



LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

OUT FROM THE ASHES: THE BUILDING OF THE WILL SISTERHOOD

A MESSAGE FROM KIRSTEN SCHEURER BRANIGAN, NJWLA PRESIDENT




In reflecting on what has occurred with women lawyers in New Jersey over the past 2 years, I am amazed by the greatness to which I have borne witness. At the end of 2005, I was asked to take on the enormous task of revitalizing the almost defunct New Jersey Women Lawyers Association.

If I could choose one word to describe this effort, it is INSPIRATION. I have been touched by seeing women truly helping other women, in so many ways, and on some many levels. And perhaps most critical in all of this was the instant awareness of our innate abilities to inspire one another to be better than good, to dare to be great. Women from different backgrounds came from around the state to join me in this effort. I inspired them to join me in the process of rebuilding NJWLA from the ground up and, in return, I have been (and continue to be) inspired by them and what we have accomplished almost overnight.

The first task was to revise the existing structure of the organization and to update the mission statement, which now focuses on not just advancement of women, but on the growing concern over the alarming number of women leaving the legal profession. I then made calls to everyone I know. With each call I made, I was given another name of another woman who would be a great addition to our efforts and I called all of them as well. And so the "movement" began... The "movement" of what you may ask? To that I can only respond, not in my own words, but in those of Lynda Bennett, who happens to be one of the most critical building blocks to the revitalized Association. In her one-line response to my inquiry as to whether she would be willing to be on the new NJWLA Board, she unequivocally answered yes, and added enthusiastically "I am looking forward to working with you to compel radical change." Another key building block, Nancy McDonald, in launching her woman-owned law firm (which is dedicated to the advancement and retention of women in the law) proclaimed her intent to "change the world, one woman at a time."

So what exactly needed to be changed? The answer is complex, but here are the basics of what we set out to change. We needed to build a strong membership base. We did that. In less than 2 years, we are now nearly 400 strong and likely to approach 500 by our 2 year mark. How did we do it? With a lot of hard work -- a core group of women rolled up their sleeves, often giving up nights and weekends (and dare I say some billable hours) to get this done.

We also had to implement new ways to gather and track data (such as the birth of the Task Forces on Gender Equity and Women of Color), to educate our members by offering cutting-edge programs on topics of great interest and to offer the opportunity to network with one another. We offered programs on Best Practices, Removing Barriers to Success for Women in the Law, the Call to Action, and How to Become a Judge, all of which were extremely well-attended. We also revamped all Board positions to allow for job sharing in recognition that time for women lawyers, especially those with families, is tighter than imaginable. The only way we could get good women to contribute their valuable time to the cause was to make the necessary adjustments so that many could say yes. And they did say yes and it worked. We continued with NJWLA's prior efforts to support women seeking judicial appointments, as well as those interested in boards and commissions throughout the state, and those successes are detailed herein. We have also continued the NJWLA tradition of being a voice on critical legislative issues that affect women.

In the summer of 2007, WILL was born. The concept was simple. We were in the process of planning an evening event to celebrate women leaders in the law. There were many ideas on what the night should be, or not be, and then a core group sought out to make the first ever NJWLA WILL Platinum Awards Gala to honor women leaders in the law from corporate, law firm, public and judicial sectors. My last initiative as President is the launch of the WILL Mentoring Program, which I am happy to say has already been received with tremendous enthusiasm. As I leave the Presidency of NJWLA, I take great comfort in knowing that the next NJWLA President, Desha Jackson, will help to take the Sisterhood's efforts to the next level. I await with excitement what is to come as I know it will be better than good, it will be GREAT. We have all dared to be great and I am so proud and, yes, inspired by all of you -- my friends, my colleagues -- my Sisters. **As long as there is a W I L L, we will find a way.** 

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