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## MOVERS & SHAKERS

An issue focusing on men and women who play a key role in shaping the business and economic life of the state.

### Branigan Revives Women Lawyers Group

*A new focus makes this organization a winner*

By Martin C. Daks

WHEN **KIRSTEN Scheurer Branigan** took the helm at the New Jersey Women Lawyers Association in June 2006, the once-active statewide organization was on its last legs. Membership had long been dwindling and was essentially nonexistent, the group had not met for more than a year and people doubted whether Branigan could save the 20-year-old association.

But the then-36-year-old attorney guided the group through a jump in membership to more than 400 women. On July 1, when Branigan handed the gavel to **Desha L. Jackson**, an associate at **Wilentz, Goldman and Spitzer PA** in Woodbridge, the association was no longer on life support.

Branigan, who is now a partner at **McDonald Law Group LLC** in Florham Park, also recast the association's focus

to reflect the concerns of a new generation of women lawyers.

"Some people thought that women lawyers had accomplished everything they set out to do," says Branigan, explaining her decision to try to rejuvenate the Women Lawyers Association. "But I rejected that assumption."

On the surface at least, it was easy to see why some people thought there was no longer a need for an association known mainly for trying to get more women appointed as judges.

By the time Branigan took over, **Deborah T. Poritz** had been named chief justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court, and currently, three of the seven justices are women. By then it was also no longer unusual to see women partners at large law firms.

"We had a generation of women lawyers who no longer expected their gender to be a barrier to advancement,



Kirsten S. Branigan received the Alice Paul Equality Award.

and that's good," says Branigan, a graduate of Rutgers School of Law-Newark. "But the problem was that they saw the Women Lawyers Association as focused on issues that had already been resolved."

When she took office as president, Branigan updated the association's

focus, expanding it to address issues that she thought would matter to today's women attorneys. She also called friends and colleagues to ask them to reach out to their contacts and get the word out that something new was going on at the New Jersey Women Lawyers Association.

"With each call I made, I was given another name of another woman who would be a great addition to our efforts," says Branigan. "I called all of them as well."

The strategy worked.

At its low point, the association struggled to get 50 or 60 people to show up to an event. In contrast, more than 500 people showed up on April 9 for the group's Women's Initiative & Leaders In Law tribute ceremony.

The event, held at the Sheraton at Woodbridge Place Hotel in Iselin, honored a diverse group of women, including New Jersey Supreme Court Justice **Virginia Long, Gibbons P.C.** employment law department Chair **Christine A. Amalfe** and **Schering-Plough** Associate General Counsel **Susan Ellen Wolf**.

"I really had not taken much notice of the Women Lawyers Association until Kirsten took over," says incoming president Jackson. "There just wasn't that much going on with it. But now we've got a growing organization, and I look forward to continuing to build on what Kirsten did."

Branigan will stay on as a board member, says Jackson. Branigan will also focus on public policy and other

issues, and will continue to lead a mentoring program that she created.

Branigan's efforts have not gone unnoticed. In April, she received the Alice Paul Equality Award for her work to advance equality for women. The award is given by the Alice Paul Institute, a Mount Laurel organization dedicated to educating the public about the life and work of **Alice Stokes Paul**, a New Jersey suffragist.

The Women Lawyers Association also created a leadership award in Branigan's name.

Today, on a broad scale, the association's mission is to "...retain women in the legal profession through education and activism, to promote our members to the highest levels of law firm, government, academic, community and corporate positions, and to endorse qualified female attorneys for appointments to the state and federal judiciary," according to the organization's Web site, [www.njwla.org](http://www.njwla.org).

The association also promotes leadership among its members by offering professional activities, mentoring, educational programs and networking functions.

Under Branigan's watch, the association is also addressing gender challenges and racial and ethnic barriers. It is also taking on the "maternal wall" that women say they often run into if they choose to continue to practice law after having a child.

That issue really strikes home for Branigan, a mother of two young chil-

dren.

"I went to law school because I was an idealist and I wanted to make a difference in people's lives," says Branigan, who focuses on employment law. "For 10 years I was working on significant cases involving pregnancy discrimination and sexual harassment, but as a new mom I found it difficult to balance my family's needs with my career. I nearly gave up law."

Instead she restructured her career, similar to the way she restructured the Women Lawyers Association.

Branigan worked at Wilentz for 10 years and then worked two part-time jobs that offered flextime: as a partner at then-named Fischer, Porter & Thomas in Englewood Cliffs and as an attorney with Essex County. Branigan later opened her own law firm in September 2006, but in June she became a partner at the McDonald Law Group LLC.

Branigan says the move brings her closer to achieving a balance between work and family life, and also enables her to make a difference in other people's lives.

"The McDonald Law Group is committed to the hiring, retention and advancement of women and others in the practice of law," she says. "We offer flextime and other benefits that enable the people here to be productive and still have time for a life outside of the firm. In many ways it's similar to what we're accomplishing at the New Jersey Women Lawyers Association." ♦



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