

**Apr 26, 2022**

**The BBJ unveiled its 2022 Best of the Bar honorees, and Twala Grant Wallace is one.**

**ALEXIS BREWER**

How has Covid-19 affected your practice area? Volunteer Lawyers Birmingham was heavily impacted by Covid-19. The day that we left the office when quarantines were put in place, we were immediately on high alert. It was necessary for us to immediately convert our desks to remote. I had to convert all of our practice manuals to digital versions and create documents that were necessary for our “new normal.” We represent the low-income residents of Jefferson County, Alabama. These individuals and families were impacted in ways that most of us could not imagine. They faced loss of jobs, food insecurity, the threat of the loss of their housing and sadly cases of domestic violence during a pandemic. Our teams responsibility was and continues to be helping or providing free quality legal assistance to everyone who qualifies. We are busier than we have every been. Our staff is very small but we are blessed to have attorney volunteers from the city and some from other areas of the state step up during this time and assist our clients.

Why did you decide to be a lawyer? I was initially working on my doctorate in cancer biology. After a few years working as a research associate specializing in cell biology, I grew weary working in a lab alone. I am a people person, consequently, I decided that with my analytical and writing skills I would pursue a career in law. This afforded me the opportunity to work directly with people and to be the change that I wanted to see in the world.

What’s the hot topic in your practice area? Unfortunately the current hot topic in my practice area is eviction prevention. Covid-19 saw record unemployment during the quarantine period which resulted in persons not being able to pay their rent. The unfortunate result was delinquent rent and the threat of eviction.

Are there any new types of cases in your practice to arise out of Covid that you hadn’t seen before? There have not really been new types of cases but there have been expanded areas. Covid increased evictions to a level that we have never seen. It has forced us to explore and implement all available

defenses and engage in creative negotiations. We realize that the Covid-related evictions caused extreme income losses for those private landlords who rely on rental income. Our challenge was to fashion or negotiate a win-win situation. Now we are in a situation where the emergency funds have dried up and we have to seek out housing solutions for cases where there is no way to catch up on the rent. My dream/goal would be the passage of temporary legislation that would expunge evictions that occurred during the Covid quarantine from tenants' records. We have also noticed that there are income-related barriers to employment. There are numerous job vacancies with the growing industries in our county. The available employee pool, however, is small. There are a number of willing workers who would like to work but cannot due to misdemeanors and other non-violent felonies on their records. This has spurred our interest in developing a program wherein we can assist those persons with expungements. Those efforts involve finding funding to pay for the expungement application fee which is more than any of our clients will ever be able to afford. We would also train volunteers to assist those persons with the preparation and submission of those applications.

What's your most memorable case and why? During my time at Volunteer Lawyers Birmingham there are quite a few memorable cases because they all involve helping people who are in dire need. During Covid-19, aside from preventing families from being evicted, my most memorable cases involve helping grandparents who have lost a child adopt their grandchild. This keeps the child in a continuous family dynamic and helps to somewhat ease their loss. During my time in private practice my most memorable case involved representing a young man who was facing multiple life sentences. His previous counsel kept urging him to accept a plea. I knew that this young man was innocent and that the facts would prove his innocence. Working with a colleague we teamed up to provide him with the representation that he deserved. Today that young man is employed full time and a committed father to his three children. In short, we gave him his life back. These cases illustrate why I chose to practice law - helping people in need.

What's been the biggest change in the legal field during your career? I have been practicing almost 30 years. I have witnessed the biggest change that I have seen in my career through my work with Volunteer Lawyers Birmingham. The majority of our volunteers are from the major law firms in Birmingham and Jefferson County. These are corporate attorneys who take time out of their busy

schedules to help people who are income challenged with legal needs. Their commitment to this community was never more evident than during our lockdown period. These attorneys stepped up and volunteered. We even had attorneys who were former Birmingham residents and lived as far away as Huntsville volunteer to be of assistance. It solidified my belief in the good of this profession and my purpose which is to “Be the change that you want to see in the world.”

Who has been the biggest mentor in your legal career? I have been blessed with two extremely wonderful mentors in my career. The first was Attorney Cleophus Thomas. As a first-year law student I served as a summer intern at his Anniston law firm. During that time he challenged me with complicated cases and impressed upon me the importance of trusting my abilities. My legal client skills, research, writing and analytical skills were truly enhanced during my time with his firm. The second most impactful mentor in my career was the late Judge J. Richmond Pearson. Judge Pearson made sure that I knew the importance of thorough case preparation as well as the importance of communicating with your client. He stressed that confidence, professionalism and preparation were the keys to success in this profession.

How do you support diversity and inclusion at your firm? Volunteer Lawyers Birmingham is a very diverse work environment. We seek out the best and thankfully that has resulted in what I consider the most solid and caring team ever. We have representation from a variety of religions as well as racial diversity. This representation is important when dealing with a diverse population of clients. Our attorney volunteers also reinforce our commitment to diversity. We have a team that includes people from different backgrounds, socio-economic levels, etc. who volunteer to help people from the community at large who are income challenged.

What has been your greatest accomplishment so far in your legal career? My greatest accomplishment in my legal is the intersection of my career and my family. I was able to maintain a career that inspired our son to pursue a career in law. I would say that my second greatest accomplishment has been helping to keep Volunteer Lawyers Birmingham and our volunteers connected during this pandemic by expanding client access to our desks. We have been able to work to help prevent evictions (homelessness), aid victims of domestic violence, as well as assist in other pressing legal matters during the pandemic crisis. I know that you asked for my greatest accomplishment but I also have a third one that occurred earlier in my legal career. This particular case impacted me tremendously and it involved defending a young man against charges that would

have landed him in prison for life. When others gave up I, along with a colleague, defended him and gave him a new lease on life. We secured four not guilty verdicts. He is now a responsible father and hard-working young man. It is very fulfilling when your occupation can positively affect someone's life.

If you could make any change to improve metro Birmingham, what would it be? The development of more housing options for people who are struggling to keep their families housed. I would also like to see a concerted effort to aid people to obtain expungements. This effort would require a concerted effort and partnership between the cities and the corporations that call this county home. This would open up more employment options and aid employers in securing reliable personnel.

What law school did you attend? University of Alabama School of Law