

# Women Bar Presidents: Changing the Picture and Focus of Leadership

By Cynthia L. Cooper

“Our profession is late to understand that the greatest strength is in diversity,” says Ellen Conedera Dial, who served as president of the Washington State Bar Association in the year ending in fall 2007. She was the third woman president in the organization’s 116 years. A mandatory bar, the Washington group has a budget of \$20 million and more than 140 staff positions. It oversees the state bar exam, licensing, and discipline, as well as providing programs for lawyers and lay citizens.

Dial, whose area of practice is real estate and land use, was most surprised by the reactions of other women. “I was shocked at the number of women who said, ‘I am so glad that you are president.’ My areas have not been gender-related,” Dial says. “It meant that there was a path to leadership for women.”

Dial’s experience is emblematic of the role that growing numbers of women are discovering as they ascend to the presidencies of state and local bar associations. By being in the picture, women presidents are also changing the picture. Women in both mandatory and voluntary bar groups are breaking barriers, challenging exclusivity, and expanding diversity—not only for women

lawyers and lawyers of color, but also for lawyer relationships, legal access, and community outreach.

In 2007, more women than ever before served as presidents of state and local bar associations, according to statistics from the American Bar Association Division for Bar Services. A peak of 98 women held the position in the 300 larger, staffed bar groups that the Division tracks. The group, while only one-third of the total, nearly doubles the 50 women presidents in 2000. The president of the National Conference of Bar Presidents is a woman, too—Kay H. Hodge, former president of the Massachusetts Bar Association.

## Breaking Through Barriers

Repeatedly, women bar presidents describe the real-world leadership models they set when they are “at the table.” For Maryann Saccomando Freedman, “the table” was in a dining room. In 1982, Freedman became the first woman president of the Erie County Bar Association in Buffalo, New York. She diligently headed to an event to which she had been invited in her official capacity, only to encounter an unanticipated obstacle at the door of the male-only club.

“They said I wouldn’t be allowed in the front door. I said: ‘Thank you, but no thank you,’” Freedman recalls. “I consider myself a person with a great deal of self-respect and respect for my women colleagues. I don’t think that’s being radical. I think that’s being normal,” says Freedman, who is in her fifth decade of law practice in Buffalo.

The publicity generated by her refusal to go through a back door rippled through the community: Law firms canceled holiday reservations at the club and, with the ongoing extension of antidiscrimination rules to private venues, the club soon dropped its exclusionary practice. The result? Increasing professional opportunities for women in a variety of careers. Freedman moved up, too, and in 1987 became the first woman president of the New York State Bar, then the nation’s largest.

## Making a Difference

Women reach bar leadership positions by following similar routes: becoming involved in bar committees, sections, or a local bar. “I guess they knew I would show up,” quips Amy L. Longo of her election as the first woman president of the 3,500-member Nebraska State Bar Association in 1999. She had served on a lawyer referral committee, as chair of the bar magazine, and in the House of Delegates before being elected president by the governing board. “If able, women should say ‘yes,’” says Longo, who said “yes” again and currently is president of the Omaha Bar Association, where she focuses on building lawyer-to-lawyer connectedness.

On Law Day in 1999, Lauren Stiller Rikleen, president of the 350-year-old Boston Bar Association, greeted a thousand attendees at a celebratory dinner. She recalls a wave of satisfaction as she surveyed the event. Gathered as special guests were the featured speaker, Judge Constance Baker Motley, a civil rights pioneer and the first African

American woman named to the federal bench; the honoree, Massachusetts federal district Judge Reginald C. Harvey, an African American man who is one of the few judges in a wheelchair; and a choral group from the Boston city schools.

“There was a moment when I was seeing the generational thread. I remember feeling that this is being able to hear your heroes and know they are making a difference,” says Rikleen, who focused her term on increasing law education for children. “Having that opportunity to serve provides a platform to do meaningful work.”

### Commitment to Community

A fierce desire to help their communities propels women into bar leadership. That was certainly the case for Mary T. Torres, who became president of the 6,000-member State Bar of New Mexico in 2002 and the first Hispanic woman to serve as a state bar president. “Everyone has an obligation to give back, and I chose to give back through the bar,” Torres says. “I really like this bar stuff. I think this is a calling.”

Torres started out as president of the student bar association at the University of New Mexico School of Law and joined the Young Lawyers Division upon graduation.

After she decided to run for the state bar governing board from her district in Las Cruces, Torres was soon “on the track” for an officer position. During her presidency, she put 30,000 miles on her 1999 Honda Accord so that she could speak to lawyers in every community, no matter how tiny. As is often true among bar heads, she picked a presidential initiative, and hers drew upon her father’s devotion to the Golden Rule. “I was really focused on professionalism and increasing the positive perception of lawyers,” says Torres. Now a state delegate to the ABA House of Delegates, Torres is also an officer of the National Conference of Bar

Presidents and “on the track” to become its president.

Ruhte Catolico Ashley was aiming to head the California Bar, where she served as vice president last year. The State Bar of California, a mandatory bar, is the largest in the nation, with 210,000 members—almost a quarter of the nation’s lawyers. Ashley, former president of the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, was elected to the state bar governing board from a local district and, when eligible, ran for the top slot. In a contested election, she didn’t get the nod. “We’re still fighting the good fight,” Ashley says. “The California bar leadership is not open to women or people of color. There are lots of invisible barriers. We’re still trying to get women up in the ranks.”

Some states have consciously increased diversity by adding board seats for members of underrepresented groups or opening positions to the membership and not merely limiting them to the executive council, Ashley explains. Although she didn’t ascend to the top slot in California, Ashley managed to create and institute an Access and Fairness Council during her tenure to set strategies and policies and coordinate diversity efforts for the bar. “Even though they give us a short time on the board, we can make a difference,” she says.

Karol Corbin Walker made a firm decision to get more involved in the New Jersey State Bar Association a full decade before becoming its first African American president in 2003. While writing an article in 1992 about the importance of the African American bar group, known as the Garden State Bar Association, in raising matters of racial sensitivity, she reviewed the history of the 20,000-lawyer state bar, which has voluntary membership. “I concluded that the of-color lawyers also were required to become part of the larger bar, and that’s when I decided to be

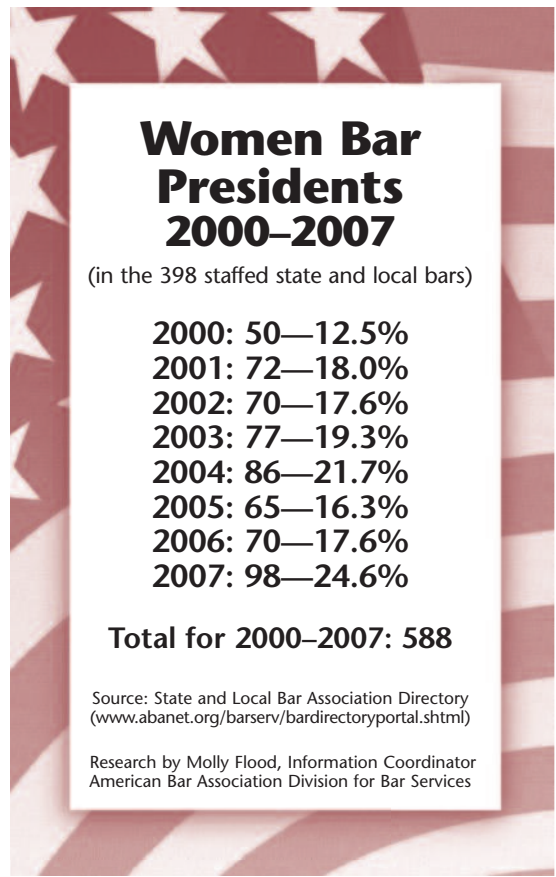
involved,” Walker says. “As president, I wanted to make it inclusive,” she says, repeating a tagline that she added to bar materials: NJSBA: Inclusive of you, your practice and your community.

Serving in a year that coincided with the 50th anniversary of the decision in *Brown v. the Board of Education*, Walker spoke to groups about the background of the case, testified to the legislature about the need to increase the allotment for legal services, and made oral arguments on bar positions to the state supreme court. “Most female bar presidents are the ‘first’ at something. We are all Type A and are forever willing to help others,” Walker says.

### Tackling Crises

Perhaps no woman bar president has been as tested as Marta-Ann Schnabel, the first woman president of the Louisiana State Bar Association. She became president—

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elect in June 2005, a few months before life was upended in her state. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita caused the biggest catastrophe that a legal community in the United States has faced to date. “The devastation was so large. Problems cropped up that no one had thought of, such as what do you do when entire law offices disappear?” Schnabel says. The legal sector was shattered and, unlike 9/11, it wasn’t possible for other lawyers to step in—even the courts were closed.

Schnabel herself faced difficulties: Her home was damaged and unlivable, her family and children had to relocate, and her firm suffered. But as

president-elect, she teamed up with the bar president to mobilize help for lawyers and citizens alike. “I’m from New Orleans. I was going through the same thing. I was one of the people impacted,” she says. “It was 24/7. I was carrying a dual role, or maybe even a quadruple role.”

The bar helped craft special legislation to preserve legal rights, created a communications system for lawyers and clients to find each other, and set up a call center to field citizen legal concerns. “I think that building consensus is one thing that women excel at and which was important in dealing with a crisis situation,” Schnabel says.

The aftermath continued through her presidency. “We’re still trying to struggle through. It’s really not over yet. Law offices are short staffed, short of equipment. Two years is a long time to be in a crisis

mode,” Schnabel says. But, she sighs, “There is never a better opportunity for service than in a crisis.”

Whatever difficulties they face—Patricia C. Bobb was trying to run her own practice when she became president of the 22,000-member Chicago Bar Association in 1997—women are creating vivid models of leadership in executive bar service. Bobb, for example, spread out bar assignments to others.

Why did she bother at all? Bobb thinks for a bare moment. “When I first started practicing in 1972, women didn’t have the same opportunities to schmooze. Once I got into it, I couldn’t stop. What can I tell you? It’s addictive—you can’t help it,” she says. ☺

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*Cynthia L. Cooper is an independent journalist in New York with a background as a lawyer.*