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## On the Side of Fairness: Karen Richardson '97 Set to Lead Women'S Bar Association of the State of New York

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# On the side of fairness

## *Karen Richardson '97 set to lead Women's Bar Association of the State of New York*

**W**hen Karen Richardson '97 is sworn in as president of the Women's Bar Association of the State of New York on May 21, she promises that her inaugural speech will be a short one.

The organization's mission? Not so small.

With more than 3,800 members (10 percent of them male) in 18 chapters across the state, the association promotes the advancement of women in the legal profession and across society. At a time, Richardson says, when "women remain underrepresented in leadership positions" in the law – for example, less than one-third of federal judges are women, and they still lag as partners and managing partners in law firms – the association has plenty of work before it.

Richardson, who works as confidential law clerk to the Hon. H. Kenneth Schroeder Jr., magistrate judge for the U.S. District Court, Western District of New York, has come up through the ranks of the bar association, from her earliest days when "people already involved in the organization drew me in. I found it was a nice resource to be able to step out of the law firm practice and have other women you could bounce questions and issues off and talk about what in this community do we need."

She served as treasurer and president of the association's Western New York chapter – the third-largest in the state – and then treasurer and vice president of the state organization. She has spent the past year as president-elect.

Richardson previously worked as an associate at the Buffalo law firm Phillips Lytle, and she assumes leadership of an organization that includes attorneys in public service, private practice, large firms and small, upstate and downstate.

"The role of the women's bar is very similar to that of the New York State Bar Association and the Erie



Karen Richardson '97

County Bar Association," she says. And so, for example, the organization takes positions on pending legislation in Albany that affects the legal profession, with special interest in issues with an impact on women's lives. Richardson notes that the Women's Bar Association was instrumental in passage of long-delayed no-fault divorce legislation in New York State, and she says it will continue to advocate for state funding for civil legal services for the poor – an issue important to women, given that the population in poverty is heavily weighted toward women, especially single women with children.

**N**oting that women are over half the general population and have been "well over 40 percent of law school students for 20 years now," she argues that advancing women's interests in the legal profession is not only a matter of

equity, but a matter of capitalizing on women's unique gifts. "Whether it's in the judiciary or the medical field or wherever, excluding them is a disservice," Richardson says. "You are excluding 50 percent of your resources." In a courtroom situation, for example, she says, "it's very important for people in a community to have a sense of confidence that they are represented – that they see themselves in that system," so the presence of women on the bench, on juries and at the attorneys' tables helps build trust in the judicial system.

Under her leadership, and with the work of the Women's Bar Association's 39 committees, she expects the association to concentrate its efforts in several areas. One is to strengthen a program to encourage women to run for elective office and to make themselves available for judgeships, so that political parties and selection committees will "expand their vision of who the qualified candidates are." Another is to expand the association's continuing legal education offerings and to make more of them available through webinars, of special help to lawyers in remote rural areas of the state.

It means a busy year in which Richardson will juggle her work back home with visits to local chapters of the association, a lot of e-mail and conference calling, statewide weekend meetings five times a year, and time in the organization's New York City headquarters. "JetBlue," she says, "is a wonderful thing."