

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 159, No. 138

## With law degree, credibility follows

Elking, consulting company vice president, thrives on creating strategy

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Law Bulletin staff writer

So far, Tiffany E. Elking's career might best be characterized by her adherence to the adage "the pen is mightier than the sword."

Just ask her about her early work in contract law.

"I was writing contracts when I was 11 years old. I would write contracts on everything — what we were doing on the weekend, who was doing the chores," said The John Marshall Law School alumna and recently minted vice president of Government Navigation Group, a consulting company in Chicago and Springfield.

"I always thought if you write it, if you can frame the argument, you've got the upper hand."

She's a bit older now, but Elking is still a fledgling politico by most standards — a legal-aide-turned-lobbyist only a few years removed from law school and the bar exam.

But what she lacks in age, the 27-year-old St. Louis native might make up for in savvy. She's spent the formative years of her career bumping elbows and polishing her political skills with some of the best-known figures in the Illinois political galaxy.

Before graduating from DePaul University with a political science degree — at age 19 — she was among the first crop of interns for then-U.S. Sen. Barack Obama.

With her boss fresh from the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention that sent his star soaring, Elking handled typical intern assignments: immigration, constituency services and attending Obama's appearances on "Late Night with Conan O'Brien."

"It was during the time when he

was becoming really a hot topic. He went on 'Conan' and I got to go along, and I just remember the trendiness factor," Elking said. "It really just made you kind of realize how quickly things change from just a couple years prior, that anything is really possible in politics."

That bit of inspiration — along with a stint helping U.S. Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-Mo., on his successful re-election campaign in 2006 — provided the spark for Elking to pursue what she said was a related goal: getting her law degree.

"With my age, I wanted something that made me more legitimate and credible," she said. "I thought that getting a law degree would establish my credibility in a political atmosphere."

She would go on to hold positions for U.S. Sen. Richard J. Durbin, the city of Chicago and U.S. District Judge Robert W. Gettleman during law school, stoking the embers for a career in public service — until late 2010, when she applied for a job analyzing legislation and providing counsel in House Speaker Michael J. Madigan's office, arguably the white-hot core of Illinois policy-making.

"What stuck out is she knew so much about the job before she got it," said David A. Ellis, who at the time was chief legal counsel to the speaker and ultimately hired Elking. "She had done her homework, she had talked to other people who'd done the job and it was a very easy decision to make."

Ellis, who led the impeachment proceedings against former Gov. Rod Blagojevich in 2009, emphasized the importance of Elking's work on redistricting — a controversial issue in many states but one with particular gravitas in Illinois given Madigan's reputation as a political chess master and his



### Tiffany E. Elking

Vice President, Government Navigation Group

- **Career:** Intern, U.S. Sen. Barack Obama, 2005; field supervisor, U.S. Rep. Russ Carnahan's campaign, 2006; law clerk, U.S. District Judge Robert W. Gettleman; assistant counsel, Illinois House speaker, 2011 to 2012; Government Navigation Group, 2012 to present
- **Age:** 27
- **Law school:** The John Marshall Law School, 2010
- **Interests:** Painting, traveling

nearly three-decades-long grip on power.

"Dave Ellis leaned heavily on her in the redistricting, the plan and the court case," said Rep. Louis I. Lang, a Skokie Democrat and veteran lawmaker who also relied on Elking for research on casino gaming — one of his own specialty issues until a conflict-of-interest concern caused him to relinquish it during the most recent General Assembly session.

"If you give her a project, give her a direction, she'll get it to the finish line without a lot of looking over her shoulder," Lang said.

In 2012, the first election under the new map, the Democrats reversed Republican gains made during the GOP wave election in 2010, controlling eight out of 19 congressional seats that year but 12 out of 18 now.

The new lines for the state legislature didn't hurt Democrats either — they have supermajorities in the House and Senate. Although, the majorities have proven unreliable on major issues such as pension reform.

Naturally, Republicans grumbled. But very few maps, no matter how seemingly partisan, have been completely invalidated. And it was up to Elking and others to make sure the Illinois maps could pass constitutional muster:

"The lawyers don't have any part in the actual drawing of the map," Elking said, citing the legal team's role in defending the process in any potential litigation.

"Our role is kind of different, it's making sure that all the districts are legally sound, meaning our voting rights requirement, equal population requirements, things of that nature."

Like her propensity to draw up contracts as a child or her appraisal of the benefits to a legal education, Elking's rationale for seeking out the redistricting issue rings as though it came from a seasoned political tactician. It's fitting for someone working under Madigan.

"I specifically wanted everything to do with the election code and tax code," Elking said. "I thought that the most important thing to our caucus and, you know, to my experience, was understanding the finances and getting people re-elected. I thought if you could understand the money and the power, that would be important."

Elking joined Government Navigation Group after working through the General Assembly's spring 2012 session. The firm handles public and private clients, including 3M, Blue Cross Blue Shield and the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County.

The daughter of a father who owns a St. Louis Shopper newspaper and a wedding chapel and a mother who lives in Florida and works in property management, Elking is the first person in her immediate family to attend college.

And while she's compiled a packed resume at a relatively young age, she's not done seeking challenges in the political world. Don't expect her name to appear on a ballot anytime soon, however.

"I always saw myself being a public servant," Elking said. "Basically a long-term goal would be the chief of staff of an elected official. I see myself helping create the strategy, but not necessarily being the face of it. I'm more of a behind-the-scenes person."

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