



## Crafting Distinctive Careers:

### DEBRA MERCHANT & JOHN MERCHANT



**D**ebra '84 and John '82 Merchant chuckle about the fact that they never “met.” They always knew each other. In fact, Debra was delivered into this world with the help of John’s mother—the first Black registered nurse in Lexington—and John was born the following year. Raised in Lexington with overlapping friend groups, they started dating in high school before attending Morehead State University.

The Merchants’ wedding took place two weeks before Debra’s first day in law school. The couple then followed their hearts into intriguing legal careers, with Debra on an education path and John taking a finance focus.

Now a partner at Dinsmore & Shohl in Cincinnati, John has worked in government-related roles for four decades. At the start, he knew very little about municipal finance law.

“I always wanted to be a lawyer, but I’m not sure I knew what that looked like,” John said.

He studied political science and economics and talked to people like Bill James, the law school’s only African American professor at the time, about what to do with his law degree. The Black Law Students Association provided John with friendships and additional insight from students from around the country.

“I looked up to Bill. We talked about the law and opportunities in the community after law school. He had a big impact on me.”

John’s proudest moment was graduating from law school, but he still wasn’t sure what direction to take with his law degree. When former Kentucky Lieutenant Governor Steve Beshear needed an administrative assistant, John took on the role. He attended board meetings, which covered a variety of legal topics, including bonds. For several years, his involvement with housing and finance

issues grew. Eventually, John was reviewing most of the bond transactions on behalf of the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

Around 1990, a Cincinnati law firm contacted him to join them as a public finance attorney. From 1991 to 2014, John continued developing his specialization as a municipal bond counsel with Peck, Shaffer & Williams. That firm merged with Dinsmore & Shohl in 2014. John continues to practice there and feels fortunate to have built a career in public finance law.

“I enjoy it because I contribute to tangible infrastructure projects such as bridges, school buildings, the Cincinnati streetcar and the Lexington Airport. I’ve done the bond work for these and get to see citizens using the completed projects,” John said.

Debra grew up admiring her mother’s teaching abilities and envisioned herself in education. She studied special education and then became interested in the legalities of the field. Today, she serves as Vice President for Student Affairs at the University of Cincinnati.

“After getting my special education degree and teaching, I had a curiosity about the underpinnings of the law for special ed and how the law impacts everything we do on a daily basis. Social justice and constitutional law are other threads that continue to pop up in my career.”

Debra’s mentors at UK College of Law, such as Carolyn Bratt and Louise Graham, had meaningful conversations with her about women in the legal profession. Later, Professor Bratt and Debra crossed paths again through the Kentucky Commission on Women.

A judicial internship showed Debra the interplay of the law and socioeconomic factors. Early in her career, she worked for Kentucky Protection & Advocacy as an advocate for

children with disabilities and became Director of Disability Services at the University of Cincinnati in 1998. Since being named to the Student Affairs role in 2013, Debra leverages her law degree daily in the implementation of policies and practices in higher education.

“If it weren’t for law school, I would not have enjoyed such varied and rewarding professional opportunities. I always hoped I would be able to combine my calling to educate and empower with the insights and critical analysis skills I acquired in law school,” Debra said. “I’ve been able to impact lives, advocate on behalf of marginalized populations, influence policies that made public schools better and contribute to the rich legacy of higher education.”

Debra and John have one daughter who is a political scientist. The Merchants have both been civically engaged, with John serving on the Morehead State University Board of Regents for 12 years, including serving as the Board chair for four years. They chuckle, noting that John learned a lot about Debra’s role during his board service in higher education. Debra is currently enjoying an appointment to the Cincinnati Museum Center Board of Trustees.

“For both of us, looking through the legal lens is a skill set that is valued wherever we go,” Debra said.

The Merchants will continue to give back to communities and institutions that have given so much to them, including the UK Rosenberg College of Law. Their support of the building fund will help expand the college’s commitment to excellence.

“We appreciate how the law school has grown and its commitment to diversity and inclusion,” Debra said. “We like the trajectory it’s on.”

RUTH PAARMANN