JENNER&BLOCK

Featured Alumni

Christi Childers, General Counsel & Executive Vice President, First American Bank

Tell us about your current role at First American Bank.
First American Bank is the largest privately held bank in Illinois, with about $8 billion in assets and 61 locations across Illinois, Wisconsin, and Florida. We pride ourselves on being a community bank that offers our customers that personal, community feel while also providing the sophisticated financial services of a larger institution—from commercial lending and Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) financing to a full range of wealth management services.

As General Counsel, I oversee a remarkably broad range of legal matters. I handle regulatory compliance, contract negotiation, litigation management, e-discovery, IP protection, and employment law. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we've expanded from employees in three states to 23 states.

My work is different from day to day—I advise business units, interpret regulations, and support strategic initiatives. Currently, what's keeping me especially busy is AI. I'm on the bank's AI Tiger Team: this team is working to identify use cases, help departments develop applications, and drive adoption across the bank. That ever-changing mix keeps the job interesting.

How did your time at Jenner shape your career?
As an in-house lawyer, you're forced to make decisions quickly, sometimes with incomplete information, and you have to learn to trust your legal gut. At first, I had a difficult time doing that, but then I realized that training at a place like Jenner helped me develop good legal instincts.

The bankruptcy group specifically gave me a strong foundation in legal analysis and understanding rules and regulations. We were constantly dealing with complex regulatory frameworks in bankruptcy, and I've carried that skill set over to my role at the bank. Because Jenner handles such complex matters, I can take that experience and apply it even to what might seem like small day-to-day issues.

What do you see as the biggest legal and regulatory challenges facing the banking industry?
The top challenge for all banks is cybersecurity and data privacy. Online criminals are getting more and more sophisticated, so we're constantly having to up our game on security measures and risk management strategies.

We also face complex and continually changing regulations. When you get a new administration, the regulatory environment shifts. When I first joined the bank, I'd look at a new regulation and think, "Oh, that'll be a simple fix." But I quickly learned that everything the bank does is really interrelated. You might think a new overdraft regulation is straightforward, but overdrafts touch the whole customer relationship. When a regulation comes down, we have to take a step back and look at how it will affect the entire bank—all the systems and customer touchpoints.

What surprised you most about transitioning from law firm practice to an in-house role?
During my interview with the executive team, they said something that really stuck with me: "We don't want you to say no to an idea we have. Instead, we want you to say, "Well, not that way, but this way." What that meant was that I not only had to understand the laws and regulations applicable to the bank, but I had to understand the business.

In a law firm, you're often dealing with the aftermath—the client comes to you after something has exploded. In-house, I can be on the front end of so many things, helping the business make decisions. I've learned to focus on balancing legal risk while considering the business realities of what they're asking, rather than just saying "the law says this."

The biggest shift was figuring out how to be a member of the business team and not just someone dispensing legal advice. It's about being at the table for business decisions. I developed that understanding by meeting with businesspeople and asking a lot of questions—about their customers, what they were seeking to gain, and why we wanted to pursue certain initiatives. It was about spending time with them, sitting in meetings, and getting my arms around what they're trying to do.

What career advice do you have for attorneys considering a move in-house?
When somebody comes to you with a legal question, don't think about the law in isolation. Understanding the facts is what we do as lawyers, but as in-house counsel you also need to understand the business context and the impacts of your advice. Any legal advice you give will impact operations, revenue, and risk throughout the organization.

Learning how to adapt to change quickly and collaboration are also key skills. I have focused on building strong partnerships throughout the organization so that when there's a push and pull between departments, I can navigate those relationships to drive resolution.

It is important to remember that, in a business, your job is not just to issue-spot. Instead, you are there to help the organization achieve its objectives. In-house lawyers used to think they were like a little law firm within the business, but that's not what the business wants or needs. They want you to be engaged with their goals and priorities, while managing risk effectively. If you're thinking about going in-house, learn what makes those businesses tick—what drives their bottom line and what risks they face.

Finally, sometimes we have our heads down just doing our work and forget that it's not just about getting the work done—it's so much more than that. Spend time now making connections. Those relationships are your go-tos for advice when you are in-house and, often, what will help you find that in-house counsel role.