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A Reality Check for Women in the Profession

UB Law Forum
A Reality Check for in the Profession

Making connections, going beyond the myths and learning about working with the law from those who do it every day. That was the agenda at a uniquely practical gathering that drew more than 60 people to O'Brian Hall.

"Women in the Legal Profession: A Reality Check From the Field" presented brief talks by five panelists working in diverse areas of legal practice, then adjourned for an informal networking reception at which law students grilled the panelists — and a slate of additional practitioners who also volunteered their time — on the realities of their working life.

The panelists brought words of advice and encouragement for the would-be women lawyers in the audience. Few spoke of any barriers thrown before them because of their sex. Instead, they talked about the serendipity involved in how they got where they are, and how to take advantage of
opportunity when it comes knocking. The common theme was an admonition for women to figure out what they enjoy doing — and then work hard at doing just that.

Here is a sampler of the advice these speakers gave to the next generation of women lawyers:

**Hon. E. Jeannette Ogden '83** is a Buffalo City Court judge, first appointed by Mayor Anthony Masiello and recently elected to a full term on the bench.

"Women in the legal profession have increased significantly over the past 20 years, and in the judiciary as well. One-third of Buffalo City Court judges are female. However, our power has not increased as our numbers have."

"For so many years, the legal profession was composed of men and older men. ... I have had male lawyers address me as ‘Honey.’ They’re not doing it out of disrespect — that’s just what they’re used to."

"What I would recommend to you is to be confident in yourself and your own abilities. It’s in the way you present yourself and the preparation you do for your case. That’s the first step in demonstrating that you can do the job as well as, or better than, any male lawyer."

**Kathleen M. Carmody '88** began as a solo practitioner, worked for years as a pro bono advocate for targets of domestic violence, and directed the Women’s Law Center in Buffalo before returning to private practice.

"No matter what you wear, no matter who you are or who you’re in front of, if you know your facts, you’re really going to be on top of your case. That’s your edge, because it’s your case."

"The Volunteer Lawyers Project is an outstanding training ground. You’re learning from some of the top people in the areas of family law and landlord-tenant disputes."

"Buffalo is a great legal communi-
“For so many years, the legal profession was composed of men and older men. ...I have had male lawyers address me as 'Honey.' They’re not doing it out of disrespect — that’s just what they’re used to.”

“You just have to know what to do, where to stand in court. You can get snagged on those little details. Don’t be afraid to ask and keep on asking until you know them.”

“I’m no smarter than anybody else, but I’ve really worked hard for my clients, and that has been the key for me.”

Sarah Hill Buck ’80 is president of Fiduciary Services in Snyder, N.Y., an independent service company that she founded in 1985. It provides tax and accounting services to banks.
attorneys and estate planners.

“I wanted to do something different. I had always wanted to be a tax attorney in a big law firm. And I got that. The only trouble was, when I got there I didn’t like it. This was a big shock.”

“I was the first attorney at my firm to put a computer on my desk and use it for substantive work. Now almost everything I do is computer-related. It’s an automated, on-line, high-tech world.”

“There is more and more specialization in the law, and there are a lot of niche areas where you can specialize. I encourage you to go out and invent your future.”

Barbra A. Kavanaugh ’83

spent a dozen years working for low-income housing clients with Neighborhood Legal Services, including serving as lead attorney in a successful challenge to segregated housing in Buffalo and Erie County, before her recent election as member at large of the Buffalo Common Council.

“I think I would have chafed badly if I had gone into a traditional private firm. This practice (housing law) is very, very varied. Some people like to stay in a specialty; me, I’m more of a gadfly.”

“Sometimes I’m not considered a ‘real lawyer.’ That’s hard if you need affirmation from the outside.”

“Politics is different. Unlike legal services, you are not necessarily working with a lot of like-thinking people. But for some people politics is really the essence of public service, and it’s rewarding when I run into those people.”

“The J.D. gives credibility. That’s sad but it’s true, and I don’t mind using it.”

Susan J. Egloff is senior court attorney with the Erie County Surrogate’s Court. Previously she was a partner at the Buffalo law firm Hodgson, Russ, Andrews, Woods & Goodyear, where she worked for 12 years. She holds a doctoral degree in English literature from Yale University.

“I started out in the estates department, doing estate and tax planning, drafting wills and trust agreements. I did a lot of public speaking at church groups and clubs, and began to develop a client base that way. (At Surrogate’s Court) I do legal research, write many of the court’s reserved decisions and advise the judge.”

“I like to look into an area of the law. This is the time when I really have learned a lot about the law. At a firm, you’re always battling some kind of a deadline.”

“This has given me a chance to use my writing skills and use my intelligence. I find it very intellectually exciting.”

“Try to find what you really enjoy doing. Don’t give up. Then you’re going to have a rewarding career and not just a job.”

Maryann Saccomando Freedman ’58, of the Buffalo law firm Cohen & Lombardo, moderated the panel presentation. She summed up: “The options available to women come out of law school today are boundless. You can find a niche in almost any kind of practice you want to be in. That’s a wonderful thing for me to know, and I hope it’s a wonderful thing for you to look forward to.”

“Women in the Legal Profession: A Reality Check From the Field” was presented by the New York State Bar Association’s Committee on Women in the Law, Claire P. Gutekunst, chair. It was co-sponsored by the New York State Bar Association’s Law Student Council and its Committee on Minorities in the Profession; UB Law School, its Association of Women Law Students and its Latin American Law Student Association and Black Law Student Association; Syracuse University College of Law and its Women’s Law Caucus; Circles, the Buffalo Women’s Journal of Law and Social Policy; Cornell Law School; and the National Women’s Law Student Association.