

# Bar None

BY JULIE STERMASI

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**K**im Kardashian is within a Hail Mary of becoming an attorney.

As you may have heard, Kardashian is participating in a legal apprenticeship program available in four states—California, Washington, Vermont, and Virginia—which will allow her to sit for the bar exam after four years of study under the mentorship of an experienced practicing attorney or judge. This process is called “reading the law,” and it’s not new—lawyers existed long before there were law schools. As part of the program, Kardashian was also required to sit for and pass California’s “baby bar” before beginning her second year of study.<sup>1</sup>

What does this option mean for people who don’t own billion-dollar enterprises? It means you can become a lawyer without mortgaging the rest of your life. It opens the profession to all.

I wish I had known about this when I started. As a first-generation American, it would have been easier to just do the work and not worry about school ranking, admission, and cost. Call it “zero barriers rare, hold the nepotism.” If I had to do law school over again today, goodbye *beaucoup plata*: The total cost of attendance for the 2022–23 academic year at my alma mater, the George Washington University Law School, is \$96,980<sup>2</sup> (I’ll do the math for you—that’s a grand total of \$290,940). The four-year, part-time program is \$78,850 per annum, for a final cost of \$315,400. Kim K has the coin, but how many other working mothers can say the same?

Judging from all the shade she’s received in the media, many, both in and out of this tradition-steeped profession, balk at the thought. Is earning the right to sit for the bar without suffering law school “unfair”? The expense of the degree makes it trickier to achieve for those of lower- or middle-class economic backgrounds, who are from immigrant or foreign families without established resources, or who wish to have children, among others.

### **Outsiders Make the Best Fighters**

And for some, “getting in” still feels like being an outsider in the hallowed halls of jurisprudence. Ergo, the much-maligned Jimmy McGill of TV’s *Better Call Saul*. Despite a law degree from the University of American Samoa (go Sand

Crabs!), where he studied and trained outside the lines, the respect of his peers eluded him (but sometimes, outsiders can make the best fighters: “If you even dream of beating me you’d better wake up and apologize,” said Mohammed Ali<sup>3</sup>). Perhaps the atypical learning of the law to state admission specifications just offends a legal profession that has historically excluded many, as a glance at the portrait wall of any local bar association in the country will corroborate.

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The bar exam is designed to certify all those who have shown the requisite knowledge of the law to ensure the responsible and ethical practice of law. If Kim K can pass the bar, she succeeds by the same standard anyone else does. In many ways it will be harder to do, and the pass rate for people going this route is low, so why diss her for the effort and commitment?

Maybe because the law is a notoriously slow dancer: Precedent and A Priori are the King and Queen of the prom, always and forever. It’s not surprising you can almost hear the community sneering at the thought of Kardashian as a

lawyer, with its less-than-veiled insinuations that she is not bright—she didn’t finish college, and she’s more famous for her hair than her head. But through savvy business strategies, sustained entrepreneurship, and the uncanny ability only the most successful people have to leverage tech trends and stay on the cutting edge of culture with impeccable timing, she’s built enormous wealth. Kardashian is founder and owner of a beauty products empire that includes makeup, perfume, and shapewear brands she has created and directed. As a social media influencer, she has more than 300 million followers and reportedly earns up to a million dollars per sponsored post.

A student of law practiced in the art of presentation who can command the attention of millions? Poised and resolute, her speech is direct and measured and she always looks you in the eye. What jury wouldn’t be transfixed? I predict opposing counsel will have a long uphill slog just to be heard. If her legal skills grow to par, we may have snagged a legit jurist.

### **She Shows Promise, Brethren**

Four years of study, along with hands-on training with real cases as an apprentice, builds chops and tests one’s values *before* being let loose to define someone else’s reality. Kardashian has taken an activist stance to establish apolitical prison reform that could correct sentencing inconsistencies and provide supportive services for those who have done their time. She has written letters in support of clemency petitions, engaged bipartisan support for the First Step Act to reduce recidivism, and met with former President Trump in 2018 for a successful bid to commute the sentence of Alice Marie Johnson, who received a life prison term for being a “phone mule” to a ring of drug dealers in Tennessee.

Criminal justice is not the cutest pick for an exercise in serving others, but the country needs it, and Kardashian believes in attacking it on the granular level—helping to address individual cases that merit a second look. And not for nothing, but some of the greatest movers and shakers are proof positive that learning and doing outside of strict precepts begets innovation by doing away with limiting notions of what is

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possible. Kardashian has already proven she can make things happen. So if she’s set on making grand plans to improve areas of injustice, more power to her.

It’s true that Kim K’s looks, coupled with 15 years of pumping shallow waters to quench our thirst for vicarious pablum, are the genesis of her success, but there are lots of good-looking people commanding social media in this hyper-visual era—they did not become a global celebrity and create billion-dollar businesses while becoming a branding unicorn, raising four kids, and “reading the law” at 40. Her sexual cachet is an easy ruse for compartmentalizing and diminishing her accomplishments. There’s no other way to interpret one commentator’s suggestion for her “to stay in your lane.” What’s her lane? Following in her father’s footsteps? Robert Kardashian was a prominent LA attorney on O. J. Simpson’s defense team in his 1995 trial for double homicide. Kim K says she used to wander into his office to watch him work and peruse his books. So why wouldn’t she be inclined to follow the example of a beloved parent, like so many other kids?

What are the other lines she’s supposed to walk within: ex-wife of music mogul? (how many weddings at Versailles can you plan); mother of four? (help or no help, it’s no joke); smokin’ hot goddess? (try it, see what it takes). Snickering at Kardashian for her effort to pursue a complex profession often responsible for protecting life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness reeks of the limits and disrespect that have confined women’s work and worth for millennia. *Kardashian alone defines who she wants to be.* And we should always refrain from judging a book by its cover, male or female. Arnold Schwarzenegger ran for office and succeeded in becoming governor of California after lucrative careers as a bodybuilder and actor. His political candidacy was taken seriously, despite the fetching hard curves of his flesh. And no one ever thinks to tell Bill-Gates-with-the-boom-boom-bangin’-brain, to stay in his lane because he dreams about sanitation revolutions and worm-powered toilets you don’t have to flush.


**There is No Bar to a Dream**

The big bottom line: A smart woman with sexual, economic, or political power is just too much for some. Haters gonna hate. Ask Nefertiti, Cleopatra, Marilyn Monroe, Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, et al. But as our beloved Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg once said, “no doors should be closed to people willing to spend the hours of effort needed to make dreams come true.”<sup>4</sup> She herself wanted to be remembered as “someone who used whatever talent she had to do her work to the very best of her ability.”<sup>5</sup>

Kardashian, in her own way, is doing just that: using everything she has, as Ginsberg said, to do “something outside of yourself, something that makes life a little better for people less fortunate than you.”<sup>6</sup> So kudos, Ms. K, and good luck.

If Notorious RBG could send a DM to Kim K right now, I’m guessing it would be this:

You go, girl.

#onestepatatime #whentherearenine 

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**NOTES**

1. California’s First-Year Law Students’ Examination, or “baby bar,” is required only for those students who are studying the law or enrolled at an unaccredited law school. It’s offered twice a year, in June and October. Only 20.7% of the candidates who took California’s June 2021 baby bar exam passed, while 53.1% of the applicants who took California’s June 2021 general bar exam passed. See <https://www.calbar.ca.gov/Admissions/Examinations/First-Year-Law-Students-Examination>.
2. See <https://inatgw.law.gwu.edu/cost-attendance>.
3. Ali, in conversation with Cathal O’Shannon, RTE Television, Dublin, Ireland (July 17, 1972).
4. Ginsburg, “The 234th Commencement,” Baccalaureate address, Brown University (May 26, 2002).
5. Ginsburg, interview with Irin Carmon, “The Rachel Maddow Show” (aired Feb. 16, 2015), <https://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/exclusive-justice-ruth-bader-ginsburg-interview-full-transcript-msna531191>.
6. Ginsburg, in conversation with Rev. Jane Shaw, dean for religious life, at the Rathbun Lecture on a Meaningful Life at the Stanford Memorial Church (Feb. 6, 2017).

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