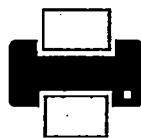


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MEDIA

Gawker's General Counsel Takes On a Leadership Role

By SYDNEY EMBER JUNE 12, 2016

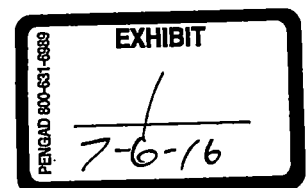
Heather Dietrick, Gawker Media's president and general counsel, has always been close to her 90-year-old grandfather, a prisoner of war during World War II who, she said, "has taught me a lot about fielding a lot of situations."

She still wears his vocational high school class ring from 1943 as a reminder that people can get through anything if they are resilient.

It's the kind of inspiration that has helped Ms. Dietrick make it through the last 11 months at Gawker. These have been tumultuous times, perhaps never more so than last Friday at noon at the company's Manhattan offices.

After taking a few moments to collect her thoughts, Ms. Dietrick joined Nick Denton, Gawker's founder and chief executive, at a companywide meeting. There they told some 200 employees that Gawker, facing a \$140 million judgment from a lawsuit by the retired wrestler Hulk Hogan, had filed for bankruptcy and was putting itself up for sale.

As she stood beside Mr. Denton and delivered the news, Ms. Dietrick said in an interview over the weekend, she looked at her audience. "I could tell there was initial shock, seeing everyone and looking them in the eyes."



Ms. Dietrick and Mr. Denton spent much of the 90-minute meeting answering questions and assuring the employees that the company planned to continue its operations during its bankruptcy. As has recently become customary, Ms. Dietrick did most of the talking.

Since joining Gawker three years ago, Ms. Dietrick, 35, has become the main source of support during a chaotic time for the company. Most general counsels work in obscurity, but Ms. Dietrick, with the added responsibilities of president, has taken on more of a leadership role at Gawker as Mr. Denton has pulled back from the day-to-day operations.

Throughout the Hulk Hogan case, she has been the bridge between the newsroom and Gawker's legal proceedings. She manages much of the company's editorial operations and has a formal role in editorial decision-making. And though Mr. Denton is still arguably the public face of Gawker, she has been called on repeatedly to represent the company during periods of turmoil.

"The place would not run without Heather," Mr. Denton said in a recent interview. "She's the person that holds everything together."

In the last year, Ms. Dietrick, who has both a law degree and an M.B.A. from the University of Michigan, has had to try to steer the company through one crisis after another.

Last month, the Silicon Valley billionaire Peter Thiel acknowledged in an interview with The New York Times that he was financially supporting the Hogan lawsuit and other legal cases against the company. That put Gawker at the center of a First Amendment battle that has captivated the media world while highlighting a deepening chasm between an ascendant technology industry and a journalism business buffeted by financial challenges.

In the interview on Saturday, Ms. Dietrick said that Gawker began seriously considering filing for bankruptcy once Mr. Thiel's involvement in the Hogan case became known.

The pivotal moment came on Friday at around 11 a.m., after a hearing in which

a Florida judge affirmed the \$140 million judgment in the Hogan case and granted Gawker's request for a stay, but under conditions that the company found too onerous, Ms. Dietrick said. The conditions included allowing Hulk Hogan, whose real name is Terry G. Bollea, to get liens on the company's assets.

Gawker had considered the option of filing for bankruptcy within a few days, Ms. Dietrick said. But as its lawyers in Florida provided updates on the hearing by phone, she and Mr. Denton decided the company could not wait any longer because they feared it would be unable to continue to operate otherwise.

"The timeline was pushed forward a little more quickly than we expected," Ms. Dietrick said on Saturday. "As of yesterday, it was inevitable that we were going to go through with the sale." The company still plans to appeal the judgment.

Gawker has had its fair share of detractors, and on Twitter and in comments in news articles, some cheered the company's fate. Ms. Dietrick said any suggestion that Gawker got what it deserved was "absurd." She said that the company had certainly "overstepped the line a couple of times" but that it was proud of nearly all of the stories it had done over the years.

Ms. Dietrick said she was committed to staying at Gawker but acknowledged that its future was uncertain.

The company said on Friday that it would conduct a sale through an auction and expected to close a deal by the end of the summer. Ziff Davis, a digital media company, has submitted an opening bid in the range of \$90 million to \$100 million.

It was not clear whether a buyer would want all of Gawker's sites, and it is possible that Mr. Denton might consider buying back Gawker.com at some point.

Nearly everyone who works with Ms. Dietrick, who was in Hearst's legal department before coming to Gawker in May 2013, describes her as nice. But that belies her steeliness in difficult situations. They also say she has brought a sense of professionalism and diplomacy that helps balance Gawker's notoriously freewheeling spirit.

She has built up a team of four lawyers including herself who handle vetting,

contracts, licensing deals and most of the company's other legal matters. And she has gained the trust of editorial staff members, who view her more as a partner than an adversary. Women at Gawker say they see her as an advocate at a company that has been criticized in the past for how it treats female employees.

She often works on her laptop on a couch in the lounge area near the editorial team and goes out for drinks with employees. On Friday evening, she invited staff members to a rooftop gathering at her apartment building in the West Village, where she lives with her husband. People ordered pizzas and drank beer.

Ms. Dietrick firmly believes in Gawker's approach to news, current and former employees say. She is a staunch defender of the First Amendment and would rather figure out a way to tell a story than prevent it from running.

"She believes in what we do as much, if not more, than I do," said John Cook, Gawker Media's executive editor.

Last July, Gawker published an article claiming that a married male media executive had sought to hire a gay escort. The article drew a firestorm of criticism and there was considerable debate at the company about whether to remove the post. Mr. Denton ultimately decided to take it down after a vote that he said showed that the company's management, including Ms. Dietrick, was largely in favor of doing so.

But Ms. Dietrick maintained that she wanted to keep it online and that her stance was misconstrued. "I knew the world was going to have a discussion about it," she said. "I think it's hard to talk about things once they've been disappeared."

Some colleagues suggest that her numerous roles may have stretched her too thin. "She actually has more jobs than one human should probably have," said Hamilton Nolan, a writer who has worked at Gawker for eight years.

Some in the media legal community question whether it makes sense for Ms. Dietrick to hold general counsel and president roles. Acting as both executive and lawyer, they say, can complicate attorney-client privilege.

Ms. Dietrick said she did not think her dual role was "that odd," but

acknowledged that the last year had been tough. "I feel like my job has been removing roadblocks," she said.

For all of the challenges, however, it is largely because of her roles at Gawker that Ms. Dietrick is now enjoying much more prominence than most general counsels ever do.

"If I were her, I wouldn't be unhappy being in her position," said Sandra S. Baron, a First Amendment media lawyer and a former executive director of the Media Law Resource Center. "There's nothing humdrum about what she's doing now."

A version of this article appears in print on June 13, 2016, on page B1 of the New York edition with the headline: Gawker's Top Lawyer Steps Up.

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