

2020 WOMEN IN LAW

Women Leaders in Law: Tracing 35 Years of County Bar Leadership



Hon. Melinda Lasater
San Diego Superior
Court Judge



Johanna Schiavoni
2020 SDCBA President

In 1985, Melinda J. Lasater – now a Superior Court judge here in San Diego – became the first woman to serve as president of the San Diego County Bar Association. She was appointed to the Municipal Court bench in February 1987 and, three years later, to the San Diego Superior Court bench, where she has served for 30 years.

In December of last year, appellate lawyer Johanna Schiavoni, whose legal career includes clerkships with the U.S. District Court in Los Angeles and the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and more than a decade as an appellate specialist attorney, took the gavel as the SDCBA's 113th president. She is the 14th woman to hold the position.

A total of 35 years separates Judge Lasater's groundbreaking tenure as SDCBA president and Schiavoni's term this year. Attorneys Jim Crosby and Renée Stackhouse, president-elect of the SDCBA for 2021, sat down with Judge Lasater and Schiavoni to trace the progression of women in the legal community in San Diego County over that time and to discuss their respective paths to leadership.

Contents have been condensed for brevity and clarity from the original San Diego County Bar Association's Meet and Confer podcast interview. To hear the entire conversation, please click here.

Q: Judge Lasater, what was it like for women in the legal profession and to serve on the County Bar Board when you took the reins as president in 1985?

Judge Lasater: It was a time when if you were a woman on the board, you needed to be working hard. You needed to excel and develop the friendships, to develop the networking links, that were necessary to succeed. We were still definitely in the minority within the profession. Today, when I am presiding over a trial, I'll frequently see both sides represented by women. The bailiff and the court reporter may be women and virtually everybody in the courtroom may be women. It wasn't that way back then at all. We were still a bit unusual. The jurors actually watched us more closely, and if you were smart, you could work that to your benefit. But at the same time, you couldn't make too many mistakes either. It was a time of growth and it was a time where I think we made major headway. Frankly, it was also a lot of fun.

Q: What did being president of the SDCBA signify for you at that time?

Judge Lasater: Well, it was part of a process; there were other women who had gone before me who had made

the run at the office and deserved to be elected. When I first was elected to the SDCBA board, I honestly never even thought about running for president... When I was eventually elected president, I recognized that it was a major step for women. It wasn't about me though; it was about progress that we were making. I got, I think, very good exposure and an education about our profession as a whole, which is why the San Diego County Bar Association still is very near and dear to my heart.

Q: Have you seen a change in how female litigators and trial lawyers are treated by their opposition and by colleagues over the years?

Judge Lasater: Definitely, yes! I also see women are in positions of leadership because they deserve it – not as tokenism. If you look at the women leaders in our legal community, they're there because they're good at what they're doing. They deserved it. They work for it. And they're well respected. But as far as the acceptance over the years, it took quite a while to get to where we are today.

Q: How has the treatment of women progressed over the last 10 to 15 years?

Johanna Schiavoni: We're still fighting some of the same battles as the last four decades, including seeking equal pay for female attorneys, removing bias from evaluations and progression decisions, and the fair distribution of credit for generation of client matters. I came from a background in BigLaw and worked at a large global firm on and off for six years. There are some entrenched ways of thinking in large law firms. While many clients of are pushing for change, firms themselves have been slow and resistant to change. There is expert scholarship around the idea that for culture shift to happen in organizations, it should happen rapidly so that people believe in the commitment to change. In the legal profession, I'd like to see the pace accelerated and hope we engage in a period of rapid change toward gender equality.

When I was a newer lawyer in New York, I had just finished a federal clerkship in the district court in Los Angeles where I worked on various intellectual property cases. So, in New York, I was scooped up by the IP practice group at my firm and became a patent litigator. I don't have a science background, but I'm not intimidated by science and enjoyed serving as a bridge, a translator of sorts between the technical language and a legal audience. I relished the role, but looked around and there were no other women—the clients, inventors, experts, or lawyers. I had some early experiences of overt gender bias, particularly from opposing counsel. But, to Judge Lasater's point, sometimes you have to let people underestimate you and just prove them wrong.

Q: How important has mentorship been to you as you've progressed in your careers? Who have been important mentors for you?

Judge Lasater: There were so many...like Judy Keep, Nap Jones, and Dick Huffman. Lynn Schenk was phenomenal. I didn't understand politics; I was so naïve. And she was just a wonderful educator, friend, and mentor. I just really benefited from a number of people across the board who were willing to tell me when I was wrong, and who gave me ideas and advice about how I could approach things. And when I was president, I couldn't have done it without my vice presidents.

Schiavoni: There have been so many mentors for me as well, but one of the most significant has been Ninth Circuit Judge Margaret McKeown. She is the reason I came to San Diego. After my first clerkship in Los Angeles and a couple of years practicing in New York, I applied for appellate clerkships across the country and had the great fortune of securing a job with her in 2006 in San Diego. She encouraged me to get involved with Lawyers Club and the County Bar. And, I had the great honor of her swearing me in when I became president of the SDCBA. She treats her law clerks as family, and I have tried to do the same for those I've mentored over the years.

Q: We are obviously living in a really incredible time. The COVID-19 pandemic halted nearly all court proceedings back in March, and we're only now seeing a real return to court hearings and regular processes (though they're now mostly virtual). How do you think women are uniquely situated to lead through crises like these?

Judge Lasater: Women are exceptional problem solvers and are not afraid to think outside the box. They don't just accept something as immutable. If they encounter an obstacle, they solve it and don't give up. I see the women thinking outside the box and being comfortable with trying new things. They're truly taking on difficult tasks and making it look a little easy.

Schiavoni: Women have absolutely excelled throughout the current crisis. At the SDCBA, we're in a period where we've had four women Presidents in a row, from Kristin Rizzo to Lilys McCoy to me, and then Renee Stackhouse, who will inherit the mantle for 2021. I don't think that's an accident. Our boards have recognized that we bring to the table consensus-building, empathy, and a desire to listen and hear people sincerely, and to help our members navigate the law and the profession. We don't lead with those characteristics simply because we're women, but those characteristics are amplified and, frankly, probably given more value now than they were previously.

Q: What advice do you have for female lawyers today?

Judge Lasater: Learn from your experiences and build on each day. Keep looking forward and don't take things personally.

Schiavoni: To women who may consider leaving the profession because of challenging gender dynamics and barriers, I would say this: don't let anyone else decide the course of your career. Don't leave the profession because of what someone else expects you to be in your life. I eventually left BigLaw because I found my niche in appellate practice, where I am well suited to providing a 10,000-foot view, developing legal strategy, briefing, and oral advocacy. That is the kind of lawyer I am meant to be. I didn't let those early experiences of being the only woman in my practice area define me—I used the opportunity to learn and grow and face tough situations. To others, I would say: be the kind of lawyer you imagine yourself being, and rely on mentors you can trust to help you navigate your own path – just like Judge Lasater did blazing the trail as the first female County Bar President. And, we should all reach out and bring up the next generation of women lawyers behind us.