

This privacy pro came out of retirement to get back on the field

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For Rena Mears, the freshly minted principal at DLA Piper's Global Data Protection, Privacy, and Security group, the plan was to retire four years ago, once she completed her tenure at global consulting firm Deloitte.

Some things, it seems, just aren't meant to be.

"No one believes me, but I fully intended to retire." She laughed as she explained. "It turned out I wasn't quite ready to go sit."

Passionate tirelessness is hardly new for Mears, however. She's a near 25-year veteran of the privacy and data-protection landscape, starting her career with a background in auditing. But "I've always been interested in tech - building computers, working with computers early on," she said. It was her early exposure and interest in this technology that opened her eyes to the potential privacy concerns. "It started becoming apparent that there would be a lot of challenges," she said. "It's only gotten more obvious over the years."

At Deloitte, she worked as a partner in the firm's security and privacy services team, focusing on the West Coast's tech hub in the internet's toddler years. "We looked at the security of the product ... very early," she said. Her team realized the companies they advised were gathering lots of data in swaths, "maybe more than people expected," she said. The global nature of these organizations, oftentimes credit card companies, only added to the amount of information collected. "It became apparent that they could see a lot of things people were doing online," she said. "So the companies were very quickly having to deal with managing [data], but also managing jurisdictional expectations."

By the time Mears hit Deloitte's mandatory retirement requirement in 2012, she had amassed plumes of feathers in her professional cap. She had climbed to a position as a national lead, and then promoted to a global role that she held for nearly five years.

She speaks warmly of her time at the firm. "Deloitte first is, and was, a great firm to work in, and they were supportive and innovative and fun," she said. Her coworkers on "the team," as she called it, only added to the dynamic. They were "creative, fun people who had ideas and vision," Mears said. "Sometimes it was like throwing spaghetti against the wall to see what would work; it wasn't just trodding down a well-worn path." Innovation thrived. She loved it.

That chapter came to a close, and Mears began her short retirement.

It was from boutique law firm Buckley Sanders, to serve managing director. Accepting the offer was a straightforward no-brainer. "So I decided to do that," Mears said.

Strong team dynamics is something that is clearly important to Mears, and she found that once more at Buckley Sanders. Her colleague, Margot Tank, was integral in getting her onboard. "She is just a wonderful person and a wonderful lawyer," she said.

Cut to 2016, when the siren call of the global privacy landscape became too powerful for Mears to resist. DLA Piper's Jim Halpert, who Mears calls "brilliant," formally invited her to join the firm's international practice group.

"And with the coming of the GDPR, and the availability to have that global reach, it was just such an opportunity to address the really hot topics and the really hot issues of managing data in a global environment." Her role as principal would tackle the multi-faceted issues that span cultures and jurisdictions. "I do really want to be a part of that global conversation. And that's really what drove me. I love global teaming; I love multi-cultural teaming. I think that's exciting," she said.

It's at this point in the interview that Mear's obvious affection for her industry bubbled over. "The thing I love about this space is that it attracts a lot of diverse people – people with diverse interests, diverse cultures, etc. ... it requires diverse perspectives," she said. "It consumes them all, and it requires them all. I obviously sound passionate. I am passionate about this space, so that's why I'm still in this space."

With the move formally announced in May, Mears is looking ahead. Her resume is a collection of impressive achievements, from implementing and fostering privacy programs to writing surveys and guidances. Mears isn't done, however. "At this point, how do you want to wrap up this whole adventure?" she asked herself. "I want to add value. That's been the whole purpose all along."

For Mears, adding value also means paying it forward. She harkened back to her early partnership with the IAPP and Larry Ponemon as an example. Together, the group studied gender distribution among privacy professionals. She recalled her initial fascination that the divide was rather evenly split in the privacy field, but when looking at the security industry, the 70/30 divide was more men-heavy. She's interested in culling a great amount of female interest and representation, of bringing more perspectives "to the table," she said. "I'm interested in giving women that opportunity to look at the challenges more broadly and the challenge to benefit from the diversity. I want to be helpful and supportive of [that]." It's not unprecedented, she added. "There's a number of women at the IAPP who have one foot on either side, and I want to see more of that."

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