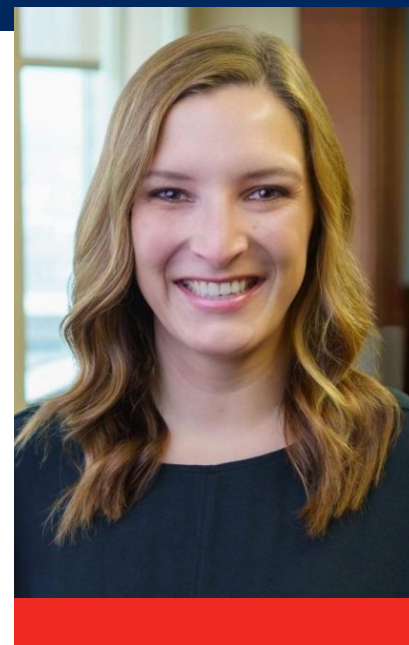


Attorney's time working for U.S. Senator proved to be transformative

By Brian Cox



"Wild," that's how attorney Marianna Knister Downer often describes her years as a young Senate staffer in Washington, D.C.

"It was wild to be so young and around so many different, influential people," she says of those days more than a decade ago when she was in her early 20s and was "busy and broke with friends who were as busy and broke" as she was.

While her time in D.C. was meant to be just a brief stint, it turned out to be an enormously influential experience in Downer's life.

Born and raised in New Orleans, Downer grew up in a tight-knit, blended family just down the street from Plum Street Snowballs, the landmark stand where generations of New Orleanians have

lined up for icy summer treats. Her father, Terry Knister, was an attorney, and her mother, Angie Lamoli Silvestry, and stepfather, Kevin McGill, worked for the Associated Press. Her mother was born and raised in a small beach town in Puerto Rico, where much of her family still lives. Being from such a large, closely connected family in Puerto Rico, Angie made sure to instill the same familial bond in her children throughout Downer's upbringing.

"Family was everything," Downer says. "It didn't matter if everyone didn't get along, at the end of the day everybody was there."

The oldest of three daughters, Downer knew early on that she wanted to follow in her father's footsteps and pursue a career in law. She is now a civil litigator, practicing mainly construction and corporate defense at Gordon Arata, a full-service law firm with deep roots in Louisiana.

"The best part of working here at Gordon Arata is that the work doesn't lend itself to pigeon-holing yourself into one area," she says. "It could be anything on any given day."

As a senior political communications major in the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University, Downer landed an internship with U.S. Senator Mary Landrieu's office in Baton Rouge. That introduction to politics led to her decision to move to the nation's capital after graduating from LSU a semester early in 2013. She had eight months before she planned to start law school in the fall – spending those months in D.C. seemed like a good use of her time.

She arrived in D.C. at 21 years old, living with three roommates and learning how to manage life on her own.

"I loved it. I feel everybody should have to live in D.C. for at least a summer," says Downer.

Within mere months of arriving, Downer started as a staff assistant in Landrieu's D.C. office. Her very first day coincided with a ricin attack in the Senate mailroom, and she spent the day on lockdown on the seventh floor of the Hart Senate Office Building.



Marianna's family is close-knit and gets together as often as possible. Pictured at a Thanksgiving gathering are (front, l-r) sister Samantha Knister, father Terry Knister, and Marianna; (back) stepfather Kevin McGill, mother Angie Lamoli Silvestry, and sister Angelina Knister.

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As a part of Sen. Mary L. Landrieu's staff, Marianna (fourth from the left) had the opportunity to meet many influential Washington, D.C. figures, including U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

"It was a good indicator of what the next few years would look like," says Downer with a laugh. "It was never boring."

The "plan" to return to Louisiana for law school dissolved quickly as Downer thrived working for the senator.

"I loved my job," she says. "I loved the friends that I made there. There are some that are still my best friends today."

She ended up staying 3-1/2 years, working her way up to assistant scheduler and then executive assistant to Landrieu. Those roles put her directly at the center of the Senator's daily life. She routinely drove Landrieu around in a 2006 green Jeep Liberty, picking her up from the airport, taking her to meetings, and driving her home at night.

"We went everywhere, and I mean **everywhere** in that Jeep, which she hated," says Downer. "We got to spend quality time together, which was really interesting. I also got to meet a lot of really cool people. Anybody would jump in my car."

She remembers picking up Landrieu from the airport and having any number of senators jump in as surprise backseat passengers, catching a ride to afternoon votes at the Capitol.

What started as an entry-level job answering phones and greeting constituents, grew into a front-row seat to the work of the U.S. Senate.

"As a staff assistant, it was my responsibility to make the senator's constituents know that they'd been heard," Downer says.

Later, as assistant scheduler, her job became orchestrating when and how staff could get time with Landrieu. Walking and talking was the key.

She remembers watching the senator once power through 11 meetings in just over two hours, moving from conference room to conference room, absorbing information, engaging with people, and being prepared for each conversation. The pace was grueling, but it was also inspiring.

In 2014, Downer returned to Louisiana to work with Landrieu's campaign manager on the senator's re-election. The work was all-consuming and nonstop. At one point, six campaign staffers were living in Downer's mom's house in New Orleans. When Landrieu lost her re-election bid after serving 18 years in the Senate, Downer says the letdown was hard.

"When it was done, it was just **done**," she says.

Back in D.C., while helping the senator's staff pack up the office, Downer approached Landrieu and offered to continue working for her. Landrieu took her up on the offer, and Downer spent the next year and a half as her executive assistant.

For Downer, working in Washington was transformative.

"I'm so thankful that I took some time between my undergraduate and law degree," she says. "I think I grew up a lot. When I worked for the senator, it gave me the opportunity to realize I can do this, and I can be in charge and I can handle anything."

The confidence she developed during those years carried forward into every part of her life.

"Working for the senator gave me the confidence to be as involved in law school and in the community as I am now," she says. "I think growing up, I probably had the skill set, but I didn't have the confidence to be involved."

After another year and a half working for Landrieu, Downer determined it was time to return to her original plan and attend law school at the Paul M. Hebert Law Center at Louisiana State University. The Law Center gave her new outlets to get involved. She served on the Student Bar Association, spent two years on the Journal of Energy Law and Resources, spearheaded events, and volunteered with all sorts of organizations.

While at the Law Center, she also met her husband, Stephen Downer, now a civil litigator at Deutsch Kerrigan LLP. The couple have an 18-month-old daughter, Nora. If you ask Downer, being Nora's mom is her greatest role to date.



Marianna and her husband, Stephen, recently welcomed their baby daughter, Nora, into the world.

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While at the Law Center, Downer tailored her studies around LSU's Energy Law and Policy program, but after law school, she began her legal career at a traditional insurance defense firm in New Orleans. A true case of trial by fire, Downer says she conducted her first deposition within her first week.

"It was exhilarating and terrifying at the same time," she says. "I learned so much about the practice of law that set me up for what I do now."

Less than 18 months later, Downer had just finished a three-day jury trial when her father called to say an associate position had opened up at Gordon Arata, the same firm where he has worked for more than 20 years. He encouraged her to send in her resume. Three weeks later, she was working in the same office as her dad, a former police officer who earned his law degree from the University of Mississippi.

"I always wanted to work with my dad, it's just something I never really thought would happen," she says. "I grew up knowing my dad was a good lawyer the way every kid thinks that their parents are the best at everything, but watching him work and learning from him is special."

In her office, she has a framed photograph that her father gave her of the two of them when she was sworn in to the Louisiana Bar. He calls it their "daddy-daughter lawyer photo."

"The standards and expectations he sets are high because he knows what I'm capable of," says Downer. "He pushes me to do my best and I love working with him. Don't tell him I said that."



Marianna's dad framed this photo of when she was sworn into the Louisiana Bar. He refers to it as their "Daddy Daughter Lawyer Photo," and she keeps it on a shelf in her office at Gordon Arata.