

Women of Influence 2025



The Enterprise-Tocsin
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Kimberly Merchant, CEO of Mississippi Center for Justice

Educational Background

I am a proud graduate of Pascagoula High School. I earned a Bachelor of Science in English from the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) and a Juris Doctor from the University of Mississippi School of Law. I have been licensed and practicing law in the State of Mississippi for 28 years.

Family/ Background Information

I come from a family of educators. My father was a history teacher and basketball coach, and my mother was an English teacher with a specialization in special education. I was raised by a strong, loving single mother, alongside my two brothers—one older and one younger—making me the middle child. My upbringing was grounded in education, resilience, and a deep sense of family.

Full Title/Position

I am the President and CEO of Mississippi Center for Justice, a non-profit public interest law firm committed to advancing racial and economic justice.

Talk about your career and what led you back to Mississippi Center for Justice.

After graduating from law school, I followed a traditional legal path and began practicing civil litigation at McTeer & Associates in Greenville, Mississippi. I initially handled insurance de-

fense cases in both state and federal court. Over time, the firm shifted its focus to representing plaintiffs in matters involving medical malpractice, serious personal injury, employment discrimination, product liability, and defamation. I spent nine formative years at the firm until Mr. McTeer's retirement prompted me to explore a new direction.

I then served as an Assistant District Attorney in Washington County. I appreciated the role because it gave me the flexibility to understand the people behind the crimes, and to make more informed, compassionate decisions about prosecutions and plea offers. However, over time, that approach was met with resistance. I was labeled a "social working DA," and it became clear that the system I was working within wasn't designed for the kind of justice I wanted to pursue. I realized I needed to be in a space where I could confront the inequities I saw every day and work to change them.

That realization came just as I learned the Mississippi Center for Justice was opening an office in the Mississippi Delta. I applied for and became the first Managing Attorney of the Indianola office, and also served as Director of Educational Opportunities. For the first time, I had the space to explore why these injustices existed and to work alongside colleagues and communities to develop real, collaborative solutions. It was liberating.

After six years at MCJ, I was offered a national lead-

ership role at the Shriver Center on Poverty Law, where I became the inaugural Director of the Racial Justice Institute and Network. In that role, I trained and mentored legal aid and public interest attorneys across the country, centering the intersection of race and poverty in their advocacy. The urgency of this work only deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the wake of George Floyd's murder, when racial and economic injustice became impossible for the nation to ignore.

After six years in that national role, I entered private practice, serving as city attorney for Indianola and Greenville, and as board attorney for the Hollandale School District. During that time, I was invited to join the board of the Mississippi Center for Justice and later served on the search committee for the new President and CEO. It was through that process that my fellow board members began encouraging me to consider the role myself. Ultimately, I said yes.

Returning to MCJ feels like a full-circle moment—like coming home. Given the current challenges facing both our state and our country, I don't see this as just a career move, I see it as a calling.

Describe a day in the life of the President and CEO of Mississippi Center for Justice.

As President and CEO of Mississippi Center for Justice, my days are spent managing a complex ecosystem—operations, fi-

nance, communications, development, and advocacy all move simultaneously, and I have to keep them aligned and responsive. About 75% of my role is focused on keeping the lights on: making sure my staff are paid, supported, and fully equipped to serve the communities that depend on us.

Much of my day is dedicated to relationship-building—whether it's cultivating new donors, stewarding existing funders, or identifying fresh streams of support to strengthen our sustainability. The rest of my time is spent collaborating with my team to ensure the systems that power MCJ are running smoothly and strategically. It's demanding work, but it's also deeply rewarding.

What led you to choose law as your career path?

I did not choose the law, it sort of just happened. When I first arrived at USM for my undergraduate studies, I wanted to be a computer programmer. What I didn't know was that computer programming requires lots of math courses and I was not interested or good at math. Once I lost the dream of being a computer programmer, I began exploring various majors, including political science, criminal justice, paralegal studies and finally settled on English.

English because I loved to read and write and made As in all of my English courses, so why not. In my final year of undergraduate studies I was preparing to take the GRE (Graduate Records Ex-



Kimberly Merchant is now the CEO of Mississippi Center for Justice. Photo for The E-T


amination) to acquire my master's in English. USM was providing me a scholarship and an opportunity to teach entry level English courses (ENG 101 and 102). While preparing for graduation, one of my paralegal studies teachers stopped me randomly one day on campus asking what my next step was. I told her about my plans to acquire a master's and in English and she said why not law school. Law school was not on my radar until the very moment my professor mentioned it. As a result, I took the LSAT (Law School Admission Test) and began applying. I was accepted to many law schools with Vanderbilt being my first choice, then UM invited me to attend on scholarship. I weighed the cost of Vanderbilt versus free tuition and decided to go with UM free of charge. That's how I choose law as my career path.

Who is your biggest hero? Why?

My mother, Dorothy Jean Lewis Jones, is my biggest hero. She has been a powerful example of love, intelligence, and strength throughout my life. I watched her raise three children while working and attending college, an extraordinary balancing act that showed me the meaning of perseverance and purpose. As her career grew, so did our family's opportunities, and I witnessed firsthand how hard work and determination can transform lives.

She's always given me the space to make my own decisions and my own mistakes, but has never wavered in her support. She is my rock, my greatest champion, and the one person whose unconditional love I've never had to question.

See Merchant Page 9



CONGRATULATIONS TO THE 2025 WOMEN OF INFLUENCE!

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Congratulations, Rebecca!

We're proud to celebrate Rebecca for being honored as a Woman of Influence. Her passion, hard work, and heart make a meaningful impact at Planters Bank and Sunflower County!



Planters Bank

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Kendall McDowell, senior marketing coordinator at Raborn Media

Educational Background:
I have a Bachelor's degree in Communication with an emphasis in Public Relations from Mississippi State University

Family/Background Information
I grew up in Greenville, MS attended Washington School, met and married Will McDowell and we have one son, Wallace who is 16 months

Full Title/Position
Senior Marketing Coordinator

Number of Years at your current position:
Six years

Describe a day in the life of a marketing coordinator:
Every day looks a little different for me, which is why I love my job. One day I'm creating a campaign for a client, and the next day I'm on-site helping do a video shoot. It's equal parts creative and structured and we have a really great team to help bring it all to life!

What led you to choose marketing as your career path?

What inspires you the most in your professional life?
The people I work for hands down. The clients I have had the privilege of working with have become some of my greatest friendships.

What advice do you have for young women looking to be involved in the marketing industry?
Working at a firm is a great place to start. You get to work with so many different types of clients, people, personalities as well as working in different types of marketing.

Who is your biggest hero? Why?
My Mom! She is both my biggest career hero and life hero. She had a great professional career and has inspired me professionally but also a mom, mentor etc. She did it all so delicately and I aspire to be more like her.

Honestly, I never saw myself in marketing. I always thought I would be working in more of a PR role, but through Divine intervention fell into marketing and I love the creativity, which is not something that I really saw in myself before this job.



Kendall McDowell is Senior Marketing Coordinator at Raborn Media. Photo for The E-T

DOWNS

Continued from Page 4

several businesses there, and my parents and brother have continued their legacy—building deep roots in the community that I've always felt connected to.

Full title/ position
I am a Family Nurse Practitioner at Indianola Family Medical Group.

What led you into the medical profession?
Ever since I was young, I've had a strong desire to pursue a career in the medical field. My greatest inspiration has been my older sister, who began her journey as a nurse and is now a nurse practitioner. Watching her dedication and passion encouraged me to follow a similar path and pursue a career in nursing, with the goal of furthering my education

Describe a day in the life of a nurse practitioner.

A typical day for me as a nurse practitioner often begins with reviewing the day's patient schedule and checking in on any follow-ups or test results from the previous day. The morning usually starts with seeing patients for a wide range of concerns, including routine check-ups, managing chronic illnesses, diagnosing and treating common conditions like infections or minor injuries, and providing preventive care such as vaccinations and screenings.

In between patients, I document notes, return phone calls, consult with collaborating physicians when needed, and follow up on lab results or specialist referrals. By the end of the day, I may have cared for newborns, children, teens, adults, and seniors. While the days can be challenging, this role is incredibly rewarding and fulfilling.

What is the most rewarding part of your job?
I know it might sound cliché, but helping people truly is the most rewarding part of my job. Working in the

medical field is all about serving others. I've been on the other side—as a patient—and the gratitude I feel for the doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals who cared for me is immeasurable. So now, when I have the opportunity to help someone, even in the smallest way, it fills me with a deep sense of pride and purpose.

Who is your biggest hero? Why?
My dad has always been my biggest hero. He's always been focused and driven, yet he remains humble and kind. From a young age, he taught me that helping others is a kindness that never goes unnoticed—and that lesson has stayed with me throughout my life.

What Inspires you most in your professional life?
One of the greatest sources of inspiration in my professional life is the incredible people I have the privilege of working alongside. The doctors, nurses, and staff at Indianola Family Medical Group and South Sunflower County Hospital once saved my life—and now, having the opportunity to work beside them is not only an inspiration to do more, but also the greatest honor. Their love and dedication to this community are undeniable, and it's impossible not to be inspired by them or to want to be part of this amazing family.

What advice do you have for young women looking to go into the medical field?
My biggest piece of advice is simple: keep going. There will be good days and there will be hard days—days when the stress feels overwhelming or the emotions run high. In those moments, remind yourself why you chose this field in the first place. The Lord called you to serve, and that calling is no small thing. We are here to help and care for those who need it most, and that purpose is what carries us through the challenges.

post customer bills and cash payroll checks. Then I make sure that I check and respond to all emails.

What inspires you at

DICKERSON

Continued from Page 5

What led you to come back to your hometown and run for public office?
I decided to run for public office to enable my hometown residents to engage in the political process and address systemic issues related to poverty and inequality. Witnessing the struggles that persist in Drew and the surrounding communities, I felt compelled to leverage my experiences and expertise to advocate for change from a

MERCHANT

Continued from Page 6

What inspires you the most in your professional life?
I have the best job in the world as President and CEO of Mississippi Center for Justice. This work is not just a career—it's a calling. No attorney chooses this path without a deep passion for people, and for me, that passion runs deep. Every day, I get to examine the broken systems that harm our communities and work alongside

POTTER

Continued from Page 7

the Northeast. It quickly became my mission to find loving homes for as many shelter dogs as possible. With the support of my fellow Humane Society board members and dedicated shelter staff, we worked tirelessly to vet the animals and coordinate their adoptions and transports to the northeast. Witnessing these once-forgotten animals—many of them starved, terrified, and unfamiliar with kindness—transform into happy, healthy, and beloved family members is indescrib-

HIBBLER

Continued from Page 8

medical treatments, giving care, support, and education can lead to profound, life-changing outcomes. This fuels my commitment to being the best healthcare

Shoppers Value?
My co-workers are friendly and nice and eager to help Shoppers Value customers at all times.

What advice would you give to people wanting to get into retail?
If you want to get into retail, be kind and patient with customers. Always put your-

hero? Why?
My mother, Mae Bertha Carter, is my greatest hero. Despite the numerous challenges she and my father faced while ensuring the best opportunities for their children, my mother demonstrated remarkable courage and determination by sending us to an all-white school during the civil rights movement.

What inspires you the most in your professional life?
Observing the success of children and youth is my foremost source of inspiration. Attending high school

country for everyone to thrive. It should not be that in a land of such abundance, so many live with so little. That contradiction fuels my fire. I am honored every day to lead an organization that dares to imagine and fight for a more just Mississippi and a more just America.

What advice do you have for young women looking to be involved in the legal field?
My advice to young women considering a career

Cloutier, founder of Northbound Rescue Society, Middtown, CT. She saw a vision with shelter animals throughout the Mississippi Delta, She selflessly finds homes for, coordinates transport, and donates whatever is needed for Delta animal rescue groups. She always find a way to be a light for both humans and animals.

What inspires you the most in your professional life?
I get the opportunity each day to detect and prevent financial crime. Knowing that my attention to detail and commitment to compliance

graduations and witnessing students who have participated in We2gether's programs receive their diplomas, as well as observing graduates obtain degrees from colleges and universities, are among my proudest achievements and bring me immense satisfaction.

What advice do you have for young women looking to be involved in public service?
Do it with dedication to the well-being of the community. Focus on serving the public rather than pursuing political aspirations.

in law is simple: go for it without hesitation or apology. Don't let anyone convince you that law school is too hard or that only a select few belong there. That's a false narrative designed to limit your potential. If becoming a lawyer is what you want, and you're passionate about using the law to make a difference, commit to the work. Do the reading, show up, stay focused and trust that the rest will follow. You belong in every room where decisions are made and voices matter.

helps safeguard our customers and our bank from harm gives my work real purpose.

What advice do you have for young women looking to be involved in the banking industry?
My advice to young women interested in banking would be to stay confident, remain curious, and never underestimate the value of hard work. The banking industry offers a wide range of career opportunities. Learn the basics, ask questions, and don't be afraid to take on challenges.

through workshops, certifications, and mentorships. Lifelong learning enables nursing professionals not only to enhance their clinical competencies but also to deliver high-quality, evidence-based care to the patients they serve.

of our Brock/Bush/Honey families. He is always there for us, rain or shine and we love him dearly.

MCDUFFY

Continued from Page 4

I walk through the store and talk to customers and

self in their place and always speak nicely to them.

Who is your hero? Why?
Sam Brock is the patriarch