

# KANSAS CITY BUSINESS JOURNAL

## Newsmaker: For Orr, the law lets him be part of ‘the fabric of things’

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*Raised by a family of community activists, Nathan Orr was destined to become heavily involved in the Kansas City-area community.*

*Orr grew up in Brookside and has lived in the area nearly his entire life. The Spencer Fane LLP partner has been practicing law for 19 years. He is the current president of the Kansas City Metropolitan Bar Association, immediate past chairman of the Downtown Council of Kansas City and immediate past chairman of the Salvation Army board for Western Missouri and Kansas.*

**Why did you become a lawyer?** I thought I was going to be a doctor until I got to organic chemistry. It quickly guided me to go somewhere else. (laughs) I didn't think about becoming a lawyer until my senior year of college. I think I picked law because my parents were always civically involved, especially my dad. We were blessed to have a mom who stayed at home and raised us, and my dad was hugely involved in the city. I thought the law was a great path to get involved in the civic community and the fabric of things.

**What was your dad involved in?** My dad is Martin Orr. He was the No. 2 guy at the Economic Development Corp. of Kansas City for many years. Prior to that he was at the Black Economic Union in the late 1960s. Curtis McClinton's group had been involved in working with the city to come up with what was basically the precursor of the Economic Development Corp. of Kansas City. ... It was the Kansas City Corporation for Industrial Development, which eventually merged in and became the EDC. It really came about because of the Black Economic Union work. They were focused on urban redevelopment, which was a passion for my dad and is a huge passion for me.

**You watched your dad's activism from an early age?** My dad tells stories about taking me as an infant and sitting me on the bar at Jaycees meetings. I've tried to do the same thing with my kids.

**What got you involved with the Downtown Council?** I've been blessed to be involved with a whole lot of organizations. But my time with the Downtown Council has been the best. I'm uniquely passionate about downtown Kansas City. I've officed down here for 20 years. I think it's the face of the entire community.



Nate Orr is a partner at Spencer Fane LLP.

**What stands out about Downtown's changes the past few years?** An anecdote that Bill Dietrich, the president of the Downtown Council, likes to share is that U2 came here and filmed a music video in 1997. Everyone was excited, and then we found out the video was about the end of days, a post-apocalyptic scene. They wanted a major city where they could shoot and have it look completely desolate. They chose this town. Interestingly, they shot on the weekend and didn't have to pull a single permit to close a city street. But now residential is blowing up, and there are lots of cultural amenities.

**What do you think triggered that the most?** Arts led everything, as it always does. That brought us to residential, which led to some major cultural investments, which gave us a reason to have organic retail and other service delivery for some of those residents. We feel at the Downtown Council that we're now poised for the final chapter: major corporate relocation. It's the last piece, if you watch the renovation of downtowns across America. We're working very hard on it.

**What is it about the arts that spawns redevelopment?** Every thriving community in the world has an art component. Artists help restore neighborhoods by making them cool, attractive and a place where everyone wants to be. I think what happened here 25 years ago in the Crossroads that everyone takes for granted now is First Friday. People know when it's First Friday and if they come down here it's going to be amazing. That started 25 years ago.

That attractiveness encouraged more and more artists to relocate here. Then you've got development because you're building housing.

**How have you been supporting the arts?** I chair our charitable contributions committee here at Spencer Fane and about 15 years ago we overhauled the charitable giving at the firm to exclusively support the arts. It's really been exciting. We developed an annual grant process. It put the firm in a position to do something to help a segment of the community we feel is driving the growth of the whole community.

**What's your focus this year as president of the bar association?** One thing I've made an initiative for us is to try and leverage the relationships I've built through my other civic and business involvement to get the bar association out there and more integrated into the community. So we're really pushing visibility and connection in 2019, whether it's business, philanthropic, neighborhood, governmental or whatever other community. I want to get our 5,000 members out there and better connected so we can find out how to help the community. Lawyers are uniquely skilled to help people with a lot of stuff.

**Is there anything people might be surprised to learn about you?** I was a limousine driver in college. I have better stories from my time as a limousine driver than I have from the rest of my career combined.