



26 Declaration of Candidacy - Second Vice President Catherine Ava Leatherwood

Formstack Submission For: **2026 DRI Declaration of Candidacy**

Position Sought: Second Vice President

If you have declared your candidacy for Second Vice President and are not the successful candidate, will you consider the Secretary - Treasurer Officer position?: Yes

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How long, in years, have you been a member of DRI?: 13

Areas of Practice: Construction, Product Liability, Asbestos/Toxic Tort, Insurance Defense

Please provide your employment history in chronological order beginning with the current position.: January 2022 - present: Member (Partner), Rogers Townsend; Rogers Townsend Executive Committee Member 2023 – present
October 2016 - December 2021: Associate, Rogers Townsend

October 2012 - October 2016: Associate, Barnes Alford
September 2011 - October 2012: Law Clerk/Summer Associate, Barnes Alford

May 2022 - September 2011: Summer Associate, South Carolina Attorney General's Office - Civil & Securities Division
May 2011 - August 2011: Intern, South Carolina Court of Appeals
May 2010 - May 2011: Mayor's Fellowship with Mayor of Columbia
May 2010 - August 2010: Research Assistant, USC School of Law (Prof. Brant Helwig, (Trusts & Estates project) Prof. Joel Samuels (Conflict of Laws/Forum Non Conveniens project)
May 2010 - July 2010: Intern (JOE Program), The Honorable Judge Leslie Kirkland Riddle

Please describe your previous involvement in DRI, including but not limited to, leadership positions held, projects contributed to, committee memberships, presentations given, and written materials

I currently serve on the DRI Law Institute and am the LI Liaison to the Young Lawyers Committee. Immediately prior, I served for three years as a National Director on the DRI Board of Directors, Chair of the DRI Cares Committee, member of the DRI Foundation Board, and Board Liaison to the Employment & Labor Law Committee and the Law Practice Management Committee. I have

authored. Special accomplishments should also be noted.:

served on the 2025 Annual Meeting Steering Committee (DRI Cares and DRI For Life). I have been involved for several years now with the DRI Center for Law and Public Policy on its Social Inflation Task Force, and co-authored a white paper in 2022 titled Social Inflation: Legal System Abuse. I have also served on DRI's SLC Engagement Committee.

In my current role on the Law Institute, one initiative I have been particularly excited to help develop is a Micro-Leadership Engagement Program designed to enhance the seminar experience while creating accessible pathways for member involvement and leadership development. Recognizing that meaningful engagement often comes through small but intentional interactions, I have helped lead a project to develop a flexible framework of ambassador and host roles, from registration and app support to networking events and dine-arounds, that can be tailored to the unique needs of each seminar rather than applied as a one-size-fits-all model. The program is intended to improve the experience for first-time and returning attendees alike by fostering a more welcoming, inclusive, and connected environment, while also creating meaningful opportunities for members to begin to become involved, develop leadership skills, and build relationships that support long-term engagement within DRI.

As a member of the SLC Engagement Committee, I worked with other leaders to evaluate member engagement and retention within DRI's affinity committees, recognizing that their needs and challenges often differ from those of substantive law committees. Through discussions with leaders across multiple affinity groups, we identified opportunities to strengthen communication, encourage cross-committee collaboration, and better support the communities that often serve as members' first leadership

experience within DRI. These efforts were aimed at fostering long-term engagement and ensuring affinity committees continue to play a vital role in developing future leaders and strengthening member connections across the organization.

Since 2019, I've been active in the DRI Product Liability Committee, and have held roles on the Steering Committee starting with YL Marketing Liaison, YL Chair, Online Communities Chair and Vice Chair, and the Chair and am the current Chair of the Construction Devices and Building Products SLG.

I have been actively involved with the Young Lawyers Committee since 2013 and had the privilege of serving as Chair in 2021–2022. During my tenure, the Committee received a record number of Steering Committee applications following the Young Lawyers Seminar in Atlanta. During that time, the executive leadership of the Committee helped revitalize the Young Lawyers Liaison Program by engaging every substantive law committee in discussions about its unique needs, opportunities, and leadership pipeline. Those efforts reinforced the importance of tailoring engagement strategies to individual committees while advancing the broader goal of introducing young lawyers to substantive committee leadership early in their DRI involvement and cultivating the next generation of organizational leaders.

Prior to serving as Chair, in 2019, I was selected as Second Vice Chair of the YL Committee, and subsequently appointed Vice Chair in 2020-2021. Prior to 2019, I have held various leadership roles on the YL Steering Committee, including Marketing Chair, Marketing Vice Chair, Sponsorship Chair, Sponsorship Vice Chair, and several years of a Legislative Liaison position, among others.

Throughout my time in various roles on the YL Steering Committee, I have endeavored to share with other substantive law committees and their leadership some of the various tools that we as a committee found successful to member engagement, such as an application process for leadership.

Concurrently with my involvement in the DRI Young Lawyers Committee, I was the South Carolina State Membership Chair (previously existing position) from 2017 to 2021, and was also the Annual Meeting representative for South Carolina (marketing-focused role that previously existed).

DRI Presentations

This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: The Reality of the Nuclear Verdict, DRI Product Liability Seminar (2025, main stage)

SLDO/SLC Collaboration Discussion (co-leader), DRI Leadership Conference (fill-in for original speaker) (2024)

Bridging the Gap – Candid Discussion with DRI Young Lawyers, DRI Managing Partners and Law Firm Leaders Seminar (2023, panel)
Becoming A Trusted Business Partner to Your Corporate Clients, DRI Young Lawyers Seminar (2023)

Navigating Personal Jurisdiction Post- Ford Motor Co. v. Montana, Corporate Counsel Breakout, DRI Product Liability Seminar (2021) (late fill-in)

2021 Product Liability Case Law Update, Webinar (2021)

Everything We Wish We Would Have Known as New Associates, Webinar (2018)

Navigating Career Crossroads: Taking Charge of Your Path, DRI Young Lawyers Seminar (2018)

DRI Publications

DRI Center for Law and Public Policy Social

Inflation Task Force, co-author of white paper in 2022 titled Social Inflation: Legal System Abuse

On the Record: For Young Lawyers and Beyond, Invest in You in 2022, For the Defense (2022)

Young Lawyers: Now is Your Time to Get Involved, The Brief Case (2022)

2021 Product Liability Case Law Update (Co-Editor)

2020 Product Liability Case Law Update (Co-Editor)

2019 Product Liability Case Law Update (Co-Editor)

Chair's Corner, Raising the Bar (multiple issues, 2019-2021)

An Inside Glimpse of Seminar Marketing; Raising the Bar (2018)

Bad Attitudes, Jerks, and Bullies: Let the Maxims Be Your Guide, For the Defense (2017)

Personal or Collective: May the Duty to Defend Be Divided Among Multiple Insurers of a Common Insured, In-House Defense Quarterly (2015)

List any significant leadership commitment and involvement within the legal field other than DRI, including but not limited to other legal organizations. :

Since 2023, I have been involved in IADC, and am currently a Steering Committee member as a Vice Chair on its Construction Law Committee, where I was recently asked to serve as Vice Chair of Publications. I am also a member of the IADC Product Liability Committee and the Class Actions Committee.

I am a member of the SCDTAA (South Carolina's SLDO), the South Carolina Bar Association, and Richland County Bar Association, but do not currently hold any leadership roles in those organizations. I currently serve as Risk Manager (role previously titled League Attorney) for the Junior League of Columbia (JLC), one of the largest leagues in the United States. Risk Manager is a position slated by the

Nominating Committee and voted on by the membership. This position sits on the Board of Directors of the JLC.

I currently serve on my firm's Executive Committee, a position elected by the LLC's Members/Shareholders, and am the youngest attorney to have been selected for the position. Last year, I was privileged to have been invited by a client to be part of a tort reform group including companies, industry group leaders, and both in-house and outside counsel, focused on efforts to address and amend critical statute of repose exceptions in South Carolina statutory law that have long adversely affected construction, development, commerce, and the willingness of carriers to write Commercial General Liability policies in the state.

Why do you wish to join the board of directors or become an officer and what skills, abilities and attributes identified in the Board of Director/Officer Competencies can you bring to the role?:

Looking back on my years of service to DRI, I am most energized by building opportunities that help people connect, become involved, and grow into leadership roles. Whether through the Young Lawyers Committee, affinity committee engagement initiatives, or more recently the development of a micro-leadership framework, my focus has consistently been on creating intentional pathways that strengthen member engagement and cultivate future leaders.

That philosophy has also shaped my service this year as Law Institute Liaison. Working closely with seminar leadership and participating throughout the planning and execution process provided valuable insight into the attendee experience from start to finish. It also reinforced my belief that many of the most meaningful improvements come through thoughtful, people-centered details: welcoming first-time attendees, facilitating connections, reducing barriers to participation, and creating opportunities for

members to become active contributors rather than passive participants. Those observations have directly informed my work on a flexible ambassador and micro-leadership framework that can be adapted to the unique needs of individual seminars rather than applied as a one-size-fits-all model.

Serving as a National Director significantly broadened my understanding of DRI's governance, strategic planning, financial stewardship, and relationships with state and local defense organizations. Combined with my experience on my firm's Executive Committee, I believe I bring both practical leadership experience and a demonstrated commitment to strengthening DRI through innovation, collaboration, and thoughtful stewardship. My goal has never been simply to serve in leadership roles, but to leave behind sustainable systems and stronger pathways that help future members engage, lead, and succeed.

Throughout my service, I have tried to lead with curiosity, collaboration, and candor. I value thoughtful discussion, welcome differing viewpoints, and believe the strongest organizations are built by leaders who are willing to listen, adapt, and make difficult decisions when necessary. At the same time, I believe culture matters. I am lucky to be part of a law firm that carefully guards its collaborative and respectful culture, and I have sought to foster a similar environment within DRI where professionalism, transparency, and mutual respect are equally valued.

The legal profession continues to evolve rapidly, and so must the organizations that serve it. I believe DRI's future depends not only on the excellence of its educational programming and advocacy, but on its ability to cultivate meaningful relationships,

develop new leaders, and create opportunities for members to see themselves as part of something larger than any one seminar or committee. That has been the central focus of my service to date, and it is the perspective and energy I would bring to an officer role.

What suggestions would you make to move the organization forward?:

Serving on the DRI Law Institute and as a National Director has reinforced many of the ideas I already believed, but it has also challenged and refined them. It has given me a much deeper appreciation for the complexity of the decisions DRI makes, the extraordinary work performed by our volunteers and staff, and the importance of balancing innovation with responsible stewardship of the organization's resources and mission.

If there is one theme that has consistently emerged from my experiences, whether through the Young Lawyers Committee, the SLC Engagement Committee, my service as Law Institute Liaison, or my work on the DRI Board, it is that member value should be at the center of every decision we make. Attorneys have more choices than ever for education, networking, and professional development, and they are increasingly selective about where they invest both their time and their resources. We cannot assume participation; we must continually earn it.

I believe one of DRI's greatest opportunities is to become even more intentional about the total member experience. That begins long before someone walks into a conference hotel and continues long after they return home. Every interaction from marketing and registration to educational programming, networking, first-time attendee outreach, and leadership opportunities, should reinforce that DRI is a welcoming, high-quality organization where members are valued and where meaningful

professional relationships can flourish.

My work as Law Institute Liaison further reinforced my belief that seemingly small details can have an outsized impact on engagement. Thoughtful touches that make it easier for members to navigate a seminar, meet new people, or become involved often determine whether someone leaves feeling like they attended a conference or joined a community. Those observations have informed my work in developing a flexible seminar ambassador and micro-leadership framework designed to create intentional touchpoints for connection while also creating accessible pathways into future leadership. Importantly, that framework is not intended to be one-size-fits-all, but adaptable to the unique goals and culture of each seminar and committee.

I also continue to believe there is significant opportunity to strengthen collaboration with our state and local defense organizations and to further leverage the tremendous resources of the Center for Law and Public Policy and the NFJE in ways that provide tangible value to defense lawyers across the country. Those relationships should be mutually beneficial partnerships built on collaboration and demonstrated support rather than assumptions about what either organization needs.

Finally, I believe leadership development deserves continued strategic focus. DRI's long-term strength depends on creating intentional and accessible pathways for members to become engaged early and ultimately become the next generation of leaders. The work we do to cultivate those future leaders today will determine the strength of DRI for decades to come.

**Describe one
transformational/defining**

One of the most defining experiences of my professional career has not been a trial or a

experience in your professional life you have been involved with and what you learned from that experience. :

significant victory, but the retirement of my longtime mentor and law partner after decades of practice. For years, he had been the person I turned to for guidance on difficult cases, firm leadership issues, and the countless judgment calls that cannot be learned from a textbook. When he retired recently, I suddenly found myself assuming many of the responsibilities and leadership roles that he had quietly carried for years.

The transition has been, at times, unsettling. It forced me to recognize just how much institutional knowledge, perspective, and quiet leadership one person can provide, and it challenged me to grow into responsibilities that I had always known would someday be mine but perhaps did not expect to arrive so quickly. It also made me appreciate that leadership is not about having every answer; it is about being willing to make difficult decisions, accept responsibility for them, continue learning, and provide stability and confidence for others even while you are still growing yourself.

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned was the value of intentional mentorship and leadership development. My mentor invested years in creating opportunities for me, sharing his judgment, and giving me room to grow while always being available when I needed guidance. His retirement reinforced my belief that strong organizations do not simply identify leaders—they deliberately cultivate them long before they are needed.

That experience has shaped how I approach leadership within my firm and within DRI. It has strengthened my commitment to creating meaningful pathways for others to become engaged, assume responsibility, and develop the skills and confidence to lead. It has also reminded me that no matter the position we hold, there is always more to learn. Some of the most significant

professional growth comes not from having all the answers, but from being willing to embrace new responsibilities with humility, resilience, and a commitment to continual improvement. Whether in DRI or a law firm or any other organization, a critical leadership quality is an interest in developing people and building institutions that outlast individual leaders.

Describe the greatest challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for DRI over the next five+ years.:

Serving as a National Director and on the Law Institute has reinforced my belief that DRI's greatest challenges and greatest opportunities are often one and the same. Over the past several years, I have become increasingly convinced that our long-term success will not be determined solely by the quality of our programming or the importance of our advocacy (both of which are exceptional), but by our ability to continually demonstrate value to our members and create an organization where people genuinely want to invest their time, energy, and leadership.

The legal profession is evolving rapidly. Lawyers have more choices than ever before for education, networking, and professional development, and time has become one of our profession's most valuable commodities. Particularly among newer generations of attorneys, participation is no longer driven by tradition or expectation; it is driven by meaningful value and authentic connection. That presents a challenge, but also an extraordinary opportunity for DRI to distinguish itself.

One lesson reinforced through my service as Law Institute Liaison and on the SLC Engagement Committee is that member engagement does not happen by accident. It is the product of intentional design, which was a driving factor behind my efforts in the Ambassador/Micro Leadership initiative.

Every interaction from the first invitation to register through the final networking event shapes whether a member feels welcomed, connected, and inspired to return. I believe DRI has an opportunity to continue elevating the member experience through thoughtful programming, investment in networking, accessible leadership opportunities, and seminar experiences that consistently reflect the quality and professionalism of our brand. Equally important is recognizing that our committees and seminars have different cultures and objectives; a successful approach should be flexible rather than one-size-fits-all.

I also believe one of DRI's greatest strengths is its people, and one of its greatest opportunities is to continue investing intentionally in leadership development. Creating meaningful pathways for involvement, strengthening mentorship across generations, and making it easier for members to move from attendee to volunteer to leader will ensure that DRI continues to benefit from fresh perspectives while preserving the institutional knowledge and culture established by those who came before us.

At the same time, DRI must continue to lead on the substantive issues affecting the defense bar. Social inflation, third-party litigation funding, artificial intelligence, evolving client expectations, and rapid technological change will continue to reshape our profession over the next decade. Through the Center for Law and Public Policy, the NFJE, collaboration with our sister organizations and state and local defense organizations, and practical, forward-looking programming, DRI is uniquely positioned to be both a trusted resource and an influential voice on behalf of the defense community.

Ultimately, I believe DRI's greatest

DRI strives to be governed by a diverse board of directors—in terms of race, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disability, location, and/or professional level, and other facts that enhance diversity and inclusion --- who can and will help advance DRI's goals through the power of collaboration. In what ways have you demonstrated a commitment to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in your work, and how will your DE&I experience inform your contributions as a Board member?:

opportunity is not simply to respond to change, but to lead through it by remaining true to its mission while continually evolving to meet the needs of its members, strengthening relationships across the defense community, and investing in the people who will carry the organization forward for generations to come.

For me, diversity and inclusion have always been less about statements and more about intentional leadership practices. Throughout my career and my service to DRI, I have tried to focus on creating environments where talented people have meaningful opportunities to contribute, where differing perspectives are actively sought, and where leadership pathways are both transparent and accessible.

Within my firm, I helped lead our Diversity Committee and developed educational programming on topics such as unconscious bias and microaggressions. As a member of the firm's Executive Committee, I have advocated for thoughtful hiring and recruitment practices, encouraged open dialogue and respectful exchange of ideas, and supported decision-making processes that benefit from a variety of perspectives and experiences.

My experience in DRI has reinforced those same principles. As Chair of the Young Lawyers Committee, we worked intentionally to develop diverse speaker panels, address issues relevant to newer attorneys, and communicate clearly that leadership opportunities were available to anyone willing to contribute. More recently, my work on member engagement initiatives, including efforts surrounding liaison programs and the development of a flexible seminar ambassador and micro-leadership framework, has been guided by the belief that organizations are strongest when they

lower barriers to participation and create multiple pathways for members with different backgrounds, experiences, and leadership styles to become involved.

Serving on the Board and Law Institute has further reinforced for me the importance of diversity in all of its forms. This encompasses not simply demographic diversity, but diversity of experience, practice setting, geography, generation, perspective, and thought. Some of the most valuable discussions I have participated in have involved colleagues with fundamentally different viewpoints, and those conversations have consistently led to better decisions and stronger outcomes.

If given the opportunity to continue serving in leadership, I would remain committed to fostering a culture where inclusion is reflected in our actions: by encouraging broad participation, investing in mentorship and leadership development, listening intentionally to a wide range of perspectives, and ensuring that DRI continues to cultivate leaders who reflect the breadth of the membership and the profession we serve. I believe organizations are strongest not because everyone thinks alike, but because they create an environment where people with different experiences can contribute, collaborate, and move a shared mission forward together.

Is there anything else you would like to add that has not already been previously stated?:

If there is one thing I would add, it is that my approach to leadership is rooted in action. When I see an opportunity to improve the member experience or strengthen the organization, my instinct is not simply to identify the issue, but to work collaboratively to develop a practical and sustainable solution.

The recent development of the seminar ambassador and micro-leadership framework

as part of serving on the DRI Law Institute is a good example. Drawing on observations from my service as a Committee Chair, Board Liaison, and years of involvement in DRI seminars, I recognized opportunities to make the member experience more intentional, particularly for first-time attendees and those looking for meaningful ways to become involved. In a relatively short period of time, that observation evolved into a flexible framework designed to create welcoming touchpoints throughout a seminar while simultaneously creating accessible pathways into leadership. Importantly, the concept was never intended to be one-size-fits-all; its value lies in giving individual seminars and committees adaptable tools to meet their own unique goals and cultures.

That project also reflects a broader philosophy that has shaped my service to DRI: without a strong member experience, nothing else works as effectively as it should. Outstanding educational programming, exceptional advocacy, and strategic initiatives are all critical, but they are ultimately experienced through the people we serve. Members who feel welcomed, connected, valued, and invested become volunteers. Volunteers become leaders. Leaders strengthen the organization and create that same experience for the next generation.

If given the opportunity to serve as an officer, that is the perspective I would bring. I will continue to listen carefully, ask difficult questions, collaborate respectfully, and focus on practical solutions that strengthen DRI for the long term. I want my contribution to be measured not simply by the positions I have held, but by the systems I helped build, the people I helped develop, and the positive impact those efforts continue to have long after my own service has ended.



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