarily have the background to do it.” Under Christina’s leadership, the asylum committee has started holding workshops to help asylum seekers on Denver’s expedited docket fill out their asylum applications.

In December, Christina traveled to Tijuana, where she volunteered with the nonprofit Al Otro Lado to help 15 asylum seekers present themselves to authorities at the border. This resulted in a 17-hour standoff with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), during which the group—eight attorneys, 10 non-attorney volunteers, and two members of Congress—slept on the ground near the border to demand that CBP process the claims of their clients, who were fleeing danger in Mexico. “That probably was one of the best things I’ve ever done as an attorney, and it was really impactful. Everyone was processed and allowed in,” Christina says. The group also convinced border authorities to process another six people who had initially been turned away.

Since then, Christina has been putting up the fight every day here in the Denver Immigration Court: “We have a lot of clients seeking asylum and lot of final asylum hearings. We’re constantly trying to push the boundaries of gender-based and gang-based asylum, and that’s been our focus right now. We’re developing a pretty healthy federal practice in the Tenth Circuit to try to push those boundaries.” Recently, Christina was granted nonprofit status to continue her work with gender-based asylum. Her program is now officially operating as the Colorado Asylum Center, which strives “to protect the rights of asylum seekers through zealous representation and advocacy.”

Christina also continues to work on the border; just this month she traveled to Juarez to run an asylum application clinic for asylum seekers stuck in Mexico under the Remain in Mexico program.

Setting the Record Straight

The one takeaway Christina wants to impart to attorneys and the public is this: “Seeking asylum is a legal process, and no matter how much the current administration wants to criminalize it, it’s entirely lawful. It exists in our own laws and international laws that we are members to, that we have signed on to. There’s a lot of misinformation out there, and it’s hard because asylum law is so complicated, and it’s hard to correct it.” Yet Christina says that it is worthwhile to keep informing the public about the realities of immigration, while continuing

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to support immigrants. “It’s lawful, and these asylum seekers need our compassion, and they need our help. People should imagine what they would do if their choice was to stay at home and die, or flee and take the risk of running into the Trump Administration at the U.S. border, right? No one is coming here thinking they’re going to be welcomed with open arms; the only reason someone comes into a climate like this is because the one that they are fleeing from is worse.”


She continues: “It feels like a relentless assault. And I’m not even the asylum seeker. How does it feel when you don’t even feel like

you have any power? I’m pretty hard-headed and stubborn and I have a lot of fight in me, and my clients do too, but they are new to this system, and standing up to the U.S. government is hard.”

How does Christina balance the demands of advocating for immigrants with the rest of her life? “I have a healthy meditation practice now that I have put in place since [working in] family detention that has helped a lot, and in the summers we go out and we hike—nature helps a lot, that’s kind of an extension of the meditation piece. I try to make a lot more time for social activities these days, like seeing friends and commiserating with fellow asylum attorneys who understand the pressure that everyone’s under. . . . We have things that we call ‘happy hours’—they’re not happy, but they are very helpful. And my dogs help a lot—I think dogs could generally save us as humans, and they save me every day. . . . And my husband [Scott Reynolds, an engineer] of course is really supportive as well and does everything he can to keep me sane.”

Bar Association Work

Reflecting on the role of bar associations, Christina mentions that she helped develop a partnership between the Santa Fe Dreamers Project and the Colorado LGBT Bar Association that pairs seasoned immigration attorneys with volunteer attorneys to help LGBT asylum seekers detained in New Mexico. “There’s a lot of room in the CBA and DBA to get more involved with these efforts if people want to help. I am more than happy if every single member wants to reach out to me, and I will give them resources to do that.”

With her dedication to helping her clients and to highlighting the human aspects of one of our most contentious current political issues, Christina is the epitome of a hardworking, socially engaged Colorado attorney. The CBA is proud to name her the recipient of the 2019 Gary L. McPherson Award for Outstanding Young Lawyer of the Year. 

NOTE

1. Hylton, “The Shame of America’s Family Detention Camps,” *New York Times Magazine* (Feb. 4, 2015).

GRAND FINALISTS

The CBA would like to take a moment to showcase the accomplishments of this year's exceptional finalists for the CBA YLD Gary L. McPherson Outstanding Young Lawyer of the Year Award. These finalists have made contributions to the law and beyond that belie their years in the legal profession—and they're just getting started! Please join us in recognizing these nine outstanding young lawyers.

Jeff Althaus



Jeff Althaus focuses his legal practice on estate planning, probate, and guardianship/conservatorship matters. Formerly, Jeff was a lawyer at the office of the Deputy Public Administrator in Adams County, where he handled guardianship and conservatorship matters and complex probate issues. He is a member of the CBA and the Adams/Broomfield Bar Association.

Jeff grew up in Iowa, where he attended the University of Iowa as a business/marketing major and obtained a certificate in entrepreneurship. He is a Hawkeye, through and through. After undergrad, he attended law school in Minnesota at Hamline Law, graduated, and moved out to Thornton. Don't worry Broncos fans; he still loves the Broncos and would never cheer for the Vikings.

Sonia Anderson

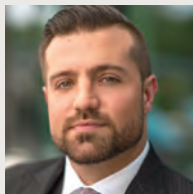


As an employment law attorney at Husch Blackwell, Sonia advises employers on compliance with various state and federal employment laws and litigates employment claims. The advisory part of her practice includes training employers on providing accommodations and leave under

the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Family and Medical Leave Act. She also drafts employment handbooks, restrictive covenants, and severance agreements. The litigation portion of her practice involves responding to allegations of workplace discrimination or workplace safety violations.

Sonia is vice president of committees for the Colorado Hispanic Bar Association and a mentor for Judge Arguello's Law School "Yes We Can" program. She is also a member of Judge Espinosa's Dream Team, which is dedicated to mentoring diverse middle school and high school kids.

Eric Faddis



Before becoming a founding partner of Varner Faddis Elite Legal, Eric was an attorney at Springer & Steinberg, where he handled criminal and civil matters. Before that, he served as deputy district attorney for Arapahoe County in both the felony and Special Victims units. Formerly, Eric worked for the Gang Unit in the Denver District Attorney's Office and was selected to serve as judicial law clerk to the Honorable Margie Enquist.

Eric has also done pro bono legal work for the Navajo Nation Supreme Court and volunteers as a judge for the Denver Urban Debate League and a presenter for the Hate Crimes Ed-

ucation Task Force. When not in the courtroom or office, Eric enjoys lifting weights, reading philosophy, meditating, and playing guitar.

Nicole Godfrey



Nicole Godfrey is a visiting assistant professor in the Civil Rights Clinic (CRC) at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law. From 2015 to 2018, Nicole served as the clinical teaching fellow in the CRC, earning an LLM in clinical legal education in May 2018. Nicole received her MA in international human rights from the University of Denver, her JD from Denver Law, and her BA in international relations from Boston University.

After law school, Nicole worked as a staff attorney for Prisoners' Legal Services of New York before returning to Colorado to cofound an organization dedicated to protecting the constitutional rights of prisoners confined in Colorado. Before joining the faculty at Denver Law, Nicole worked as an associate attorney at the Denver civil rights firm Killmer, Lane & Newman, LLP (KLN). Her practice at KLN focused on law enforcement misconduct, employment discrimination, and prisoners' rights.

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Chance Hill



Chance Hill is an employment attorney who works as an associate with Sherman & Howard LLC in Colorado

Springs. He is also the elected University of Colorado Regent representing Colorado's fifth congressional district. Before becoming an attorney, he served for three years as an officer and analyst with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and served six years in the Navy.

Chance graduated in 2001 from Dartmouth College, where he served as student body vice president. He also graduated with honors from Georgetown's School of Foreign Service in 2010 and from the University of Michigan Law School in 2015 as a selected member of the editorial board of the law review.

Ruchi Kapoor



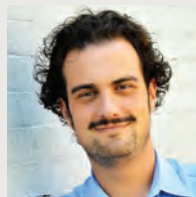
Ruchi Kapoor is the appellate director and legislative liaison for the Colorado Office of Respondent Par-

ents' Counsel. She graduated from the University of Colorado Law School in 2010 and subsequently clerked for the Denver Juvenile Court. After clerking, she spent three years in private practice devoted solely to appellate and postconviction work. She then stepped into her current role to create the first appellate program for respondent parents in child welfare cases in Colorado.

Ruchi is a past president of the South Asian Bar Association of Colorado and a 2017 graduate of the CBA's leadership training program

(COBALT). She currently serves on the DBA Board of Trustees and is co-chair of the Colorado Women's Bar Association's Diversity and Inclusion Committee. In her spare time, she works on turning her black thumb green and growing more than one plant at a time in her garden.

Ben Lebsack

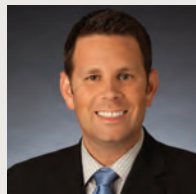


Ben Lebsack is a partner at Lowrey Parady, LLC, where he focuses on representing plaintiffs in employment law,

sexual assault, and legal malpractice cases. He also advises lawyers on their ethical duties to clients. He fancies himself the Nikola Jokić of the plaintiff-side legal community, emphasizing creativity and fun in his practice of law.

Ben serves on the CBA Ethics Committee, the Colorado Trial Lawyers Association board, and the National Employment Lawyers Association Ethics Committee, and is a past president of the Plaintiff Employment Lawyers Association. He also does a lot of pro bono work. Ben loves lucha libre (Mexican professional wrestling) and can often be found cheering the rudos at lucha libre events in town.

Richard Murray

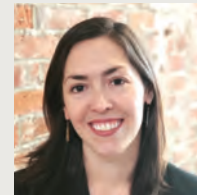


Richard Murray is a commercial litigator and shareholder at Polsinelli. Before joining Polsinelli, he represented

healthcare professionals in liability matters, and he is a former law clerk for Colorado Supreme Court Justice Nathan Coats.

Richard recently served as president of Colorado Bar Association CLE, and currently serves as chair of the University of Colorado Law School's Law Alumni Board and on the Colorado Access to Justice Commission. He is a 2012 COBALT graduate, and has served as first vice president and second vice president of the DBA and on the CBA Board of Governors.

Laura Wolf



Laura Wolf is a partner at Rathod Mohamedbhai LLC. Her practice includes advocating on behalf of in-

dividuals suffering civil rights abuses, including minors suffering from violation of their rights by school officials, persons whose liberties are lost at the hands of the police and other government officials, and employees facing discrimination in the workplace. Laura graduated from Harvard Law School in 2013 and served as a judicial clerk for the Honorable R. Brooke Jackson on the U.S. District Court for the District of Colorado.

In the legal community, Laura serves as vice chair of the Rocky Mountain Victim Law Center, a board member of the Lawyers' Civil Rights Coalition, and a member of the Colorado Women's Bar Association Public Policy Committee. Laura is also the outgoing chair of the CBA Civil Rights Section and a recent COBALT graduate.