THOSE WHO SERVE

Jenner & Block partner Angela Allen advocates for veterans and military spouses — like her

By Dustin J. Seibert
t all started when Angela Allen came across the blog of Lori Volkman, a West Coast-based attorney who, like Allen, is a lawyer with a husband who is active in the armed services. Through Volkman’s blog, Allen learned about the Military Spouse J.D. Network, a group of law-practicing spouses of active-duty service members.

“At first, I thought, “Oh my gosh, we must be the only two people who are crazy enough to be lawyers and military spouses,”” Allen said. “I couldn’t believe that there’s an organization for us, so I plugged in to that immediately.”

Allen found many kindred souls within Volkman and the network and was motivated to help military spouses in her native Michigan to get state-based licensure for various job occupations.

She received the organization’s 2017 Exceptional Service Award in

work for veterans through Jenner & Block, her law firm.

Allen is a partner at the firm, having worked there for 10 years, her entire legal career.

She talked to Chicago Lawyer about her special organization, her pro bono efforts and what it means to be a military spouse.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

CL: Tell us about your military spouse origins.

Allen: I met my husband, Linden Allen, in Michigan when we were 18. He joined the Army National Guard in 2001 right after 9/11. We did all the things you’re not supposed to do at the same time — moved to Chicago, started new jobs at a big law firm and having kids right away because people say you should wait until you’re more senior or maybe even a partner. I figured I’d make it work and I actually have never known what it was like to be a big lawyer without having kids — I’ve always had this crazy schedule.

What was different is I didn’t expect him to get deployed for the invasion of Iraq. When he went in 2012, that was the year [President Barack] Obama said they’d all be home by Christmas and my husband was in the National Guard, so I didn’t expect him to be going at a time like that. His initial deployment was going to be a year, but it ended up being nine months. I was a third-year associate at Jenner & Block with a 2½-year-old and a 6-month-old when he left.

CL: What made you realize that the MSJDN’s licensing work was necessary?

Allen: Being a National Guard wife, I don’t live on base. I stay put and my husband goes places, so my career can be what it is solely because of that reason. I wouldn’t be able to maintain the career that I have if I had to move every couple of years to some random state or country. But I realized that for nurses and teachers, or even cosmetologists, truck drivers or lawyers, anyone who has state licensing restrictions, it becomes a huge barrier. It’s hard enough to maintain a job being a military spouse without adding licensing restrictions on top of it. It’s extra cost, it’s delays, it’s studying for this board or that board. You need to figure out the bureaucracy of every different state and how to get through that stuff.

CL: Is the MSJDN centralized?

Allen: A lot of it is electronic because its members are moving around so often. Maybe D.C., Texas and North Carolina have their strongest networks because those have huge military populations. They’ll have get-togethers in some of the bigger regions to motivate people to come out and then they have a conference once a year in D.C. I believe they have motivated licensing accommodations for up to 26 states, and there are efforts underway in several other states.

CL: How are you focusing on those efforts through Jenner & Block?

Allen: We do pro bono work with the Illinois Armed Forces Legal Aid Network, which was just recently established, and I started the Veteran/Military Families Affinity Group at Jenner & Block for not just lawyers but also staff, because if I know there’s a veteran in the mailroom, I’m not going to exclude him from the group. We partnered with [Cook County-based free legal service provider] CARPLS, which already runs a pro bono hotline for Cook County, but now they have calls coming in from this veteran’s legal aid hotline, and they already have volunteers that man the phones.

We continue to partner with CARPLS, supporting them and volunteering to help get the word out about the legal aid network so that veterans and military families who have pro bono needs know to call CARPLS to get assistance. The law only funds the program for five years, so they’re going to need to show that this is a worthwhile endeavor and that we should continue this funding.

CL: What do you want the public to understand about military spouses?

Allen: Military spouses serve our country too. By making lives easier for military spouses, you’re also making the lives easier on those military members, and that helps with retention in the military. If you’re a military member and your spouse cannot maintain employment because of your employment status, that might make it all the more likely that you will need to get out of the military sooner than you might have wanted to.

For the vast majority of military spouses moving every couple years, it is incredibly difficult to maintain a career… so difficult, in fact, that military spouses will often not put anything on their resume that would reveal them as such, because they’re concerned that employers will not want to hire them because they think they’ll just quit within a couple years. At the very least, I’d like employers not to see being a military spouse as a negative.

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Photos by Rena Naltzas