

Why a Women's Bar

Editorial by Mary L Bruntrager

After 23 years of existence of the Women Lawyers' Association of Greater St. Louis, I find people are still asking why we need a women's bar association. The simple answer is that the problems which a quarter century ago drove Charter President Judge Anna Forder and others to form The Women Lawyers' Association of Greater St. Louis are still with us today. Inequality of pay, inequality of opportunity for advancement, difficulty of mentoring opportunities and social pressures of life/work issues are all problems still facing women in the practice of law.

Almost a century ago women attorneys in St. Louis formed the Women's Bar Association of St. Louis and held meetings dealing with issues such as "career vs. marriage," "women and social justice," and "the advancement of women members of bar." In 1975, confronted with roadblocks to career advancement and the inability of women to become judges, the current Women Lawyers' Association was formed. A decade later, although women represented 20% of the bar, Missouri had no female Supreme or Appellate Court judges and only five Circuit or Associate Circuit judges in St. Louis City and County. This same concern has been the subject of several studies. The 1990 Missouri Bar study on gender bias found that gender-based stereotypes continued to adversely effect the judicial system. The 1995 ABA study, *Unfinished Business: Overcoming the Sisyphus Factor* noted that while women constituted 37% of private practitioners only 13% were partners and a wide income disparity exists between female and male partners. Recent studies report that women still earn 5 to 15 percent less than men in similar jobs. Just this past year, the Eighth Circuit U.S. Court concluded its four year study on gender bias and found evidence that gender bias exists in the Eighth Circuit and adversely effects women judges, attorneys, litigants and court employees. Furthermore, the percentages of female district court and circuit court judges are far below the average of other federal circuits.

The point is that gender bias and social stereotypes which adversely impact women in the practice of law are complex and continuing problems. Specialty bars such as the Mound City Bar and the Women Lawyers' Association are necessary because they can devote all of their attention to longstanding social problems. My colleague and fellow bar president, Mr. Donald McCullin, expressed it eloquently in his recent article in the *St. Louis Lawyer* entitled *Minority Issues in the Profession: It is the Best of Times; It is the Worst of Times*. Mr. McCullin, President of the Mound City Bar Association, points out that it has been 44 years since *Brown vs. The Board of Education* became the law of the land and we are still grappling in St. Louis and elsewhere in the country with the issue of school desegregation. In some instances, heightened awareness of social problems and social change has caused a backlash against progress. Social change is not easy. It is not accomplished in a day, a month or a year. True change takes decades, even centuries and progress ebbs and flows. We take two steps forward and one step back.

The Women Lawyers' Association is uniquely able to focus its considerable resources on the issue of the advancement of women in the profession because we do not have competing interests for the association's time, talent or financial resources. Like other specialty bars, we welcome the opportunity to work jointly with the Missouri Bar, the Bar Association of Metropolitan St. Louis and other bars on issues affecting women attorneys. As an independent bar, we can provide services to members that state and local bars are not able to provide. We step in as a mentoring force. We provide a collective voice for the appointment of qualified individuals to judicial positions and governmental commissions. We serve as a networking source for members and provide information on alternate career paths and non-traditional rainmaking. We offer a social support group and sympathetic sounding board for members who share common problems and concerns. We publicize ongoing problems with inequality of pay, unfair attorney performance evaluations and the continued under-representation of women and minorities on the bench. For more than a century, the women's bar in St. Louis has fulfilled a need not met by the state or local bar. Sheer numbers of women in the profession have not eliminated the social stereotypes and gender bias (problems of the past and, if history is any guide, the need fulfilled by the Women Lawyers' Association is not likely to go away anytime soon.