



## A Few Questions for . . . Kyle Levine

*In this issue, we feature Kyle Levine, Alaska Airlines' Vice President-Legal, General Counsel, and Corporate Secretary.*

**A&SL: Tell us a little bit about how you came into your current position with Alaska Airlines.**

KL: I've always loved the airline industry and seriously considered becoming a professional pilot. When I decided to go to law school instead, I naturally gravitated toward an aviation focus. My law school, Southern Methodist University, has close ties to Dallas's aviation community and let me arrange my class schedule so that I could work part-time in American Airlines' legal department. I spent my 2L summer as an intern in the legal office at the FAA. After graduating, I worked in two law firms in the aviation products liability practice area. A long-distance relationship had me commuting between Seattle and San Francisco for four years. I finally decided to make the leap north and try a new area of law when a transactional attorney role opened at Alaska. I joined Alaska in 2006, and after 10 years working in different capacities became the general counsel in 2016. The airline industry still fascinates me, and I thrive on the variety and constant problem-solving opportunities that come with this role.

**A&SL: What do you see as the biggest legal challenges to the airline industry in the coming years?**

KL: State and local regulation of pilot and flight attendant pay and benefits. Airlines are a key part of interstate commerce and can't easily manage the complexities and potential liabilities that come with a patchwork of regulations regarding the level and administration of pay and benefits for employees who often perform work in more than one jurisdiction in a single day. Besides differing and sometimes conflicting with each other, these state and local laws can conflict with airlines' collective bargaining agreements with their represented employees. Small carriers like Alaska are financially and operationally more exposed than their large competitors to the burdens of these laws and the staggering penalties that some states exact through their private right of action enablement laws.

**A&SL: Alaska merged with Virgin America in 2016.**

**What was it like to lead the legal team through this transaction?**

KL: I actually feel fortunate that the intense legal work related to the merger happened in my first year as general counsel. The other lawyers and I were energized for a new chapter and to stretch our capabilities. I was more patient and forgiving of myself at the time because the whole experience was new territory. The legal team bonded and grew in a way that still benefits us today. The merger also let us reinvigorate a law firm relationship that had existed for decades (with O'Melveny, our primary M&A, antitrust, and labor/employment counsel in the merger) by introducing new in-house lawyers to the upcoming generation of the firm's partners. The merger also taught me a lot about patience and pace. The Hart-Scott-Rodino clearance process was a rare point at which Legal was on the frontline to get the job done, rather than supporting business units from the sidelines. The process took much longer than expected, so my team got valuable experience in explaining contingencies and managing internal expectations.

**A&SL: Looking back, what would you say was the hardest part of your career? What was your most difficult challenge to overcome, and if you had it to do over again, would you do it the same or differently?**

KL: The hardest part of my career coincided with a big decision in my personal life: whether to follow my partner to Seattle and exchange a satisfying law firm job and California's climate for an in-house role at a then virtually unknown airline in the cloudy Pacific Northwest. I worried then that I was giving up earning potential and career momentum that could never be regained, and that it would be just a matter of time before I'd crave a sunnier climate. With the benefit of hindsight, I know I made the right decision by placing family before profession and geographic factors, and definitely don't regret taking the leap.

**A&SL: Is there a particular time or circumstance in your career that stands out?**

KL: Yes, I'll always remember how it felt to have someone take a chance and open the first door on the path of my legal career. As a brand-new law student in Dallas, I wrote to local companies, including American and Southwest Airlines, asking if they offered

internships to budding lawyers. American was possibly the only company to respond. I was offered an interview with American's corporate secretary, Chuck MarLett. Even though I had little to offer but enthusiasm and a passion for the airline industry, Chuck offered me an intern role in the corporate law department that carried me through all three years of law school. That internship taught me more than I ever learned in law school and inspired a duty of mentorship and sponsorship that I try to carry out every day.

**A&SL: You've seen this industry from several different perspectives—the government, private practice, in-house counsel. How do they compare, how do they differ, and which do you think was the most impactful?**

KL: That's a hard question. I view government, corporate, and law firm interests as complementary in the aviation world. I don't think one sector is any more impactful in our industry than another. In private practice, I encountered great lawyers on the plaintiff and defense sides who in their own ways helped advance important commercial and general aviation issues in the United States. I would also say that FAA and DHS/TSA lawyers do a great job at keeping aviation safe and secure for the greater good. At Alaska, we work with several firms (Davis Wright, Jones Day, O'Melveny, to name a few) whose lawyers are outstanding advocates on issues that impact our business.

**A&SL: Do you have a particular goal that you want to make sure you achieve in your career?**

KL: I can't say that I have a goal of that nature in mind. At this point, I'm focused on making sure that my job duties don't overtake other enriching aspects

of my life, and that I create a work environment for my team that's equally pressurized and fun.

**A&SL: If you were to give one piece of advice to a budding aviation lawyer based on something that you've learned, either the hard way or the easy way, what would it be?**

KL: When I was early in my career, "aviation lawyers" fit a distinct and homogenous mold that sometimes discouraged me. A few special people who helped my career immensely, including Kathleen Yodice who managed this interview, were beginning to break that mold for the better. So, my advice is start new traditions in our industry and never let resistance or preconceptions keep you from becoming a success in whatever aviation sector calls to you.

**A&SL: What are your interests outside of work?**

KL: I try to maintain my sanity and basic fitness by lap swimming four times a week. In the summer months, I take a dip in Seattle's freshwater Lake Washington just about every day. I cross-country ski in the winter or take advantage of my travel benefits to visit sunny destinations with my husband, often with our niece and nephew in tow.

**A&SL: The Forum Annual Meeting and Conference is going to be in Seattle this year. If you had to pick one thing that every attendee at the conference should do, what would it be?**

KL: Take Kenmore Air's float plane tour of Seattle on a clear day. It's close to a perfect experience for anyone who loves aviation and appreciates the special places where mountains and water come together.