

## 'An Opportunity to Build Generational Wealth': A University of Arizona Law Grad on How the GRE Changed Her Life

By Christine Charnosky

As Christina Rinnert tells it, if it weren't for Marc Miller, dean and Ralph W. Bilby professor of law at the University of Arizona James E. Rogers College of Law, she wouldn't be fulfilling her dream of working as an attorney, representing victims of domestic violence.

Miller's advocacy was the catalyst for the American Bar Association first allowing law schools to accept the Graduate Record Exam, on a case-by-case basis, five years ago. Rinnert was part of the first cohort of GRE-enrolled students enrolled at University of Arizona Law. She graduated in 2019 and passed the bar soon after.

Miller describes Rinnert as "a one-person illustration ... of how the GRE has opened doors, and brought extraordinary people whose academic and life paths might not previously have lead them to seek at J.D."

"She was a thoughtful, engaged student and we are a better law school for having Chris here, and now as our alumna," Miller said.

Law.com recently spoke with Rinnert, who now works as a prosecutor representing Indigenous people, about how the GRE impacted her life and could potentially impact the lives of many others, now that the ABA has given its full blessing to the use of GRE scores in law school admissions.

**Law.com:** Tell me about where you grew up.

**Rinnert:** I grew up on a small family farm (garden, pigs and cattle) in Hammondsport, New York. We all lived in a trailer on the farm. My mom was a stay-at-home mom. My dad was a self-employed plumber/electrician. In high school, I knew I wanted to be a lawyer, but we were poor, so I didn't see that happening.

**Law.com:** What did you do after high school?

**Rinnert:** Since we were poor, I went into the military. I served in the Marine Corps from 1985 to 1989. I left as a corporal and I married a Marine.

**Law.com:** What happened next?

**Rinnert:** I had two kids and found myself the victim of domestic violence. I was divorced for six years, and my children were 10 and 13 years old when my boss at the Veterans Administration encouraged me to go to college. I was 42 years old.

**Law.com:** Where did you go?

**Rinnert:** I went to Mansfield University of Pennsylvania and drove eight hours every week from New York to Pennsylvania to attend classes. I graduated with a B.A. in English with a minor in history in 2013 when I was 46 years old. I was the first one in my family to graduate from college.

**Law.com:** Were you considering grad school?

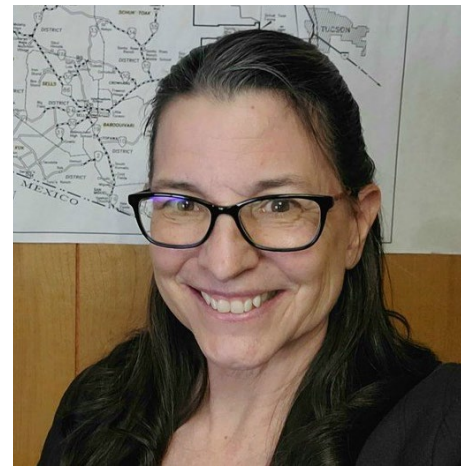
**Rinnert:** I considered getting a master's degree in English so that I could teach. I took the GRE in 2012.

**Law.com:** Do you remember your GRE scores?

**Rinnert:** I know my math score was very low, and I didn't care because I planned to get a degree in English. I was in the 98th to 99th percentile for English. When going to law school, one of the most important things is to be able to think and write critically.

**Law.com:** Did you apply to schools?

**Rinnert:** When my kids were 14 and 17 years old, I needed to pause my education to focus on them. I left my job at the VA and



**Christina Rinnert**

worked at a domestic violence shelter doing outreach and education till early 2015.

*[Editor's note: In 2016, Miller got approval from the ABA to begin accepting students to the University of Arizona James E. Rogers College of Law using the GRE.]*

**Law.com:** How did it come about that you applied to the University of Arizona?

**Rinnert:** A Marine buddy of mine, who is a lawyer, kept sending me articles [about the GRE being used for law school admittance] and kept encouraging me to apply to the University of Arizona. I was 49 years old. There was no way I was going to study for and take the LSAT at my age. I only applied to shut him up, and I didn't tell anyone I had applied.

**Law.com:** When did you find out you were accepted?

**Rinnert:** I applied on March 14 and got the acceptance email on March 27. I immediately started crying. My kids were 17 and 20 years old at the time, and their reaction was "When do we move? Let's go!" It completely changed my life and my kids' lives.

**Law.com:** What did you want to study?

**Rinnert:** I wanted to do criminal law since I have a heart for victims of domestic violence. I immediately knew I wanted to work with Indigenous people.

**Law.com:** Do you know how many were accepted to University of Arizona Law using the GRE that first year?

**Rinnert:** There were 79 applicants, 12 were accepted and 11 of us attended. If not for the GRE, none of us would have been there. There were three women, some Native people, older students, people changing careers and the majority of us had families.

**Law.com:** How was this handled at the school?

**Rinnert:** The 11 of us met, I think, within the first week. We were told that they would not “out us” as GRE admissions if it would make us uncomfortable. I was one of the few who was very vocal about it. I was 49 years old. I didn’t care what anybody thought about how I got there. I was there, and when we all take the bar, we’ll talk about it then.

**Law.com:** How did other [LSAT-admitted] students treat you?

**Rinnert:** Most were not saying anything, but within the first month, there was one incident in particular that was from a “young rich white man” who said, “You don’t belong here. You are taking a spot from somebody who belongs here.”

**Law.com:** How did you handle that?

**Rinnert:** I just looked at him and said, “We’ll see about that.” Fast-forward through our first year, and I was higher ranked than him in the class, and he had a different opinion by the end of the year.

**Law.com:** Were there any other incidents?

**Rinnert:** There were mumbles. I think it was like a hazing thing that it’s “not fair that you didn’t have to go through the LSAT.”

**Law.com:** Did all of the first 11 graduate?

**Rinnert:** Everybody graduated. Those who took the bar (not all have sat for the bar yet) passed the bar.

**Law.com:** How did it make you feel when Harvard started accepting applicants using the

GRE? [Editor’s note: In 2017, Harvard Law became the second school to begin accepting students using the GRE.]

**Rinnert:** I remember seeing Dean Miller in the lobby, and we were doing that “OMG did you see the news?” thing and it was a pretty cool moment to be like, “This might actually take hold.”

**Rinnert:** I graduated in 2019 and passed the Uniform Bar Exam on my first try. I was sworn in on Feb. 12, 2020, exactly 16 years to the day of leaving my abusive ex-husband.

**Law.com:** What is your current position?

**Rinnert:** I’m a prosecutor for Tohono O’odham Nation.

**Law.com:** What do you think of the ABA’s recent vote?

**Rinnert:** Thank God! I immediately messaged Marc and said, “Look what we did!”

**Law.com:** Why does the recent ABA vote allowing all law schools to accept the GRE in lieu of the LSAT matter?

**Rinnert:** It offers opportunities to people who may not otherwise be given the opportunity. The LSAT is expensive to prepare for and take. And if you didn’t get a good score, you have to go through the whole process all over again. You could take the GRE test “any time” [instead of a limited number of times a year]. I wholeheartedly believe it should have happened years ago, but I’m glad it finally did happen.

**Law.com:** Why should it be OK to accept the GRE in lieu of the LSAT?

**Rinnert:** The GRE got me into school, but you still have to get through law school and pass the bar. But what we have now is an opportunity to build generational wealth. Nobody in my family owns anything other than a trailer. So to be given this opportunity to now have a job that probably within the next year will allow me to be able to buy a stick-built house [is amazing] and I will be able to pass the generational wealth on.

**Law.com:** What advice would you give to students who are considering using and/or taking the GRE for applying to law schools?

**Rinnert:** The GRE and LSAT, they get you in the door. You still have to do all the work.

Besides for me being vocal, nobody knew who the other 10 people were in our class. And I graduated solidly in the middle so it isn’t an indicator of your value if you take the LSAT or the GRE, it’s a way to get the door open. You get the door open, you go in, and it’s up to you to do what needs to be done.

**Law.com:** Why do you think law schools accepting the GRE is controversial?

**Rinnert:** My full honest opinion is the reason it’s controversial is because it allows access to people who haven’t had access in the past. The old boy network, and I’m just going to say it, the old white dudes, who are trying to hold the line. You can look at any big law firm across the country and look at who is leading, look at who are partners. They’re not people who look like me. They’re not people who look like my friends who are brown or Latino. And to me, that’s the issue. The idea of “We’ve never done this before.” What’s your point? Women used to not be able to vote. African American people used to be owned. I’m an old white lady but [it shouldn’t be] that rich white people should be the only ones who have access. I know people who went into debt taking the LSAT—thousands of dollars in debt to take a test.

**Law.com:** Why so much resistance?

**Rinnert:** Big changes can be awkward and uncomfortable, but the people who I know who have been able to come through the University of Arizona are people who would most likely have had that door stay closed forever. And these are really brilliant, intelligent, caring, fantastic people who are now fantastic lawyers.

**Law.com:** Anything else you would like to add?

**Rinnert:** I tell Marc Miller all the time this has been a blessing. The University of Arizona changed my life and I know they changed a lot of people’s lives because once they proved the GRE could work and now look at where we are. It honestly gives me chills when I think about the number of people this is impacting. How absolutely proud I am to be part of this story.