

After three-and-a-half busy years as CPAA's General Counsel, Aryelle Smith is transitioning to a new phase in her personal and professional life.

"I am, technically, Aryelle's boss; but in spirit, I am also her brother. She is an intense all-in leader like me, and that can be detrimental to your health, especially if you already have underlying health issues. When I found out about her health issues and just how far her health had regressed, the brother in me kicked the boss aside and focused on her needs. The undeniable truth was that there was no way she could stay in this role while 'taking it easy.' When she's in, she's all-in." LaRaviere added, "...so I fully supported everything she needed to transition into the next phase of her life."

For LaRaviere, that included an extended sick leave. "She had given so much to our members and so much to our organization, it was time for us to give to and support her."

Support is a word often used when referring to Smith — supporting members, teams, and ultimately every school leader in CPS. Legal support is one of the primary reasons that members join CPAA, and it is important to Smith that members know the support and care will not leave with her. "I'm probably most proud of the fact that we have a fully functioning legal team now. This is no longer about the strength or ability of one person," she says and adds, "Those resources and supports are accessible to all members with or without me."



Outgoing CPAA General Counsel
Aryelle Smith

NOT A GOODBYE

Still, it's hard to see such a critical, enthusiastic, and exceptional member of the team leave. After all, she has provided representation to scores of school leaders on hundreds of cases. "I have been really blessed to form relationships with so many school leaders. I don't want CPAA members to be sad that I'm leaving. I don't want anyone to feel abandoned or unsteady in this process, especially since I know they will be fine," said Smith.

Of course, Smith had no way of knowing she'd leave CPAA so soon. But in a way, she was preparing for her departure from the moment she arrived. "When I came to CPAA, I was the only person. Succession planning was important to both Troy and to me. We wanted to create a department that would function independent of individual players. It is why we advocated for and eventually hired a second attorney and why we secured a legal assistant. Being able to thoughtfully parse work was much more efficient," and it was apparent in the results.

It is this efficiency President LaRaviere has valued, "Hiring Aryelle was – and will always be – one of the most defining moments in our organization's history. There was no one more prepared, no one more capable, and no one more determined than she." LaRaviere praised Smith's almost single-handed creation of the department and notes the importance of those legal supports that members have now come to expect from CPAA. "... She came in expecting to handle maybe 15 cases a year, based on prior averages. She ended up defending more than 75 a year."

Smith has won some impressive cases for members and has stood alongside school leaders fighting for changes to policies and procedures. Notably, the efforts from Smith and her team on Bargaining Rights and Principal Eligibility that will benefit all members. Smith, however, seems most proud of the Legal Hotline that debuted last school year. Her vision for the hotline was critical in meeting members where they were, and she made it easy for individual team members to contribute their own expertise in meaningful ways. Team members like Legal Specialist Tanesha O'Neal, who is the first point of contact on the Legal Hotline, credits Smith's prophetic ability to see beyond what is presented, "...she has a way of seeing something in you that you don't see in yourself and making you use it to your advantage."

Smith has been more than a law professional. To O'Neal she was also a mentor. Intent on seeing her team grow into their strengths. O'Neal said Smith has a way of making everyone feel comfortable in their vulnerability. A trait that is so important, not just for team members, but for clients who have to walk through some uncomfortable scenarios. O'Neal says it is because of Smith's tutelage that she is more confident and capable than when she was first hired.

Deputy General Counsel Samantha Odyniec sees Smith's dedication to members in every interaction. She says it is Smith's desire for justice that drives her. "Smith imparted to the legal team that every CPAA member deserves caring representation and zealous advocacy for protection of their legal rights regardless of how large or small their matter may be." Odyniec added, "It is Smith's dedication to the members of CPAA that has inspired and guided the rest of the legal team to work so hard in support of each and every CPAA member."

While Smith's expertise and dedication were clear and quantitative assets to CPAA, it is her thoughtfulness, her energy, and her quick smile that may actually be missed the most. "It's not often that you get to work with someone like Aryelle," Mia Maynard, CPAA's Assistant Director of Operations, shared, "She is fiercely protective of our members rights. But more than that, she was an approachable person who valued the relationships that were being built through her practice." Maynard was impressed and awed by Smith's integrity and unique ability to "...work tirelessly for the benefit of all without forgetting the person behind each case."

LaRaviere said Smith complemented the small office team, and through her leadership redefined expectations for the level of care and support CPAA members could expect from their legal team – a legacy that he will protect. "She was just what we needed to grow our organization and protect our members. She was a godsend. When she came on board, she removed whole swaths of work from my plate. She is mission-driven and member-focused, and it is reflected in the way she approaches each and every case." Never one to give up, Smith's tenacity has created a forever fan in LaRaviere who added, "She is a solution finder and a purposeful professional. She doesn't look for the easy way out." Her determination is a skill that can be rare given the caseloads and the nature of law where making a deal some-

times comes at the cost of winning.

Kent Lau, CPAA Director of Operations, worked very closely with Smith, speaking with her sometimes several times in a day, and called her advocacy on behalf of CPAA members "game-changing." He added, "From her first day, members have had a fierce and loyal advocate who has ensured that their rights are preserved and their profession respected. While her departure will be greatly felt and we will truly miss her, she has established a legal department at CPAA that will be able to carry on and move the organization forward."

LaRaviere added, "In Aryelle, I found someone who was just as tenacious and relentless in her legal advocacy for members as I am in my professional political advocacy for members. You cannot imagine how much of a blessing that was for me and for our organization. Aryelle's mark on CPAA is clear and powerful. The mark of her legal savvy, prescience, and meticulous planning is everywhere."

When we asked President LaRaviere for his thoughts on her legacy, he offered, "When I imagine people looking back 50 years from now on the role CPAA played in the transformation of our school district, I think of the play, *Hamilton*. The play forces you to come to grips with the immense role of a man who seemed like a footnote in American history, Alexander Hamilton. There's so much we take for granted that would not have happened without him. I don't know who I'll be in that history. What I do know is that Aryelle is our quiet standard; our ethical clock; and a co-visionary. She is our Alexander Hamilton.

So I hope that the history of CPAA does as much justice to highlight her impact on our organization as the play did to highlight Alexander Hamilton's impact on our country. Aryelle is an absolute jewel, and she deserves to be celebrated with awe and spectacle. If I have anything to do with it, she will."

As Smith has made an indelible mark on CPAA, so too have CPAA members on Smith. She insists that CPAA has a special place in her heart and that she doesn't want to call this goodbye. "I'm not going far. I will be keeping up with my CPAA family and offering input from the sidelines when inclined. But I know with Troy and the team he has created, members won't feel a void." A point that can be argued.

A void is inevitable, but the legacy created at CPAA by Aryelle Smith will remain.