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The Long Climb To The Top

Women managing partners still scarce in Connecticut

By DOUGLAS S. MALAN

Marsha B. Moses, Ann H. Rubin and Maureen Weaver are examples of how far women have come in the legal profession.

Even though they started their careers in the 1970s and '80s when gender bias was a given at many law firms, when there was no talk of flexible schedules, when mentorship programs consisted of colleagues chatting over coffee, they have risen to the top and become managing partners at Connecticut law firms.

The three are also examples of how much further women have to go. Of the firms that qualified for Connecticut's "Trib 25," a ranking based on gross revenues, they are the *only* three female managing partners.

In fact, of the 112 of the top revenue producing law firms in the country, only 8 percent are headed by women, according to survey results released late last year by the National Association of Women Lawyers. The survey also found that 40 percent of all firms reported that women make up less than 10 percent of their highest governing committee.

Prompted by such numbers and a Connecticut Bar Association initiative that seeks to persuade firms to do a better job of recruiting, retaining and promoting women, the *Law Tribune* decided to examine the status of women in the state's legal profession.

Our presentation includes a special section filled with bios of successful women lawyers in the state and a number of other issue oriented stories and profiles. But we'll start the discussion with some insight of



For female attorneys, 'the overt gender biases of the 1980s are less present, less overt or both,' said Ann Rubin, of Carmody & Torrance.

three women who know what it's like to overcome obstacles and reach the pinnacle of big-firm life.

Supportive Colleagues

Maureen Weaver was elected chair of Wiggan and Dana's executive committee in September 2006, which was 20 years after her admission to the state bar.

She was a relative late-comer to the profession, enrolling in the UCLA School of Law in her late twenties after several years of working in the public sector in Washington, D.C. When she became interested in the law, she had an eye on what it

took to become a well-respected professional woman.

"I felt that women needed an advanced degree to be taken seriously," she said. "I feel that I faced fewer challenges because I had my law degree than I would have if I didn't have a law degree and was trying to move up in the business world."

When she started as a litigation associate in 1986, Weaver said there were few women in leadership positions in law firms. But female mentors at Wiggan and Dana such as Linda Randell, now general counsel at United Illuminating, and Melinda Agsten, a Wiggan and Dana part-

ner and chair of the firm's Health Care Department, had a great impact on Weaver's career.

"My male partners were equally supportive and key in making me realize that I could rise to a leadership position within the firm," she said.

She worked her way up the practice group leadership ladder, developing her reputation in the health care department, and became involved in law firm administration.

She was elected to the firm's executive committee in 2002 and now manages a firm of more than 130 attorneys while maintaining an active practice.

Compared to 20 years ago, she said, the workplace is much more conducive to all working parents, not just mothers, because of a change in attitude and developments in technology that make telecommuting a viable option. There's also greater emphasis on law firm diversity around the country due to corporate clients' demands that their outside counsel reflect their in-house philosophies.

But there always were the challenges of home life where Weaver's two daughters, now 16 and 20 years old, participated in activities that conflicted with her work schedule, which she sometimes had to miss. She said her husband's willingness to support her career and share child-rearing duties were major factors in her ascension in the profession.

"You never achieve the perfect balance" of work and life, Weaver said. "You try to take it one day at a time and balance as you go. There are sacrifices you have to make on either end."

A Juggling Act

Marsha Moses joined Berchem, Moses & Devlin out of Wayne State University Law School as a part-time legal researcher in the mid-1970s when the Milford firm had about three lawyers. She worked part time until 1979, giving birth to two children in that time.

She then went full time, became a name

partner shortly thereafter and soon gave birth to her third child.

"The workplace in general was not as user-friendly for working moms as it is today," Moses said. "It was hard to say, 'I'm not going to be at that meeting because I don't have child care coverage' or 'I have to go home because my babysitter is leaving early.'"

And so her children sometimes came with her to her office and to partner meetings.

"It's been an interesting juggling act," Moses said of her 30 years as an education lawyer. "You do what you have to do to do what you want to do."

Because of the smallness of her firm, Moses gradually took on more and more managing duties while expanding her practice, and by the late-1980s, she had become the official managing partner. The firm recently absorbed Wake, See, Dimes, Bryniczka and Bloom of Westport, adding eight lawyers to its roster.

One of her most valuable mentors was a working mother/attorney whom Moses worked for in Ohio. "She was the one who said to me I could do it," Moses said.

Once Moses arrived in Connecticut, she leaned on a group of women in the New Haven bar who all were starting their careers at the same time.

"We all managed," she said, "and continue to be practitioners and now judges."

Moses said it's "absolutely" easier to be a female attorney with children in 2008 than it was when she started.

"Being a working mother will always bring a challenge to the table, and it's the same for working fathers," said Moses, whose son is now a litigator in Manhattan. "The issue has become less about working mothers and more of a working parent issue."

Swimming Against Tide

Ann Rubin, who has two teenage daughters, knew she would have to make some difficult choices between work and family when she decided on law as her career.

"I have faced that challenge a number of times," said Rubin, who joined Carmody &

Torrance after graduating from UConn law school in 1983. "But that is the type of profession that the law is. And as it has become more competitive, more global and more technologically advanced, the intensity of the pressure has increased."

She said having a clear sense of what she wants and why she wants it, in all phases of her life, gives her a clearer sense of what she has to do to juggle her responsibilities to make it happen.

"If you're swimming against the tide without thinking about why you're doing it, you'll get frustrated quickly," she said.

Rubin, a business litigator, benefited from a strong network of mentors at her firm, including Maureen Danehy Cox and James K. Robertson Jr. Anthony M. Fitzgerald taught Rubin some of skills needed to manage the business litigation practice group when she first joined the firm, and she soon discovered that she enjoyed the management side.

That began her climb up the management ladder, and she was not thinking about or experiencing any professional road blocks because of her gender.

"I just always assumed that I'd be able to do what I wanted to do," Rubin said. "I didn't think about it or worry about it."

And in January 2006, she was elected managing partner. The firm now includes 65 attorneys.

She has, however, come to appreciate the struggles that her contemporary female attorneys had when traveling career paths at other law firms, and she believes the workplace atmosphere for women has improved.

"The overt gender biases of the 1980s are less present, less overt or both," she noted.

She said there are no challenges unique to a female managing partner but that the nature of managing involves an acceptance of additional significant responsibility. So why would a woman with a busy practice, a loving spouse and an active family consider managing an entire law firm?

"Because you want to and because you can," Rubin said. ■