President's Page – November 2013

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At the end of October, I had the opportunity to attend the Illinois State Bar swearing in ceremony in Elgin with Holly and Jocelyn Koch. We were there to provide information about the WCBA to the new lawyers who might be practicing or considering practicing in Winnebago County. To our pleasant surprise we ran out of brochures and were engaged by many new lawyers who were interested in our association. While a few have already secured employment here, most were looking to join an association that would provide them with ample networking opportunities to help them find a job.

I have not been to an Illinois swearing in ceremony since my own, several years ago. While mine was special I am sure, I clearly did not appreciate the significance of such. I realized this as I sat in the audience and watched the pride in the faces of the parents and significant others who attended. Several of our own members had children who received their license that day, delivered not by Justice Thomas (Go Bears!), but by the ones who raised and supported them all of their lives. The significance of that ceremony was not lost on those parents.

The speakers were all very good, quoting often from our most famous lawyer, Abraham Lincoln. Indeed, they may have exhausted the sum total of all of his quotes. By the time we got to the final speaker, Chief Judge Judith Brawka of the 16th Judicial Circuit, however, she admitted that most of what she had to say to this class had already been said. As such, she recounted a funny story about her son, who was also being sworn in that day. She recounted that during her early career she and her other women lawyer colleagues would get together at her house, while her son was still quite little. During one such get together he looked up at his mother and asked, "Mom, can boys be lawyers, too?" The audience erupted in laughter.

I, too, found humor with such statement, but then lamented the reason why. Clearly, the audience found such statement "funny" because everyone knows that men are typically the lawyers, not women. As the son of a working mother, I do not hold such gender stereotypes. As the father of four daughters, I wish that others did not either.

So how are we as a profession doing on that? As a start, I note that the new Chief Justice of the Illinois Supreme Court and the new President of the Illinois State Bar Association, as well as my predecessor in this position and our former Chief

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Judge, are all women. Looks good so far.

However, according to a recent survey of new partners of firms in the Am Law 200 presented in The American Lawyer magazine, a greater percentage of female lawyers had a longer path to partnership than their male counterparts. Troublingly, only about 66% of female lawyers made partner within the first ten years of their career, compared to nearly 80% of their male counterparts. While there may be a number of reasons for such statistics, among those women who made partner in this period, only about eight out of ten said that they had previously been asked to lead on a matter. This number is greater than 93% for men.

Could these statistics be the result of cronyism? Twenty-eight percent of female partners who were not satisfied with some aspect of partnership in their firms cited this as the reason. Indeed, as reported recently by CNN, women make up only 15% of partners in law firms here in the U.S. The National Association of Women Lawyers, recognizing that such a statistic is abysmal, has challenged law firms and corporations to double this number for both partners and general counsel by 2015. While corporations in the Fortune 500 are nearly there, the percentage of women partners in the Am Law 200 is reported at only 17%.

How is your firm doing?

A diverse workforce provides the highest value for client services by forging solutions to problems from different perspectives. Such a diverse workforce can only thrive when there are equal opportunities for advancement and ownership. As such, I encourage you to be aware of hidden bias that may creep in and affect decisions, e.g., relating to simple work assignments and other opportunities for female associates in your firm. Without such opportunities to excel, your ability to see the value that can be provided by such female attorneys may well be lost, to your detriment and the detriment of your clients.

Women are leaders in our courts and in our associations. Let us not miss the opportunity to allow them lead our firms as well. The Bar has made great strides in the past 20 or so years since the statement "Mom, can boys be lawyers too" was made. It is my hope that the reason such statement was "funny" at the swearing in ceremony this past Halloween will be lost long before my daughters are up for partner.

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