

Pearls of Wisdom: Getting an Early Start on Leadership

By Victoria Rivkin

It's never too soon to start developing leadership skills, says Sheila L. Birnbaum, the head of the Products Liability Department at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom. Birnbaum, who was recently selected by *Fortune* magazine as one of the 50 most powerful women in American business, says one good way to develop leadership skills is to get involved in law-related activities. "Law students and new lawyers should join organizations that interest them, that help them build relationships with people who may give them future business, and that will work to advance their careers," she says.

Women must assert themselves by taking on leadership roles, agrees Tanya Neiman. Director of the Volunteer Legal Services Program of the Bar Association of San Francisco, Neiman has been building and leading its pro bono program for 20 years. "Look to an existing organization that resonates with you, and then make your mark in that sphere," she advises.

Early on as a law student, Tanisha Makeba Bailey experienced such resonance and got involved with the bar. A member of the ABA Law Student Division and outgoing liaison to the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession, she grew up in St. Croix, Virgin Islands, and knew that African Americans and Caribbeans—in particular women in these groups—often were powerless to better their own lives. Belonging to all three categories and seeing the poverty and despair around her in St. Croix, she did not lose hope. She decided to change her life and the lives of others.

Bailey moved to the United States and earned a degree from American University, then taught during the day while attending the University of Maryland School of Law at night. In law school, Bailey began to build her leadership skills. She served as editor-in-chief of *Margins*, the law school's interdisciplinary law journal on race, religion, gender, and class. She won two of the 11 law school awards given to students upon graduation, for most significant piece of legal writing published in the journal and for exhibiting outstanding service to the law school. "I went to law school to create for myself a voice and authority," she says. "I then wanted to use that voice to give others a voice in return." Throwing herself into positions that allowed her to develop and learn to lead, Bailey found a voice that reflects the ring of authority she set out to find.

Passion for a cause and the willingness to go for it also came into play for Caroline Rogus, a 2003 University of Pennsylvania Law School graduate. Interested in women's and reproductive rights, Rogus joined the student-founded and student-run Feminist Working Group and began working on the law school's *Journal of Constitutional Law*. As symposium editor of the journal, she developed and ran a program about the legacy of *Roe v. Wade* for which she assembled leading scholars and practitioners.

Rogus says she could not have done it without the 20 to 30 students involved with the Feminist Working Group. During her time at Penn, the group advocated for more female professors, better sexual harassment policy and procedures, and more equity for students of different genders on campus. The group members were her mentors, her support network, and her friends, she explains. "They taught me how to be bold when I was at my weakest as a 1L and taught me how not to step back when I believed in something. They not only gave me back my confidence, they [also] gave me a support network of like-minded people, and gave me back my voice," she adds.

Drucilla Ramey, past executive director and general counsel to the Bar Association of San Francisco, agrees that finding people who can help is key to building leadership skills. She recommends that women "seek out all kinds of people—professors, older law students, practitioners, and people in the community. You always learn something from someone who has more experience than you do."