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Recommended Citation

Bowden, Michael M., "Law School News: The View From The Statehouse 04-27-2021" (2021). *Life of the Law School (1993-)*. 750.

https://docs.rwu.edu/law_archives_life/750

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April 27, 2021

Law School News

The View from the Statehouse

At the Governor's right hand, and on both sides of the aisle in the General Assembly, RWU Law alumni are playing increasingly prominent roles.

April 27, 2021 | Michael M. Bowden



At the Rhode Island Statehouse, socially distanced but photographed with a foreshortening lens: (l-r) Brandon Bell '97, Nicole Verdi '14, Kim Ahern '09, Joseph Polisena '15, and Jake Bissaillon '16. Image Credit: RWU Law/James Jones

On March 2, 2021, when Daniel J. McKee was sworn in as the 76th Governor of Rhode Island – succeeding Gina M. Raimondo, who had been chosen to serve as United States Commerce Secretary under President Joe Biden – he found himself in the company of a growing cadre of Roger Williams University School of Law alumni in the upper echelons of Ocean State politics.

On Governor McKee's staff are Director of Policy and Senior Counsel Kim Ahern '09, and Deputy Counsel on Policy Joseph Polisena, Jr. '15. On the legislative side, Jake Bissaillon '16 is Chief of Staff to the Rhode Island Senate President, while Nicole Verdi '14 is Chief Legal

Counsel to the Rhode Island Senate President. Meanwhile on the other side of the aisle, Brandon Bell '97 is Chief of Staff to the Senate Minority Leader.

In the Governor's Office

As Gov. McKee's Director of Policy and Senior Counsel, Kim Ahern '09 works closely with cabinet members and the budget office to lead the development of policy recommendations that reflect priorities set forth by the Governor. Formerly Deputy Counsel for Gov. Raimondo – and before that, a Special Assistant Attorney General for nearly a decade, much of it prosecuting cases in the Rhode Island AG's Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Unit – Ahern brings an experienced hand to the job.

She now heads a team of seven policy analysts who, in addition to active policy development, also work with state agencies to track legislation in the General Assembly. At present, their primary focus is ensuring fair and equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, and planning the successful reopening of the state's economy, post-pandemic.

“The Governor wants policies that are aligned with a robust economic comeback for all Rhode Island businesses,” Ahern said, “while also ensuring that our education system is one in which all students can succeed. In particular, we're finding ways to account for the lost learning time that's occurred over the past year – and to ensure that all of our policies are viewed through an equity lens.”

‘There is definitely a Roger Williams presence in the statehouse; it's everywhere. RWU Law has become so thoroughly embedded in the Rhode Island legal system – and legal and political overlap.’

~ Nicole Verdi '14, Chief Legal Counsel to the Rhode Island Senate President

She sees her present role as a logical extension of her interests since her days at RWU Law. Even in those days, “I always knew that I wanted to do public service,” she said. “I wanted to focus on giving back to my community and working for the common good in government. I was heavily involved in the [Feinstein Institute at RWU Law](#), I did the [Criminal Defense Clinic](#), and was afforded a great opportunity to do a [judicial externship](#) with Justice Maureen McKenna Goldberg [of the Rhode Island Supreme Court]. Those are the sorts of experiences that get you out of the brick-and-mortar of the law school and into the Greater Providence legal community, into the larger Rhode Island community. And that's why going to Roger Williams made all the difference in the world for me.”

Ahern said her years as a criminal prosecutor also continue to inform her policy work. “That firsthand view of the criminal justice system helps me at a policy level in assessing our criminal justice policies, juvenile justice policies, and Department of Corrections,” she said.

Working at Ahern's side is Deputy Counsel of Policy Joe Polisena Jr. '15. With a J.D. from RWU Law and an M.B.A. from Providence College, the former Rhode Island public defender has served as legislative counsel to the Rhode Island House of Representatives and as vice-

president of the Johnston Town Council. He remembers being particularly inspired by a law seminar taught by U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) at Roger Williams.

Polisena's role in the McKee administration is more behind-the-scenes than Ahern's. "It involves a lot of research," he explained. "Basically, that means compiling data and information on different policies for the Governor; sitting down with various groups and organizations on both sides of a given issue, gathering as much data as possible, and then drafting a legal memo for the Governor."

Polisena's two main areas of policy interest are transportation and the environment – meaning he spends a lot of time with representatives of the Department of Transportation and the Department of Environmental Management.

"It's gratifying to be involved in public service," he said. "I try to be unbiased in the data that I gather – keeping in mind that there are always two sides to every argument – and I try to be as thorough as possible."

In the General Assembly

Meanwhile, in the General Assembly, **Jake Bissaillon '16** serves as Chief of Staff to the Rhode Island Senate President.

Like Polisena, he has paired his RWU Law J.D. with an M.B.A. from PC. He served as Chief of Staff to the Providence City Council from 2011 to 2014, during Angel Taveras' tenure as mayor. In that capacity, he worked with the Senate, the mayor and the council president on an action plan to eradicate a \$110 million structural deficit.

He chose to study law at RWU Law because it "dovetailed with the network and professional experience I had already built," he said. During his 2L year, he took a job as Policy Analyst for the Rhode Island House of Representatives, which "allowed me to advance my legal education while continuing to focus on where I wanted to head in my career."

Soon after Bissaillon passed the bar, Senator Dominick Ruggiero became Senate President, and sought "a young whippersnapper attorney to provide legal advice, staff support and that sort of thing," Bissaillon said. "Because of my Chief of Staff experience, as well as my fresh-off-the-books legal education – and my willingness to work all hours of the night! – he landed on me as legal counsel" in April 2017. Bissaillon formed a strong working relationship with Ruggiero that eventually led to his appointment as Chief of Staff.

"I've always been willing to walk through a door when it's open and to take on a lot of different jobs at once," Bissaillon said, "not the least of which was going to law school and working at the same time. It was really the flexibility, affordability and access of my Roger Williams legal education that made it all possible. There's no better way to position yourself for a future in the legal world than to use your three years in law school not just to learn about the law, but also to build your network and forge relationships."

Bissaillon said that Covid-19 created a new sense of urgency in the statehouse on many fronts.

“One thing that certainly underpins both the Raimondo and McKee administrations is an understanding that the pandemic put a lot of different things front and center now,” he said. “Both executives have demonstrated a strong willingness to take a strategic approach that takes into account communities of interest across Rhode Island.”

He continued, “Whether it’s access to vaccines or assessing which communities are most impacted by the pandemic and why, these are questions of both economic justice and socioeconomic justice that will impact how we want to emerge from the pandemic – whether we’re talking about the minimum wage or access to affordable healthcare. We have to use ‘the fierce urgency of now’ even when we’re talking in terms of action on climate.”

From the Executive to the Legislative Branch

Meanwhile, Nicole Verdi '14 has been getting herself up to speed as the new Chief Legal Counsel to the Rhode Island Senate President, working for both the Senate and the Senate President.

When Governor Raimondo announced that she was becoming United States Commerce Secretary, Verdi – who had been serving as Raimondo’s [Deputy Chief of Staff](#) – saw an opportunity in the retirement of the Senate’s longtime Chief Legal Counsel, Richard Sahagian. About a week after Raimondo’s announcement, Verdi was contacted by the Senate President’s office and subsequently offered the position. “I am excited about this opportunity and thrilled that I get to use my legal skills to continue to serve the people of Rhode Island” she explained.

While still in law school, Verdi interned for the Honorable William E. Smith and the Honorable John J. McConnell, Jr. in the United States District Court for the District of Rhode Island. After graduating *summa cum laude*, she served as a judicial law clerk for the Honorable Maureen McKenna Goldberg at the Rhode Island Supreme Court before becoming an associate at Adler Pollock & Sheehan in Providence.

Today, as Chief Legal Counsel, she works with the Senate President, majority leader, minority whip, and committee chairs, as well as managing the multiple part- and full-time attorneys who work in the chamber. Their currently focus is, again, on the pandemic, vaccination and reopening; diversity and equity issues; economic security; and climate change.

Regarding the latter, Verdi noted, “The State of Rhode Island has such a significant coastline, we need to be doing everything we can to making sure we’re combating climate change and moving towards the state’s renewable energy goals. I was really excited to see the Act on Climate signed by the Governor [on April 10, 2021; State Sen. Dawn Euer '10, D-Newport, was, incidentally, the bill’s lead sponsor in the Senate]. This is a big step forward for Rhode Island.”

Verdi said all of her past experiences have informed her current position as well. “There’s no way anyone could be 100 percent prepared for this job, but my time in the Governor’s Office, along with the other experiences that I’ve had, allowed me to hit the ground running on day one.

I started in the middle of session – so there will certainly be a learning curve – but I know how the legislative process works, I know what to look for when reviewing bills and looking for constitutional issues. All of that has helped prepare me for this current role.”

A View From Across the Aisle

Unlike the other RWU Law alumni discussed in this story, all of whom are Democrats, **Brandon Bell '97** is an outspoken Republican. He was, in fact, Chair of the Rhode Island Republican Party from 2015 to 2019, and since January has served as Chief of Staff to Senate Minority Leader Dennis Algiere, and Legal Counsel to the Senate Minority Caucus.

“Republicans are a super-minority in this state,” he noted, “and in our two-party system, having a loyal opposition is critical in my view.”

For the past 24 years, Bell has been a litigator in private practice, working in Massachusetts, Connecticut and, most of all, Rhode Island. Despite being a registered Republican since he was old enough to vote, “I was never outwardly Mr. Politician,” he said.

“I’ve *represented* politicians, both Republican and Democrat, before the Board of Elections, the Ethics Commission, and various other boards and commissions. I’ve represented a city council here, a town council there.” But pre-2011, his actual experience in public office was limited to a four-year stint on the Cumberland, R.I., planning board, along with a few commission and board appointments.

“Then someone had the brilliant idea, ‘Hey, you’re a great public speaker. You’re a trial lawyer. Why don’t you consider being the chair of the state Republican Party?’” Bell recalled, laughing. “So yeah, I ended up leading the party. I was spending 60, 70 hours a week practicing law, and another 40 doing the chairmanship. It’s a strictly volunteer position and it was a lot of work. But being a lawyer helped – knowing and understanding campaign finance laws and ethics commission rules; being able to delve into statutes that public officials might have been a little bit conflicted on sometimes.”

The post also did wonders for his political connections.

“I met some amazing people nationally,” Bell said. “I was traveling a lot. And the level of access was great, particularly after a Republican president got elected. I even was honored to interview with the Department of Justice in D.C. for U.S. Attorney for the District of Rhode Island.” Back home, the *Providence Journal*’s Katherine Gregg described him as the GOP’s “legal bulldog filing one legal challenge after another” against the Democratic leadership.

At the statehouse, “I would help the Republican members of the House caucus and the Senate caucus,” Bell said. “I developed some good relationships here. So when I was asked in January if I’d be interested in becoming Legal Counsel, I said, ‘Are you kidding me? I would *love* to do it!’ In my mind, it was a great change of pace after 23 years of running from court to court all over the place. I love the law and I love politics. Why not combine the two?”

Four months into the job, he has no regrets.

“It’s extremely rewarding work,” Bell said. “There hasn’t been a dull moment. It’s a small caucus, but I have been given the latitude to run with that, to deal with drafting the legislation, and to figure out where we can work together with the other side – and where we can’t.”

‘Camaraderie and Civility’

As for Bell's relations with fellow RWU Law graduates on the Democratic side?

“Nothing but complete graciousness,” Bell said. “Welcoming and accommodating. I was so impressed with that. Everyone here has been just amazing. I am not talking about partisan matters here, mind you – but if I need something from the ‘third floor,’ as they say in this building, I just have to pick up the phone and I literally get a response within seconds. Regardless of our political differences, there is a work-together mentality. We may disagree on many policy positions, but everyone really does get along. I very much appreciate the camaraderie and civility of the people I work with in this building.”

Verdi credits the law school for some of that civility.

“There is definitely a Roger Williams presence in the statehouse; it’s everywhere,” she said. “RWU Law has become so thoroughly embedded in the Rhode Island legal system – and legal and political overlap. That’s why I always recommend RWU Law – it’s a great law school in general; the experiences I gained there are unmatched. But for people who want to stay and practice in Rhode Island, it’s an absolute must.”

She points to her connection with Kim Ahern. “I was just in awe of the teams that Governors Raimondo and McKee assembled around them; they are all such kind, brilliant, hardworking people – and Kim is one of them,” Verdi said. “During the height of the pandemic, when we’d sometimes be in meetings from seven in the morning until midnight, we called each other ‘battle buddies.’ So now, when I encounter a situation that’s in her wheelhouse, I know I can always give her a call – and she knows she can always do the same with me.”

Bissaillon concurs. “One common factor that runs through both the Raimondo and the McKee administrations *is* Kim Ahern,” he said. “I respect her both as a fellow Roger Williams alumnus – and as an absolute rock star in the building! She was Deputy Counsel for Gov. Raimondo, and now she’s Director of Policy and Senior Counsel for Gov. McKee. That’s not just a strong testament to Kim and her work ethic – it’s an indicator of just how deep RWU Law is starting to run in Rhode Island government. And I think that’s a great thing.”