

FOR HER HISTORIC LEADERSHIP ROLE, ROSALYN SIA BAKER-BARNES WANTS TO FOCUS ON THE NEXT GENERATION

📅 Dec 28, 2023 👤 By Alexandra Glorioso ▶ Senior Editor 📁 News in Photos

The president-elect designate will be the first Black woman to lead The Florida Bar



Rosalyn Sia Baker Barnes: “I can do the greatest good by being an asset to those that will come after me. That is one of my goals, hopefully, as president, is to try to help bridge the gap for our young lawyers of all backgrounds to be successful.”

Rosalyn Sia Baker-Barnes was a new member of the Palm Beach County Bar Association Board of Directors in 2013 when Eugene Pettis **became the first Black president** of The Florida Bar.

“If there was one word that I could use to describe how I felt, it would just be, proud,” said Baker-Barnes. “Pettis left big shoes to fill and made us all proud. He did an amazing job, and really set an amazing example for all of us.”

Now, a decade later, Baker-Barnes has followed in his footsteps, breaking another barrier.

In December, she was elected as the first Black woman president of the Bar. She attributes this triumph, in part, to her parents. They told her she could do anything she wanted. Pettis was a perfect example of this.

“It was so impactful because so many people saw that this could be done, and I think, perhaps subconsciously, saw that they could do it too,” Baker-Barnes said. “I was one of them.”

That’s what’s on her mind as she reflects on this historic moment: setting an example, as an example was once set for her. But when she becomes president, she plans to do more than embody possibilities.

“I can do the greatest good by being an asset to those that will come after me,” Baker-Barnes said. “That is one of my goals, hopefully, as president, is to try to help bridge the gap for our young lawyers of all backgrounds to be successful.”

She added: “We have to invest in their success.”

As Baker-Barnes develops goals for her presidency, she is conscious of how mentoring new lawyers is relevant to the Bar's job of regulating the practice. Because when lawyers aren't properly trained, they are prone to make mistakes, and mistakes can lead to discipline. She wants to focus on helping new lawyers transition more seamlessly into practicing law.

"That's one of our responsibilities," Baker-Barnes said. "To try to avoid the problems before they begin."

She talked about preparing for her first opening statement in a trial to illustrate her point.



Rosalyn Sia Baker Barnes and former Bar President Gene Pettis, who showed Baker-Barnes how to break barriers and become the most fully realized version of herself.

"I was so nervous and, honestly, terrified," Baker-Barnes said.

"Luckily for me, I had great mentors in my firm that sat down with me, and said, 'Sia, here's how we do it.'"

They went over their past opening statements with her, highlighting why they made the choices they did. They told her to "think about the elements you have to prove and how you're going to prove them."

"It just made all the difference in the world," Baker-Barnes said.

"But there are so many of our lawyers that don't have that."

Another way the Bar could help young or new lawyers get proper training is to invite different types of attorneys to get involved with the organization such as in-house, corporate counsel, and lobbyists.

"I have so many young lawyers that ask, 'How do I do that?'" said Baker-Barnes, a Board-Certified Civil Trial lawyer specializing in personal injury, medical negligence, and product liability cases. "There are lawyers that never step foot in a courtroom and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that."

But her point goes beyond the pure practice of law. It extends into the business side of things. She credits President Scott Westheimer with **rolling out Nota**, a software program that is free to Bar members and helps them manage their trust accounts.

And her point also goes beyond training in general. Investing in attorneys of divergent backgrounds means respecting their cultures and responsibilities.

Baker-Barnes has spent her entire 23-year legal career at Searcy Denney Scarola Barnhart & Shipley in West Palm Beach.

“My partners were very supportive of me during the years when I was having children,” Baker-Barnes said, as an example. I tried cases with young children in tow and the firm supported me every step of the way.

But that isn’t the case everywhere. Research **published in 2023** by the American Bar Association shows women are leaving firms because they aren’t supported in their roles as mothers.

And, in general, burnout is high among lawyers. Lawyers of all kinds, but especially women, who now **enroll at higher rates in law school than men**, are **leaving the profession** in droves.

Baker-Barnes said she wants to better understand the causes of this phenomenon.

“*I would like to see us study the growth of our profession. Where are we in terms of practice areas? Who comprises those that practice in those areas, and how long are we staying?*” Baker-Barnes said. *“And if we are not staying in the profession, why are we leaving?”*

While stepping into the presidency of the Bar will be new, the title won’t. Baker-Barnes has also served as the first Black woman president of the Palm Beach County Bar.

She’s served on the Bar’s Board of Governors since 2018, sitting on its Executive Committee since 2020. She’s also co-chaired the Bar’s COVID-19 Taskforce and chaired the Program Evaluation and Legislation committees.

Baker-Barnes will serve with Roland Sanchez-Medina, Jr., as he is sworn into the Bar presidency at the Annual Bar Convention in June. Baker-Barnes will ascend to the office a year later. For his part, Sanchez-Medina is “so excited.”

“She has been a leader since day one on the Board of Governors,” said Sanchez-Medina. “We are fortunate to have someone with her skill set lead the Bar.”

He added: “Sia is as good a person as you can find, and I am proud to call her a friend.”

Westheimer predicts the Sanchez-Medina and Baker-Barnes leadership team will be “one of the best” in Bar history.

About Baker-Barnes, he said, she has “innate leadership skills that you can’t teach.”

“If I were to offer her advice, it would be to trust your instincts,” Westheimer said.



Rosalyn Sia Baker-Barnes and her husband, Edrick Barnes, who is also a lawyer, with daughters Selia and Emri and son Edan. She and her husband have tried to instill in their kids the same values their parents instilled in them: hard work, drive, commitment, service, giving back, and focusing on causes they care about.

And if Baker-Barnes could offer advice to new lawyers, it would be, “get outside of your comfort zone.”

So how did Baker-Barnes get out of *her* comfort zone and build the path that led her to the presidency?

It started when she became pregnant with her oldest child, Selia, who is now 15. Baker-Barnes had been traveling the state working for the Florida Justice Association, which represents trial lawyers.

“I had my first baby,” said Baker-Barnes. “And I really needed to refocus and be closer to home.”

And while she had been volunteering with the Palm Beach County Bar, she wanted to be more involved locally, a decision that jump started her leadership development.

“I chaired a number of committees focusing on ensuring that our legal community was open and receptive to all, making sure that, where we had the opportunity, to provide pathways for leadership, pathways for advancement, pathways for new ideas on how to continue to enhance our profession,” Baker-Barnes said. “We did it. And it was a wonderful, wonderful avenue for me to be involved, to give back, and still be home here in Palm Beach County.”



Rosalyn Sia Baker-Barnes and Edrick Barnes at a Florida State University football game in Tallahassee.

She added: “I had no idea that it would lead to me running for the board of directors of the Palm Beach County Bar, which I did, and eventually, becoming president of the Palm Beach County Bar Association.”

After Baker-Barnes saw that she could have such an impact locally, she thought perhaps she could do the same statewide. Her work connected Baker-Barnes to many Bar leaders who encouraged her to run for the Board of Governors while she was still president of her local bar.

By that time, she had three children: daughters Selia and Emri (now 11), and her youngest, Edan, was three years old. (He is now 10).

“I was actually thinking while I was president, ‘When I’m done with this, I’m going to slow down,’” said Baker-Barnes. “And then boom — here I am running for the Board of Governors.”

She called her work on the board “one of the greatest honors of my career and highlights of my career.”

Like Baker-Barnes, many Bar presidents have developed the skills and the relationships that proved crucial to their leadership role through their work on the Board of Governors.

“*Just like we were providing pathways to success and leadership at the local level, the Board of Governors gave us the opportunity to provide pathways to leadership and success for so many lawyers around the state at a statewide level,” Baker-Barnes said.*

And it gave Baker-Barnes friends she “probably would never meet.” She was unopposed in her quest for the Bar presidency.

We could end the profile of Baker-Barnes here. But it would be incomplete because it is missing details about her family, who have shaped her as much as or more than her career.



Rosalyn Sia Baker-Barnes says she deeply admires her parents, Rosalyn Baker and Judge Moses Baker, Jr.

When Baker-Barnes went to Florida State University for college, her father made her live in an all-girls dorm on campus. But in the summer, there were only co-ed dorms. Who'd she meet on the first day moving into one of those co-ed dorms? Edrick Barnes, her husband, also a lawyer.

Her dad's "happy" about how it all worked out, Baker-Barnes laughed. She explains that she would not be able to even think about managing a career, Bar service and parenting without her husband of over 20 years, who has supported her and cheered her on every step of the way. "Edrick wants me to be the best I can be and does everything in his power to help me do it. We are a team."

She and her husband have tried to instill in their kids the same values their parents instilled in them: hard work, drive, commitment, service, giving back, and focusing on causes they care about.

She deeply admires her parents, Rosalyn Baker and Moses Baker, Jr., who are both retired.

Rosalyn Baker was the head of the state Department of Corrections offices in Palm Beach County. Moses Baker served as a judge for more than 25 years.

Her dad and Eugene Pettis "are longtime friends."

So, it wasn't just Pettis who showed Baker-Barnes how to break barriers and become the most fully realized version of herself after all. That image of excellence was all around her growing up.

“My parents would often say, ‘The only impossible journey is the one you never begin,’” Baker-Barnes said. “They were teaching me to trust myself and test my limits and see where I would go.”

It paid off. Now, she wants to help show the next generation how it’s done.