

**2022 Honorable Mention, Outstanding Member Program Award**  
**Dallas Women Lawyers Association (DWLA)**  
**“Women’s Mentoring Circles”**

**About the Program**

A Need for Mentorship Is Identified

As discussed above, in 2016, DWLA and Dallas Association of Young Lawyers (DAYL) partnered to create “Women’s Mentoring Circles,” (WMC) a program that facilitates the connection between established female Dallas lawyers (“mentors”) and their younger counterparts (“mentees”) through group mentorship. Leaders within DWLA recognized that one-on-one mentorship depended on the connection (and at times, the schedules) of participants. By breaking participants into “circles,” i.e., small communities for developing mentorship and change, the mentees could benefit from multiple mentors’ guidance and input, gaining access to different viewpoints, ideas, and solutions to develop tangible personal and professional growth opportunities. Mentees would also receive encouragement, camaraderie, and support from their mentee peers. Additionally, mentors in the WMC Program would not only have the benefit of developing and leading the next generation of female leaders in the Dallas community, but also connect with other mentors to develop business opportunities, professional growth and recognition within the Dallas Bar. The strength of WMC Program recognizes that success is tied to the multiple, interconnected and innovative mentorship opportunities within each Mentoring Circle.

Overall Structure of WMC Program

WMC is actually run by a committee with approximately 10-12 members (two (2) co-chairs, who are generally mentors and Board Members of DWLA, and 8 – 10 mentees who may be members of either/or DAYL and DWLA). Each January, registration opens for mentors to register, and for mentees to apply and describe what they hope to achieve via the WMC Program. The registration process requires that each participant disclose firm size, firm and/or business name, and practice area. Additionally, historical information on participants is kept ensuring that each year, a circle provides a fresh opportunity for mentors and mentees to meet new people and develop bonds with female attorneys that they may not ordinarily have the opportunity to meet and network with. After registration closes, the WMC Committee meets and spends several hours creating Circle Pairings. The Circles consist of 10-12 participants (generally, 3-4 mentors, and 5-8 mentees). The Circles are painstakingly created to ensure that there is not overlap between firm(s) and/or businesses with participants to ensure the integrity of the Program and to encourage all participants to feel that they are in a safe space to discuss professional issues within their Circle. Additionally, the WMC Committee intentionally pairs mentors and mentees within the Circles based on similar practice area(s) and/or fields, operating with the goal of creating the highest likelihood that a mentee will find a true mentor. The WMC Program consists of eight (8) events that are spaced throughout the year. There are four (4) large group events/programs that are spread out throughout the calendar year and last about an hour (in 2022, these are slated for 2/16, 4/26, 6/21, and 8/16) (i.e., Large Group Program). Generally, participants are asked to participate in 3 out of the 4 large group events. Additionally, there are four (4) small group events (i.e., Mentoring Circle Meetings), based on the Circles’ availability (about an hour commitment per small group event). Again, participants are asked to make 3 out of the 4 small group events.

Providing a Voice to Women in the Legal Field

The Large Group Program(s) within the WMC Program focus on topics that are relevant, introspective, and compatible with the developing needs of the participants and the legal industry. Each program provides insight and advice on a variety of topics, including business development, networking, and career advancement. In addition, all participants are divided into smaller Mentoring Circles that meet on a monthly basis. The Mentoring Circles are intended to provide a place for mentors and mentees to share experiences and provide meaningful guidance and advice in confidential and candid conversations.

The success, viability, and need for the WMC Program was particularly evident as the legal world navigated the COVID-19 Pandemic. The WMC Program's deep-rooted connections and participant engagement allowed the Program to pivot and provide 8 virtual programs during the COVID-19 pandemic, each tailored to the difficult and varying obstacles female lawyers faced in the pandemic.

In 2020, the programing focused on recognizing strengths and utilizing them to survive. Events included programs such as, "Surviving and Advancing in a Global Pandemic" which had a virtual panel of three lawyers addressing visibility and retention issues, combating common gender stereotypes, and ensuring that compensation and benefits are not left on the table when taking on new roles and responsibilities.

In 2021, the programing promoted self-advocacy and thriving in the new normal. Events included programs like, "What is Your Brain Wired For? Brain Fitness in a Post-COVID-19 Workplace" which was a presentation by Dee O'Neill, a licensed professional counselor, who shared tools, strategies, and resources on how our brains are impacted by lifestyle factors, stress, and burnout and how to experience improved communication, collaboration, and teamwork harnessing brain science, so that we can all make the most of our post-COVID work life.

For 2022, WMC aims to empower participants to take charge, both individually and collectively. As a testament to the momentum gained during the pandemic, at the first in-person event since the beginning of the pandemic over 150 mentors and mentees attended the first Mentoring Circles event of the year, "From Stressful Striving to Skillful Striving, How to Aim High Without Burning Out." In the event, Dr. Diana Hill, a licensed clinical psychologist, author, and podcaster, shared how to identify and break our unhealthy striving cycles so that we can achieve what we care about most without unnecessary tension and anxiety.

### **Advice for Replicating the Program**

- The first step is identifying a potential pool of mentees. This may come within your organization as a whole, or you may want to partner with a junior organization that is targeting younger female lawyers/professionals.
- Create a committee to assist in creating/assigning the mentoring circles and plan/present large programs.
- Identify a pool of 20-30 candidates to become mentors from a variety law firms, in-house counsel positions, and the judiciary (this could be within a women's bar association or outside of it). The leadership within the women's bar association will most likely have to recruit via personal request/relationships to secure initial buy-in from target mentor candidates.
- Advertise registration and the Program on social media, bar newsletters, e-mails, etc. Highlight the opportunities for professional growth for mentors and mentees.
- Create a registration website for all participants. Ensure that the registration process allows the user to identify their law firm/business/corporation, their position/title, their practice area, and how many years they have been practicing.
- Based on participant class size, have the committee divide participants into groups with an equal number of mentors and mentees. To the extent possible, try to avoid any overlap between mentors and mentees working at the same law firm, business, or corporation. Circle Pairings should intentionally try to group mentors and mentees into common practice areas/firm size/industry experience.
- The committee will deliberate and create 2 – 4 large programs addressing topics both mentors and mentees are facing in the legal industry. The Committee will select speakers and moderate panel discussions, as well as facilitate larger group discussions at these meetings, and propose topics/questions for the smaller Mentoring Circles to discuss amongst themselves.

- The committee will also encourage the Mentoring Circles to plan and schedule 2 – 4 smaller mentoring meetings, with a focus on creating tangible takeaways from the large programs. The mentoring circles small group format allows for multiple opportunities for meaningful connections to be established, ideas to be circulated, and business development growth and opportunities to flourish.
- At the end of each year and at the completion of the last large program, the committee should meet to discuss what worked, what needed improvement, and strategize ways to make next year's WMC Program even more successful.

## **About the Organization**

### Humble Beginnings

In 1968, a group of women attorneys in Dallas began to meet regularly to prepare programs and activities for the American Bar Association (ABA) Convention to be held in Dallas in 1969. After their success at the ABA Convention, the group continued to meet informally for mutual support. Founding members involved in these initial meetings include legal trailblazers Louise Raggio, Judge Sarah T. Hughes and Joann Peters. From these early gatherings emerged the Dallas Women Lawyers Association (DWLA). By 1980, DWLA was meeting for regular monthly luncheons and in 1984, DWLA incorporated as a non-profit corporation.

### Evolving Footprint in the Dallas Community

DWLA was founded for the purpose of elevating the standing of women in the legal profession. Since its inception, DWLA has grown from a handful of participating female attorneys to a steady flow of hundreds of members per year. As both the size and footprint of DWLA grew, the organization continued to implement strategies and find ways to promote the advancement and development of women attorneys. DWLA began with, and currently provides the following programs and opportunities for women attorneys: legal education programs, networking events, business development coaching, community outreach fundraisers and volunteer events, partnered events with other Dallas bar associations and women's organizations, law school programming (including an annual Leadership Class), and an annual awards reception that draws ~500 attendees, recognizing the work of six lawyers in the Dallas community (firm lawyers, in-house counsel, and the judiciary) who have greatly contributed to the elevation and advancement of women in the legal profession.

In September 2015, DWLA recognized that bold leadership and innovation was necessary to actively uphold its mission statement. A partnership was soon formed with the Dallas Association of Young Lawyers (DAYL), a premiere bar organization in Dallas dedicated exclusively to the needs of young lawyers. This partnership would lay the foundation for the Women's Mentoring Circles (WMC) Program. The Women's Mentoring Circles Program Emerges as the "Crown Jewel" Program for DWLA. In September 2015, DAYL President Stephanie Culpepper approached and coordinated with Nicole Knox, 2015 president of DWLA, with an idea to form mentoring circles in an effort to provide young female attorneys practicing in Dallas with mentoring opportunities outside of their law firm, company, or other place of work. The proposed initiative was incredibly important to DWLA, and together DAYL and DWLA partnered to launch Women's Mentoring Circles (WMC) in 2016.

The catalyst behind the WMC Program was in recognition of the fact that only 31% of non-equity partners at firms are women, making the ability for young female lawyers to receive mentorship and guidance from female partners difficult, if not impossible, in some circumstances. The WMC Program is successful because established female lawyers can serve as valuable role models for Dallas' young lawyers by providing an example of the success and fulfillment that women lawyers can achieve. The WMC experience (creating 8-10 member "circles" of mentors and mentees) provides mentorship experience by creating access to a wider support network; mentees benefit from the guidance provided by their mentors, and also receive encouragement from their peers in these group settings. The WMC Program as a whole encourages both mentors and mentees to reach out to each other, to send business to each other, and

support each other in professional and personal endeavors. In sum, WMC seeks to create a network that makes the practice of law a more sustainable and successful field for women to build their respective legal career.

When planning for the initial 2016 WMC Program, committee members hoped to have 30 participants. Stunningly, more than 100 mentees and 60 mentors signed up to participate that first year. The WMC Program identified and met a need within the young lawyer community for mentorship, and has only continued to grow to meet the rapidly changing legal market. As such, WMC Program has become the “crown jewel” of the DWLA and acts as a pipeline for leadership and young female attorneys to become more active in the DWLA, sister and/or partner bar organizations, and the Dallas community as a whole.

#### Women's Mentoring Circles Continues DWLA's Tradition to Strive for Success

The success of the WMC Program has allowed DWLA to expand, diversify, and “think-outside-the-box” to continue to develop programs and opportunities to elevate women in the legal profession. In April 2022, DWLA is unveiling its newest program, “The Pitch,” designed specifically to assist female attorneys at the senior associate/junior partner level gain valuable business development experience. The goal of the program is to arm more women with the tools necessary to develop business and succeed in their law firms. The Pitch Program continues the tradition of innovative leadership and a commitment to tangible results that the WMC Program embodies, as well as the overall strategic plan for DWLA as it continues to try to move the needle towards a more equitable and beneficial workplace for women practicing law. DWLA has continued to grow, and has over 700 members who come from diverse and various legal practice areas. Membership is made up of lawyers from non-profits, in-house counsel, and law firms ranging in size from solo practitioners to big law firms. As the diversity of membership grows, the DWLA continues to strive to provide mentorship, opportunities, and recognition of female attorneys in various different legal settings and in different stages of their careers.

# Mentoring Women's Circles Kick Off to an Inspiring Year

by Tiffanie Limbrick

**D**AYL and the Dallas Women Lawyer Association (DWLA) have teamed up to form Women's Mentoring Circles

to address the need for women mentors in the Dallas legal community. The organizations kicked off the inaugural program with an inspiring and motivating lunch panel at the Belo Mansion on Wednesday, January 27, 2016. The lunch panel provided participants with first-hand examples of women in a mentoring relationship--**Angela Zambrano** (Sidley

Austin) and her mentor **Yvette Ostolaza** (Sidley Austin), and **Jennifer Kinney Parnell** (Locke Lord) and her mentor **Shonn Brown** (Lynn Pinker Cox &

the 101st Judicial District of Dallas County, who provided personal insight and inspiring quotes that motivated the participants. In addition to listening to the lunch panel, participants were introduced to their mentoring circles, consisting of three to four mentors and five to six mentees each, picked a group liaison, and brainstormed topics and ideas for their first mentoring circle meeting.

It was a phenomenal kick off and insightful start for the Women's Mentoring Circles.

*"My whole table agreed that the hour flew by, and we didn't want the panel to stop talking because it was such good information. Something about just being in that room of diverse women felt really empowering and encouraging."* - **Amelia Coates**, Associate at Kane Russell Coleman & Logan.

Hurst). The lunch panel was beautifully moderated by **Judge Staci Williams** of



May 10, 2017

Dena DeNooyer Stroh  
Dallas Women Lawyers Association  
P.O. Box 700353  
Dallas, TX 75370

Dear Ms. Stroh,

Congratulations! The Local Bar Services Committee is pleased to announce that the Dallas Women Lawyers Association and the Dallas Association of Young Lawyers have been selected to receive a Stars of Texas Bars Star of Achievement for Mentoring Circles.

Your bars will be recognized at the State Bar of Texas Annual Meeting during the Bar Leaders Recognition Luncheon in Dallas. The luncheon will take place on Thursday, June 22 at 12:00 p.m. at the Hilton Anatole.

You will receive two complimentary Thursday registrations so a delegate from each of your associations may attend the luncheon and accept your award. The registration forms are enclosed. Please send the completed forms to:

Erin Feemster  
Fax: (512) 427-4263  
[erin.feemster@texasbar.com](mailto:erin.feemster@texasbar.com)

Hotel accommodations are available at the Hilton Anatole. Please contact Erin Feemster directly at (512) 427-6834 or [erin.feemster@texasbar.com](mailto:erin.feemster@texasbar.com) by May 18 to arrange reservations or if you have any questions regarding the luncheon.

Your bar's commitment to the legal profession and the community is inspiring. The Local Bar Services Committee looks forward to honoring you in June!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Janna Clarke".

Janna Clarke  
Local Bar Services Committee Chair

CC: Cherie Harris, Dallas Association of Young Lawyers Executive Director







