



Mary Reding Smith, retired Brig. Gen. Scott Magers, and Eleanor Magers Vuono in December 2015.

Service on the Move

The Texas legal community embraces military spouse attorneys.

BY LIBBY JAMISON

In the summer of 2011, the Military Law Section of the State Bar of Texas hosted a young military spouse at its annual meeting in San Antonio. The attorney wanted to discuss the unique challenges faced by lawyers who are seeking to maintain a legal career while relocating with their service member spouses every two to three years on military orders. She spoke passionately about her belief in service, her love for the military, and the difficulties of repeatedly taking the bar exam and finding a job in a new jurisdiction every few years. She made a tremendous impression at the meeting and inspired one of the section members to introduce himself afterward. The member was a retired brigadier general in the Army's Judge Advocate General's Corps. His daughter, also a former JAG, was now married to an Army officer and dealing with the same challenges. Would the event's speaker mind connecting with his daughter so they could share their experiences?

With the exchange of business cards and phone numbers, a lasting friendship sprouted from those Texan roots. Mary Reding Smith, the founder of the Military Spouse J.D. Network, connected with Eleanor Magers Vuono, who now serves as president of MSJDN. The story of Smith and Vuono's meeting is one repeated time and again by military spouses who are convinced they are the only ones foolish enough to try balancing a legal career with the distinct demands of a military lifestyle. Since that first connection in San Antonio through the Military Law Section and recognition of a shared purpose to support their peers, Smith and Vuono have become leaders of an organization representing more than 1,200 military spouse attorneys around the world.

Texas claims an outsized presence among the 50 states for many good reasons, including Fort Hood, one of the largest military installations in the free world; a state-of-the-art military medical

facility in San Antonio; and numerous Air Force and Army training centers. Support for the military is a matter of great pride among Texans, and many veterans and their families choose to make Texas their permanent home after leaving the service. So it's no surprise that the Texas legal community also has a long tradition of engagement with the military through veterans' legal clinics and state and local bar associations with a focus on military issues.

This support was further demonstrated in 2012, when Texas became one of the first states to initiate a licensing policy for military spouse attorneys to help reduce the burden of repeated moves and bar examinations that served as a barrier to practice. Today, 16 jurisdictions have adopted formal rule changes to allow military spouse attorneys a license to practice without additional examination, while two other states have policies similar to Texas's. MSJDN continues its work across the country to educate the legal community on the barriers and to encourage rule changes and employment initiatives in support of military families. Efforts are underway in 15 additional jurisdictions to create an accommodation for military spouse attorneys seeking a license to practice while stationed in the state due to their service members' military assignment.

"Military life can feel overwhelming, especially when our peers in the legal profession don't always understand the challenges we face supporting our service members," Vuono said. "But we've found that once we explain the need for support, the legal community has embraced the call to action to lessen the burdens on military spouse attorneys."

That support is evident in Texas, where three military spouses have utilized the rule since 2012. While that number may seem insignificant, the impact of the rule on the lives of those three attorneys is immeasurable. Many military spouse attorneys find themselves unemployed due to last-minute orders, cross-country moves, or the 24/7 demands of their service members' military service—all forces beyond their control that make sitting for a second, third, or fourth bar exam impossible or impractical during an assignment. Experienced attorneys find themselves without the opportunity to practice or even provide pro bono services while in a new jurisdiction, not because of their qualifications, but because of the licensing process. Often the barriers to continued practice are so daunting that many choose to remain in a jurisdiction where they are licensed in order to maintain their career while the service member relocates alone to carry out the military assignment. A recent survey of military spouse attorneys indicates that more than 50 percent have lived remotely from their spouses at some point because of career considerations. These situations cause unnecessary stress for our military families already asked to serve in so many ways during deployments, trainings, and other military obligations. Common-sense licensing modifications like the Texas policy level the playing field and recognize the service of our military families in a meaningful way.

"The Lone Star State should be commended for its support of military spouse attorneys," Vuono said. "Accommodating the unique needs of military spouses in the legal profession comes at little cost but makes a significant difference for military families in Texas." **TBJ**



LIBBY JAMISON

is the communications director for the Military Spouse J.D. Network. She also manages her own virtual law practice and is of counsel to the Law Offices of Thomas Carter in Claremont, California. She resides in Virginia with her husband, a Navy helicopter pilot. For more information on MSJDN, go to msjdn.org.