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Women Lawyers Association Recasts Itself and Its Mission

By Mary Pat Gallagher

Last year, the New Jersey Women Lawyers Association was headed toward oblivion. It had not met for more than a year and could not find anyone interested enough to be its president.

Today, the 25-year-old association has around 100 members and a new mission. Where it once concentrated on putting women judges on the bench, it is now focusing its energies on keeping women in the law and helping them balance the

demands of their personal and professional lives.

The turnaround was set in motion by an impromptu conversation in late 2005 at a dinner sponsored by the Women's Fund, which raises money for domestic violence and other causes. Marilyn Askin, a former NJWLA president, told Kirsten Scheurer Branigan, a Newark solo, that the association had fallen off track and needed a new leader to get it going again.

Branigan jumped in. She updated the bylaws, reworked the mission statement and — perhaps most important in drawing in a broad-based group — restructured the board for wide representation.

She scoured her Rolodex, calling women she knew from high school, college and law school and even non-lawyers who could point her toward other women lawyers.

Recognizing that significant numbers of women leave the practice, the first order of business in the new mission statement is “to retain women in

the legal profession” in the face of “gender equity challenges” like the “glass ceiling,” the “maternal wall” and the “daughter track,” where women have to give up work time to care for elderly parents.

The stated mission also includes the advancement of female lawyers, endorsement of female judicial candidates and the fostering of leadership through educating, networking, mentoring and hosting activities.

The new NJWLA is organized somewhat on a corporate model. It has chief operations and chief financial officers, corporate secretaries, general counsel and directors of corporate relations and marketing. It also has just hired a part-time executive director.

The structure bears a resemblance to the New Jersey State Bar Association, with trustees for each of eight regions in the state and trustees-at-large for 14 of the 21 counties.

Branigan, who filled the empty president's seat in June, says her group hopes to add trustees for the missing

counties: Atlantic, Burlington, Cape May, Hudson, Ocean, Salem and Sussex.

An Executive Advisory Council includes members of the old guard like Phoebe Seham of Teaneck, an original founder of the association, and former presidents Colette Coolbaugh of Lawrenceville and Askin of West Orange.

Diversity is a high priority, with a committee devoted to that goal and task forces on Women of Color and Gender Equity.

There are also designated directors — two each — in charge of programming, public policy and best practices for the legal workplace.

Says Patricia Barasch, a director of public policy, “The reality of the workplace has to be adapted to deal with the reality of women's lives.” Her co-director of public policy, Lynne Anderson, was the first part-time partner at Sills Cummis Epstein & Gross in Newark.

Barasch and Anderson will monitor state and federal legislation and



N.J. Women Lawyers Association President
Kirsten Branigan

court rulings on issues that affect women, like discrimination and pregnancy and family leave. They might also initiate legislation and file amicus briefs.

In the past, the association was chiefly known for supporting the appointment of women to the bench and holding a reception every other year for new women judges, alternating with the State Bar's Women in the Profession Section.

The association will continue to push for women judges and welcome them every year in an event that also recognizes women who have ascended the ranks in private law firms, corporate law departments and government.

The group, which recently added a Web site, is also now a direct membership organization, where previously it was an umbrella organization for other women's bar groups. Branigan expects membership to go well beyond 200 by the end of 2007.

She says the new structure has co-directors because so many women wanted to be part of it and because it provides a way of sharing the workload.

The new emphasis on retention reflects a generational shift, with

Recognizing that significant numbers of women leave the practice of law, the association's first order of business is to stop the outward flow.

younger lawyers more willing to insist on a work-life balance, says Branigan. At the same time, technological developments have created more options by making it easier to work from home.

The issue is important not only to individual lawyers but to firms interested in attracting and keeping



PHOTO BY CARMEN NATALE

GETTING THE BALL ROLLING: Marilyn Askin, above, mentioned that the association had fallen off track, and Kirsten Branigan jumped in, reworking the mission and restructuring the board.

lawyers, she says.

In a survey of midlevel associates published last August by *The American Lawyer* magazine, a *Law Journal* affiliate, 45 percent of respondents, including women and men, supported the idea of a 25 percent pay cut in exchange for a 25 percent reduction in required billable hours. The survey also found an average workweek of 56 hours, with 45 billable hours, up from 41- to 50-hour workweeks, and around 40 billable hours, in 1986.

David Jay, the association's sole male member thus far, exemplifies how work-life balance is an issue for both men and women. He works from home two days a week, a setup originally meant to accommodate his lengthy commute. Once his children were born, it allowed him to coach their soccer teams and be there for them in other ways.

Jay, the hiring partner at Greenberg Traurig's Florham Park office, where four of the 45 lawyers are on reduced or flexible schedules, says he joined the NJWLA "to promote what's working at our firm and

try to attract more talent that way."

The association's official comeback event was a Nov. 3 seminar at Rutgers Law School-Newark, "Balanced Hours: The Dollars and 'Sense' of Attorney Retention." The first in a planned series of best practices seminars, it drew about 60 attendees.

The keynote speaker was Joan Williams, a professor at the University of California Hastings College of Law and co-director of its Project for Attorney Retention. She discussed the need for firms to adopt balanced hours programs and how unexamined biases and stereotypes about women and mothers impede women's success.

Over the summer, Branigan and Desha Jackson, co-chair of the committee on endorsements and appointments, met with Stuart Rabner, then counsel to Gov. Jon Corzine, and gave him résumés of potential women judges.

The committee will continue to collect résumés of potential judicial candidates, says Jackson, who will succeed Branigan as president in 2008. She is also a deputy attorney general and the immediate past president of the Association of Black Women Lawyers.

The association was one of 16 bar groups to co-sponsor a panel discussion on Sept. 27, "Pathways to the Bench: Demystifying the Route to a Judicial Career." There are plans to collaborate with bar groups on the state, county and national level.

The association's next event, "Shattering the Glass Ceiling Without Shattering Your Life," set for March in honor of Women's History Month, will focus on the promotion of women lawyers in the face of discrimination.

The ABA's most recent statistics, for 2005, show that while women make up 30.2 percent of all lawyers, they make up only 17.3 percent of partners and 16.6 percent of Fortune 500 general counsel.

Women lawyers' median weekly salary of \$1,354 was 77.5 percent of that for men, \$1,748. That was up from 69.4 percent in 2002 but not much better than the 76.8 percent in 2003. ■