MEET THE DEALMAKERS

Kelsey Donnalley

Kelsey Donnalley is the deputy team leader of Kilpatrick's Corporate Mergers & Acquisitions (MASC) Team. She focuses her practice on domestic and cross-border mergers and acquisitions, divestitures, joint ventures, corporate restructurings, strategic transactions, and general corporate matters.

Kelsey's clients include companies in the building products, technology, and consumer products industries. She also regularly advises private equity funds and their portfolio companies. Her work has garnered rave reviews from clients and a number of awards and recognitions. For example, Kelsey was recognized in 2024 and the three years immediately preceding as one of the "Best Lawyers: Ones to Watch" for Corporate Law by *The Best Lawyers in America*®. She was also named a "Next Generation Partner" in 2023 and 2024 by *Legal 500* US for Mergers & Acquisitions.

Why did you choose to practice M&A law?

I was a business major at UNC-Chapel Hill, and I thought my path lies in the corporate world, especially because I enjoy economics and corporate strategy. But I took one business law class in undergrad and it changed my trajectory, leading me to law school. In law school, I quickly discovered that I did not enjoy litigation and case research, but I loved drafting and analyzing contracts. As an M&A attorney, I get to do that all day long.

Another aspect of M&A that I enjoy is that everyone on the deal teams are working toward a common goal. The buyer wants to buy a business and the seller wants to sell a business. Our clients are looking to us to provide creative solutions and compromises to get to closing. M&A is not a zero-sum game, and it is exciting when we can get to a closing where both the buyer and seller are happy and have achieved their goals.

Finally, I really like the people aspect of this work. Atlanta has a vibrant and growing business community, and many national and international corporations call it home. Kilpatrick has a great group of Atlanta-based clients. I appreciate being able to

have personal, face-to-face relationships with the people I'm working with, as opposed to just working with people through a screen. It's easy to go out to lunch with clients who also live and work in Atlanta, or set up an in-person meeting to walk through a purchase agreement draft.

You have many international clients. How is working with them different from working with U.S.-based clients?

I find that working with international clients demands an exceptional grasp of the law and the ability to provide accessible and comprehensive explanations for why we do things the way we do them. Every international client comes from a different perspective and a different legal system, and you must be able to explain to them the intricacies of the U.S. M&A market. It is satisfying to be able to work through the M&A process with an international client and guide them to a successful deal closing.

In addition to your client work, you are also the deputy team leader of Kilpatrick's MASC team. What does this role entail?

I work closely with our team leader, Lou Barbieri, to ensure that we provide appropriate training for our attorneys, that adequate resources are available to the team, and that projects are staffed properly. We're also responsible for strategic planning for the future of the team. As someone who's spent her entire career at Kilpatrick, starting as a summer associate, I know that I owe my success to the mentors who have taught me about all aspects of being a better lawyer and leader, and taking on this role is my way of paying it forward.

I have learned so much from the excellent mentors and role models on the Kilpatrick M&A team. A lot of what we do as M&A attorneys is problem-solving and project management, which are skills that are not necessarily taught in law school, but best learned through observation and mentoring. In addition, our partners have always been willing to teach us how to constantly improve our drafting skills.

One of the biggest reasons our current M&A team is so successful is the investment our mentors have made in us. That's why mentoring our next generation of attorneys is probably the number one priority of our group.

How has the M&A group changed during your time at Kilpatrick?

Kilpatrick has a great record of being at the forefront of diversity and inclusion in law firms, and the M&A team is a great example of that. Our firm has made a targeted effort to recruit and retain diverse and female candidates, and we're starting to see the payoff from that effort. We now have a much more diverse cohort of associates and partners who are outstanding M&A practitioners. I feel optimistic about law firm diversity and diversity at our clients, given the changes I have already seen in the eleven years I have been practicing.

Are the skills of an M&A attorney useful outside of work?

Definitely! Being an M&A attorney requires developing really good time management and project management skills, and these skills have been essential in managing my career while raising two small children. This career requires you to be vigilant about protecting your time while you are at work and focusing on client needs, and while you are at home spending time with your family.

But also, you learn to expect the unexpected and roll with it without getting too stressed. The same principle applies when you are raising two young children! In both aspects of my life (work and home), I am very grateful for the people around me who fully support me and help me do my job.

In addition to your practice, your team leadership role, and your family obligations, you also support the community and take on pro bono matters. Which organizations have you worked with?

I've been involved with helping nonprofit clients in pro bono matters pretty much since I started at Kilpatrick. Over the years, I've helped many nonprofits get their tax-exempt status, for example. As I gained more experience as an attorney, I have helped nonprofits on an outside general counsel basis, including drafting and reviewing the nonprofit's contracts and organizational documents. Currently, I'm on the board of Camp Sunshine, an Atlanta-based nonprofit that runs camps for children with cancer. They also have a variety of other programs, including educational and support programs for the children and their families.

I was introduced to Camp Sunshine by Ben Barkley, who has served as general counsel for Camp Sunshine for a number of years, and I immediately knew that I wanted to support this organization. I was looking to get involved with a nonprofit that helps people directly, and the mission of Camp Sunshine resonated with me, especially because I have children of my own. It's very rewarding to know that you're part of an organization that makes a difference for kids and their families through such a trying time.

To learn more about Kelsey and the firm's nationally recognized MASC Team, visit *ktslaw.com*