

# DANIELLE MELTZER CASSEL

South Shore Contrast  
Sheds Light on Her  
Real Estate Career

by Daniel I. Dorfman

Danielle B. Meltzer Cassel's interest in affordable housing and urban development began with her childhood home, poised at the border between two very different Chicago neighborhoods.

Cassel, 43, a partner at **Vedder Price PC**, grew up in Chicago's South Shore during the 1970s and '80s. The view from the front door of her home peered into the affluent, but racially diverse Jackson Park Highlands. From the breakfast room at the rear of the house, where all of the family meals occurred, she watched the alley life and the back side of Jeffrey Boulevard courtyard apartment buildings in a much poorer and racially segregated part of the city.

Such was life for the daughter of a renowned psychopharmacologist at the University of Chicago and an English professor with the City Colleges of Chicago.

"Here I was, with the opportunity to go to the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, having these parents who worked very hard and were very professional," Cassel says today from her office that is bursting with files. "It was a really stark difference between my front door and my back door, and I was very cognizant of how different the school was that I was going to versus the other kids in the neighborhood."

In high school, Cassel's father moved to Shaker Heights, Ohio, with his daughter "kicking and screaming." One of the reasons why Cassel was not happy was she missed the racial mix South Shore and Hyde Park offered as opposed to the more segregated and homogenous Shaker Heights.

"Suddenly I am in a completely different demographic and different urban form," Cassel remembers. She was constantly surprised by how little her new classmates and neighbors seemed to physically or socially interact with people who were less affluent.

Cassel graduated from high school in Ohio and enrolled at Yale, where she describes her first day as bringing her back to growing up.

## A Custom Major and Fellowships

"It was so much like the University of Chicago. I was meeting these affluent classmates and being blown away by the course list and everything the school had to offer but then, at the same time, seeing so much poverty in New Haven," she says. "It was that front door, back door thing just staring me in the face again."

Within a few days of arriving, Cassel had to select her freshman fall classes. At 17 years old, she made a decision that directed her for the intervening 26 years of study and legal practice. She determined she wanted to pursue her interest in cities, not only in her fall coursework, but as her major. The fact that Yale did not offer urban studies as a major at that time was a blessing in disguise.



Cassel discovered a custom major could be pursued with approval from the appropriate professors and a committee. That was the path Cassel opted for, choosing courses from 10 departments that seemed to offer classes with appropriate pieces of the puzzle, including economics, sociology, history, architecture, urban design and political science.

Yet, for all the course work, Cassel believed she needed practical experience, seeing issues first hand. Therefore, during her college and graduate school semesters, and over the summer breaks, she volunteered and landed internships at government agencies and not-for-profits such as the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Justice Department, the New Haven public school system and the New York City Parks Department.

Moving forward, Cassel received additional fellowships and grants so she could spend the summer between junior and senior year doing interviews for her senior thesis, which turned out to be a 200-page examination of the 1990 federal Affordable Housing Act.

Cassel intentionally interviewed people from both the private and public sectors, staff for both Democratic and Republican lawmakers on Capital Hill, and housing advocates who were pushing widely varying types of subsidies, ranging from brick and mortar public housing construction to rental vouchers and from community-based non-profit housing development to reforms in federal mortgage insurance and tax policies.

Cassel's decision to apply to law school during her senior year was an unexpected byproduct of meeting people from these many professional backgrounds and from seeing, firsthand, the diversity and conflict among affordable housing advocates.

"I had this incredible chance to not only discuss the substance of my research topic but to ask them what they did for a living and how they got there," Cassel says. "More than one person that I interviewed said if I wanted to have a role in affordable housing policy I needed a law degree, that legal training was critical for drafting legislation, and that having a law degree was very important as a credential."

## From Public Policy to Practice

Cassel describes having an equally important realization from her senior year research experience. She decided that while she was fascinated by housing and economic development policy, she did not want to be in an advocacy or regulatory role before she had actually worked, first-hand, on projects that built housing units and created jobs.

Cassel spent the next four years at Harvard Law School, where she graduated with honors, and at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, where she received a master's in public policy.

At that point, Cassel had been away from Chicago for over 10 years, but she tremendously missed her hometown. In the summer of 1995, she had the opportunity to return home as a summer associate at Rudnick & Wolfe. After graduation, Cassel returned to Rudnick & Wolfe and stayed

there until 2008 as the firm evolved into DLA Piper.

During her years at the two firms, she was exposed to real estate law and received training that she describes as "phenomenal" from the older transactional lawyers. These years particularly intensified her interest in land use and zoning laws and the questions they present.

"How do you balance private property rights with community interests?" Cassel asks. "How do folks that are not comfortable with each other come to accept one another or not? When do you balance the citywide economy with local inconvenience? They are really hard questions, and I really appreciate having the opportunity to play a role in shaping the development process and their outcomes, hopefully in a way the neighbors can feel good about."

Cassel practices in three primary areas. The first is transactional real estate among private parties: acquisitions, dispositions, financing, joint ventures, leasing and operations. The second area deals with the interface between the private and public sector in terms of annexation, zoning, land use, infrastructure development, licensing and permitting. The third area is public-private partnerships and economic development incentives.

Drawing on her South Shore and her suburban life experiences, Cassel enjoys working on projects ranging from tough inner-city neighborhood developments to affluent suburban properties, from homeless shelters for La Casa Norte in Back of the Yards to Chicago's Trump Tower and General Growth's Oakbrook Center regional shopping mall.

One of her earlier cases involved Deborah's Place, an organization that aims to help women who had been homeless with the goal of creating temporary housing in Lakeview.

"It was a very heated neighborhood fight," Cassel recalls. "I got to be intimately involved. It was one of those early land use projects that made me see my childhood impressions of the front door-back door conflicts manifest themselves in an actual, real-life debate about the location and existence of affordable housing."

"As I became a zoning attorney, I really began to see how regulatory policies as much as private market forces cause segregation. Class segregation. Racial segregation. That Deborah's Place engagement was one of the first truly eye-opening land use fights for me. I just saw how powerful land use laws are in dictating who we live with, who our kids go to school with, and what is built around us."

As her career took off, Cassel found time to share her expertise with others as she co-taught seminars at the Northwestern and the University of Chicago law schools.

## Finding a Home at Vedder Price

By 2008, Cassel decided it was time to move on from DLA Piper. She found a new home at Vedder Price.

"It has lifted a huge weight off my shoulders," she says. "Vedder is a unique firm, and the more I talk with my colleagues, the more I realize it. It has extremely transparent governance and compensation systems and a governance model

where partners can be responsive to their clients. It is not like a top-down management system."

Among her achievements so far at Vedder Price was the growth of the Ally Bank Community Development Program, which provides financing for affordable housing.

Steve Fitzpatrick, an investment manager directing the program, recalls the intricacies of the projects and what Cassel did to see them through.

"We developed a proprietary low income housing tax credit fund and within that fund the bank would either make loans or equity investments, and sometimes both. We had some unique properties within that fund such as one in Englewood, Colo., where there were zoning issues and other complex issues concerning what would happen if the property would be destroyed," he remembers.

"Danielle's zoning expertise really knocked the ball out of the park because what happened is we were able to structure a very reasonable legal agreement that helped Ally Bank ultimately close the deal," he says.

Throughout her career, Cassel also has worked on dozens of developments close to her childhood home in Hyde Park, including historic preservation and new construction projects. One such recent project was Hyde Park's first new hotel in nearly a half century, the Hyatt Place in Harper Court, which opened in 2013.

"She paid attention to detail and she guided us through the various applications processes," says Ed Small, the president of Smart Hotel, the developer of the project. "She was able to help us expedite the process so we could meet deadline. She quickly became a member of our team so that each of us could facilitate whatever needed to be done to get us to the finish line."

Small specifically talks about Cassel's work in securing liquor permits and operating licenses from both the city and the state. "She understood the process, so she got down to City Hall herself because she knew every minute and hour were critical."

Another of Cassel's favorite recent projects was obtaining zoning approvals for a 6,000-seat Israel of God Church in Riverdale which ran into stiff opposition from the former mayor, who adamantly opposed the proposal.

"It came down to a city council meeting where the mayor was presiding, and many of the decision making corporate authorities were his appointees," Cassel recalls. "At the beginning of the meeting, we did not have the 'yes' votes. Several hours later, with me on the hot seat, we got the approval."

"I remember driving home that night, on Halsted, for 80 blocks, instead of taking the Dan Ryan, just literally with shaking hands, because it had been so touch-and-go during the proceedings. Every card was stacked against us, and I knew I really made the difference in making that happen that night."

Several weeks later Cassel was attending a birthday party when one of the guests suddenly looked at her in recognition.

"She looked over to me and said, 'You are the

woman who saved our church. God sent you.” Cassel responded with a big smile, “I guess God sent you a nice Jewish girl!”

## The Unexpected and Expected

It was through Cassel’s passion for affordable housing—with some tardiness thrown in—that she met her husband, Peter. Both arrived late to a conference concentrating on affordable housing partnerships and sat next to one another in the last row.

Cassel raised a point with the panelists during the final Q & A session. Little did she know her life was about to change.

“My future husband hands me his business card after the session ended and says I asked an incredibly stupid question and he would like to take me out to dinner and talk about it,” she recalls. “I thought I had met this nice geek that I was going to talk affordable housing with. I had no idea it was a first date.”

After working off-site the next day, she returned to her office to find flowers and a note from Peter making quite clear that they had just been on a date. Seven weeks later, they were engaged.

The night before her wedding, continuing a tradition of making five-year predictions with her college friends, Cassel said she and Peter would still be married, would both be working in economic development, would have two children named Henry and Amanda, and would move to the South Side. That’s exactly what occurred.

Danielle, Peter, Henry and Amanda live in a greystone they restored at the western edge of Hyde Park, near Washington Park. “We call it Syde Park,” she says about that “side” of the neighborhood.

“I want my children to have the very best education I can possible give them. Part of that is sending them to Lab School. Part of that is living on an edge between different neighborhoods and seeing differences in opportunity.”

Away from the office Cassel is a member of the

board of the Primo Center for Women and Children, the Law Project and the Yale Club of Chicago.

In her spare time, she enjoys watching entire seasons of TV programs in quick bursts. She finds it ironic that she has been drawn to the drama “24,” which ran from 2001-2010.

“Since I tend to be more of a dove than a hawk, and I tend to be more left than right in my politics, it is fascinating watching this Fox show that seems to be making the case for waterboarding and tossing civil liberties out the window,” Cassel notes. “But it makes for great TV.”

Cassel believes one of the reasons for her success is her upbringing in a family steeped in academia. “I’m not trying to elevate myself over attorneys who don’t have academic parents, but I know to some degree it makes me take a step back in every transaction and try to see a whole as well as the individual parts.” ■