

6-30-2021

An Uncommon Good

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/depaul-magazine>



Part of the [Civil Rights and Discrimination Commons](#), and the [Health Law and Policy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2021) "An Uncommon Good," *DePaul Magazine*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 412031 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/depaul-magazine/vol1/iss412031/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Alumni Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in DePaul Magazine by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.



An Uncommon Good

Law school alumna finds fulfillment in working to heal the world

By Marilyn Ferdinand

The light that guides the life and work of civil rights attorney **Karyn L. Bass Ehler (JD '05)** is doing the most good for the most people. Thus, it should come as no surprise that when an opportunity arose to leave her secure job at a national law firm—during a pandemic, no less—to go to work for the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), she jumped at the chance.

Bass Ehler has a full resume of work and activities that fit with her mission to make as great a positive impact on society as possible. In the summer of 2020, when she was more than a year into her job with Grant & Eisenhofer as senior counsel leading the firm's new civil rights practice, she learned that the IDPH was looking to hire someone as their general counsel.

"I am a strong believer that access to health care is a human right and a civil right. I saw very quickly that this was an opportunity to make an impact at a critical moment," she says. "Instead of waiting for the exact right time or place [to advance] my private practice career, the times were calling me. I felt compelled to answer the call."

A tradition of service

Answering the call to service is something Bass Ehler learned from her family, who she says supported social justice, an integral component of their Jewish faith. A practicing Jew, Bass Ehler says, “There’s a value in Judaism called *tikkun olam*—to repair the world. That value that it is our obligation to try our best to repair the world very much drives me.”

As a teenager, Bass Ehler thoroughly enjoyed attending Wheeling High School, which she says “was unique among many suburbs at the time for being so diverse.” As a white person, Bass Ehler was aware that her skin color imbued her with certain privileges. “Yet being Jewish in a space that was mostly not Jewish made me aware from an early age of being ‘othered’ and of other people who were ‘othered,’” she reflects.

Finding her path

Bass Ehler began her career journey earning an undergraduate degree in political science at Northwestern University in 2000 and going to work immediately as the communications director and press secretary for Jeff Clark, who was the Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate in Tennessee that year. “It was a very exciting opportunity,” says Bass Ehler, “but I also saw that to make a difference, I wanted more time than seven-second sound bites. To do some of the deep work that’s necessary, you really have to dig into the issues. Politics does not always allow for that.”

Law school seemed the inevitable goal. Bass Ehler worked as a paralegal for H. Candace Gorman, the principal of a Chicago-based human rights law firm, to see if civil rights law was a good fit for her. “I learned at her right hand about how one can use impact litigation to make the sweeping change that we sometimes need in the world,” she says.

Now set on her path, Bass Ehler began investigating law schools. DePaul stood out, she says, because “it really lived and breathed the social justice beliefs that aligned very much with my values. I felt that it was a place where one could really engage with some of the top thinkers in the country who were open to discussions in ways that I didn’t experience at some of the other schools I visited.”

A scholarship package eased her financial burden and allowed her to focus on her studies. A hard worker, Bass Ehler was able to carve out the time needed to serve as editor-in-chief of the DePaul Law Review. Upon graduation she served as a judicial law clerk to the **Hon. William J. Bauer (JD ’72, LLD ’93, LLD ’05)** in the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals and the Hon. Matthew F. Kennelly of the Northern District of Illinois.

“I am a strong believer that access to health care is a human right and a civil right. I saw very quickly that this was an opportunity to make an impact at a critical moment.”

Holding government accountable

Bass Ehler spent seven years as a partner with the Chicago law firm Hughes Socol Piers Resnick & Dym, where civil rights and constitutional law were a central part of her practice. Then in 2015, she got her first chance to work as an attorney in the public sector when she became civil rights bureau chief within the Office of the Illinois Attorney General. During her four years in that position, she oversaw the team that investigates and litigates civil rights cases that involve patterns and practices of discrimination that may violate state and federal law.

As with her move into the IDPH, Bass Ehler spent her first year in the Attorney General’s Office in the middle of a crisis—the video of the police shooting of Laquan McDonald was about to be made public 10 months into her new job. “Our team very quickly jumped into place and tried to figure out what our state could do in the wake of this injustice,” she says.

The team worked with then-Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan to craft a letter to the U.S. Department of Justice requesting an investigation into allegations of discriminatory policing practices within the Chicago Police Department. The result was the binding federal consent decree that provides the critical roadmap needed to hold the City of Chicago accountable for implementing police reforms.



“It’s not subject to the political winds of who’s holding office, and it’s not subject to budget constraints. It is a binding document that a federal judge is overseeing,” Bass Ehler says.

Safeguarding the public’s health

Bass Ehler’s tenure in the Illinois Attorney General’s Office left her feeling confident about the positive impact she could make working in the public sector. The opportunity to work for IDPH Director Ngozi Ezike, by now a familiar face to Illinoisans who are keenly following news about COVID-19, clinched the deal for her. “Her vision for the agency and her help in guiding the state through this pandemic is nothing short of remarkable,” Bass Ehler remarks.

As general counsel, Bass Ehler guides her colleagues on a wide range of issues that have legal implications, from regulatory questions and procurement contracts to litigation.

Of course, stepping into the middle of pandemic mitigation efforts is not for the faint of heart. Bass Ehler found herself dealing with the challenges posed by emergency mitigation rules

and regulations, and working to enforce those requirements with local law enforcement, local health departments and other state agencies and offices, such as the Illinois State Police and the Illinois Attorney General’s Office.

“Setting up different community testing sites across the state also touches on our work because that involves procurement contracts. We also have to work through some of the testing questions that employers are facing that may touch on requirements of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act or privacy concerns. We are mindful that we represent the people at large, but not X, Y and Z company as they try to figure out how to get their employees back to work,” she explains.

Among the non-COVID-related work in which Bass Ehler and her team engage is a steady stream of litigation and consultation with divisions within the agency, “everything from the Office of Planning and Statistics to the Office of Women’s Health to environmental health,” she says. “When they have legal questions, we’re their lawyers. We help to field those questions and do the research. What I often say is that we take a ‘yes, and’ approach. Yes, we will handle that, and we will look into related issues.”



“We’re constantly working toward learning from challenges that we faced in the past at different iterations of this pandemic to improve our responses as we face that next chapter.”

Service to DePaul and the legal profession

Bass Ehler has remained active with her alma mater by serving on the College of Law’s advisory council. Her contribution to the college, however, goes back to her law school days.

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the almost simultaneous dot-com economic bust, DePaul administrators, faculty and students were concerned about what an economic downturn might mean for new graduates. They held discussions about what could be done to help DePaul alumni distinguish themselves in a competitive job market.

The College of Law already offered certificate programs in intellectual property and health law. Bass Ehler reviewed her public interest law program and said, “Wouldn’t it be great if we could have a public interest law certificate, just like we had for the intellectual property program or the health law program? All these pieces are already in place. Can’t we bundle them together?” Thus, the Certificate in Public Interest Law was born and, from that program, DePaul’s Center for Public Interest Law, which expanded opportunities for would-be public interest lawyers in terms of networking, program support and experiential learning.

Although the legal profession remains competitive and continues to struggle with a lack of diversity in decision-making spaces, Bass Ehler is enthusiastic about where the profession is going. “One thing that is great about the practice of law now is that there are many ways to be a lawyer. And that has opened up space for more diverse voices to have a seat at the decision-making table. Beyond

being in-house counsel or working at a law firm, I feel some of the innovations of the startup world have trickled into the legal space as well. Alternative fee arrangements and smaller firms that are offering really high-impact, high-level legal work at a fraction of the price of huge law firms exemplify some innovative steps forward,” she says.

Bass Ehler also sees potential in the partnerships between nonprofits and large law firms that have developed over the years. “Whether working with undocumented students or on issues related to transgender health care access, I have seen really amazing partnerships that have shown what’s possible in terms of innovative advocacy and positive results when the public interest and private bars work together,” she says.

The work at hand

As the pandemic continues as a multifaceted threat and challenge, Bass Ehler remains focused on the opportunity to make an impact on the lives of the people of Illinois. “It is very hard to quantify some of the day-to-day work that we do because it’s just drinking from a fire hose—frenetic,” she says. “But when we look at the broad picture of all the different pieces that have been put in place, we can see very clearly the almost constellation-like efforts that have framed our COVID response. We’re constantly working toward learning from challenges that we faced in the past at different iterations of this pandemic, and we just keep working hard to learn and improve our responses as we face that next chapter.”