

Lawyer on a mission

A rebirth for the women's group

By Kathleen Bird

K

irsten Scheurer Branigan is on a crusade.

The part-time employment lawyer with Fischer Porter & Thomas in Englewood Cliffs is leading the rebirth and assuming the presidency of the New Jersey Women Lawyers Association.

Branigan, also a part-time assistant Essex County counsel, said her own experiences — both within and outside the workplace — fueled her determination to help breathe new life into a statewide organization focusing on assisting female lawyers through mentoring, education, networking and professional advancement.



A key aspect of the organization's mission, outlined in its draft bylaws, is to focus on the retention and elevation of women in the legal profession.

She and others say they're concerned that while women compose 40 percent to 60 percent of law school graduating classes and are well-represented as associates in firms, they're under-represented in partnerships.

What's happening, she said, is that all too often women put their career on hold or bail out of the legal profession completely. At the same time, firms are doing little to make it easier for women to avoid that course.

Despite decades of conferences and articles about the mommy track and the glass ceiling, very little has changed to improve the condition of women in the legal workforce, especially in private law firms, she noted.

Branigan said that while the accounting profession "gets it" and has policies addressing work-sharing, flex-time and other adjustments, "women are still at a particular disadvantage" in the law.

She attributes that to a "generational gap" caused by older male partners unwilling to make adjustments in work schedules.

In her experience as an employment lawyer, she said, few firms or companies have formal policies about flexible work time, and even those often are "riddled with complications."

Ripe for change

Branigan said the work environment is ripe for change, now that e-mail, cell phones and other equipment enable lawyers to keep in touch with their office at all times.

Female lawyers, she said, often sacrifice promotions and are penalized or held back because they're the ones taking care of small children and aging parents.

As she put it, many women "are caught between the mommy track and the daughter track."

When it's formally reconstituted, the New Jersey Women Lawyers Association will have several task forces.

One will compile, analyze and report on statistics, cases and legislation affecting women's advancement, including any impediments they face.

Another panel will have the same charge, but focus on women of color.

The organization also expects to endorse candidates for state and federal judgeships, and foster and track legislation advancing the legal status of women.

Many organizations over the years have focused on the problems faced by women in the law. Asked what will be different this time, Branigan said she's convinced there will be "more focused" leadership and "more specific and goal-oriented" programs.

And, she noted, the group won't just identify issues, but also concentrate on the "follow-up" needed for change.

In that regard, she said being a results-oriented person is in her blood. She calls it her "crusading gene."