

# A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN LAWYERS

## The Early Years

The genesis of the Association for Women Lawyers was a small group of women lawyers who met during the early 1970s. At that time, there were few women lawyers practicing in Milwaukee, perhaps 25 to 30 in total. They held meetings at the American City Bank, where the Milwaukee Bar Association held its meetings, and they met in each other's homes. Karen Case remembers that they thought it was important to be seen as a group. In addition to Karen, a number of those women remained AWL members for decades, including: **Marjorie Jansen, Ellen Kozak, Rose Marie Baron, Joan Kessler, Gilda Shellow and the Honorable Margaret Dee McGarity.**

The first meeting notice which has been retained was dated February 3, 1975. The meeting was a cocktail party for women interested in participating in a group called "Lawyers Association for Women." By August, the group had formed a steering committee with **Karen Case**, Ellen Kozak and Margaret Dee McGarity as members. Marjorie Jansen was the treasurer. The group decided that its purpose was to share information on legal topics and to develop social relationships (what we would now call networking). They decided that the group would not endorse political candidates or causes. Because members held different political views, they were concerned that political activities would be divisive to the group. From 1976 to 1978, the group had 35 to 40 members and held regular meetings. A number of women served on steering committees for the group, including **Diane Diel**. In 1979, the leadership of the group changed and the steering committee lost members. The meetings became infrequent. By mid-1980, the group had become inactive.

## The First Judges' Night

In 1981, Diane Diel and Marjorie Jansen discussed their sense of loss over the apparent demise of the group and the \$300 which remained in the treasury. With Karen Case and **Mary Wolverton**, they decided to renew the group, or to at least spend the money remaining in the treasury, by sponsoring an event which was called: "Women Judges' Night Sponsored by the Greater Milwaukee Area Association of Women Lawyers." Justice Shirley Abrahamson was the keynote speaker and over 100 women attorneys attended. The first Judges' Night was a resounding success.

## Renewal

At the first Judges' Night, Diane Diel announced a reorganization meeting. With that announcement, the group began again and renamed itself the Association for Women Lawyers (AWL). The group met at the YWCA. The new steering committee members were Karen Case, Diane Diel and Rose Marie Baron. Marjorie Jansen was the treasurer. Diane Diel served on steering committees for each year until 1984. At that time, AWL changed its management structure to a board of directors. Diane Diel became the first President of AWL in 1984.

AWL changed its governance to a board in part because Diane and others recognized that AWL needed to develop new leadership. Too few people had carried the burden for too many years. There was also the practical problem of managing an organization which was growing rapidly. In 1984, AWL had 132 members. **Kristin Bergstrom** became the next president. During her presidency, AWL grew to 277 members.

## Managing the Organization

For the next few years, the leadership of the AWL was concerned with managing a much larger organization as well as expanding leadership opportunities for AWL members and increasing AWL's visibility within the legal community. Kristin expanded the size of the board. Her board made practical changes such as hiring clerical help and developing a policy and procedures manual for Judge's Night. The board also published the first AWL Membership Directory. When **Alyson Zierdt** (then Sloan) became the president in 1987, she worked to develop a more professionally run organization. She developed a structure for board and committee meetings, prioritized board tasks, and hired an administrative assistant to publish the newsletter. **Amy Seibel** became President in 1988. She had served as AWL's treasurer for several years and knew that the task of managing the organization's finances was growing. For the first time, AWL hired an accounting firm, developed a budget and had financial statements.

## Expansion and Development

As AWL grew, expanding the opportunities for developing leadership skills and networking among members became a greater concern. In 1989, **Karri Fritz-Klaus** held the first strategic planning meeting. From that meeting, Karri significantly increased the number of people participating in leadership positions. During her presidency, AWL created four new committees, four specialty groups, subcommittees and a number of special projects.

When **Carrie Raymond Bedore** became president in 1990, AWL had become a much more complicated organization. Carrie acted to stabilize the leadership and to balance competing interests within AWL. She was concerned that AWL's monthly programs and seminars met the needs of women in different types of law practices. **Jean DiMotto**, the next president, was also concerned about making AWL more accessible to its members. During her presidency, the membership grew to 415 members. The board created two additional committees, two new specialty groups and participated in a number of special projects. For the first time, AWL sponsored judicial debates.

When **Maureen McGinnity** became president in 1992, she moved to streamline the management of the group by delegating greater authority to AWL's expanded committee structure and moving decision making deeper into the organization. During her year, AWL initiated a Speakers Bureau to coordinate requests for speakers and planned two separate half-day CLE programs. Expanding the number of AWL members who are involved in decision making has meant that diverse views are recognized and expressed. **Susan Marguet**, who became president in 1993, found that her role was to resolve concerns regarding the management of AWL and its involvement with political issues. She worked to develop policies which could serve as a means of managing and resolving differences in the future.

**Sarah Elliott** became president in the fall of 1994. One of her interests was to improve the transition process that occurs on AWL board and committees after the elections each fall. As a result, job descriptions for board positions and committees were prepared. A new social function, the AWL summer golf outing, also began at this time.

A truly historic event, the Midwest Women's Regional Bar Conference had its beginning in 1994 as well. The inspiration, planning and consummation of the Bar Conference took several years. Organizing the conference was a primary focus during **Carol Comeau's** presidency in 1995-96. The actual conference was held in October 1996. More than 130 women from five Midwest states attended two days of seminars and meetings, and the conference culminated in the formation of the Midwest

Women's Regional Bar Association. The hard work and efforts of many AWL members, including then-President **Susan Rosenberg**, paid off, as a subsequent conference was held in Kansas City in 1998.

During Susan Rosenberg's presidency in 1996-97, there was also a concern with member needs on a smaller scale. The concerns were met by forming mentoring groups and a New Lawyer's group. When **Kelly Centofanti** became president in the fall of 1997, she continued these outreach efforts to new members. The Membership Recruitment Social and the President's Reception were two events that gave new members a chance to learn about AWL in a fun-filled setting.

### Looking to the Future

In 1998-99, AWL was further modernized during **Virginia Pomeroy**'s presidency. AWL adopted a new logo and hired an outside editor for the monthly newsletter. **Joan Farrell** became the AWL president in September 1999. She led AWL into the year 2000, presiding over AWL's 25th anniversary at the first Women Judges' Night that featured a national speaker, Catherine Crier, at Milwaukee's Midwest Express Center.

AWL launched its 26th year under the leadership of **Lesli Hosford McLinden**. In October of 2000, AWL held its first formal strategic planning session and established goals for AWL that are rooted in its 25 year history, but look to the organization's future. **Gwendolyn Connolly** furthered the concept of a strong future for AWL during her presidency in 2001-2002. This was developed through an emphasis on the financial security of AWL and the promotion of AWL and its value to female attorneys throughout Southeastern Wisconsin.

AWL's value to women was further emphasized during **Mary Richards**' presidency in 2002-2003 when a new mentoring/networking program was added, as well as a fund raising event to benefit women in need. As a further indication of AWL's strength and growth, a chapter administrator was hired to assist the organization. The members were reminded AWL is not just all work as the AWL golf outing returned and was well received.

### The Scholarship is Named

**Susan Lovern**'s term as president saw the further development of the new mentoring program into a two-part interactive workshop and the continuation of the WomenAde event. Sadly, AWL lost past president Virginia Pomeroy to breast cancer during the 2003-04 year. In honor of Virginia, AWL's law student scholarships were renamed the Virginia A. Pomeroy Memorial Scholarships. A record sum raised at Women Judges' Night facilitated a 250% increase in the amount of the two scholarships awarded at the annual meeting.

As AWL's 20<sup>th</sup> president, the highlight of **Cathy Priebe Hertzberg**'s term was the celebration of two important AWL anniversaries. The 2004-05 fiscal year marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of AWL as an organization, as well as the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Women Judges' Night. It was only fitting that Wisconsin Supreme Court Chief Justice Shirley Abrahamson served as the keynote speaker, as she was the keynote at the very first WJN and attended every single WJN event since. In August of 2005, Cathy was honored to represent AWL at the Women's Bar Leadership Summit in Chicago, sponsored by the National Conference of Women's Bar Associations. During the summit, she served on a panel regarding "mentoring programs that work" and was proud to share details regarding AWL's mentoring workshop and mentor/protégé forum.

Under the leadership of **Ann Devine**, AWL experienced many operational changes during her 2005-

2006 term. In fact, Ann only served nine months. AWL made its first change to the Constitution since 1992 by changing the fiscal year to align with the program year – making it July 1<sup>st</sup> to June 30<sup>th</sup>. This also changed the way we elect the Board of Directors, and ballots were put in the newsletter rather than a voice vote at the Annual Meeting. In this term, the AWL finances were transitioned over to Dana Robb from the accounting firm. Another record sum was raised at Women Judges' Night and the Board agreed to give \$10,000 in scholarships in September 2006. Additionally, Robin Shellow made a request to donate up to \$10,000 in scholarship funds in memory of her mother, which prompted the development of the AWL Foundation. The Board approved this initiative and past president Gwen Connolly chaired the committee to move it forward.

**Deborah Krukowski** focused her presidency on strengthening AWL and supporting the community. In 2006-2007, AWL reached a record 425 members. The scholarship program was strengthened by the implementation of the AWL Foundation, our non-profit organization which was created last year and administers and grows funds to continue our scholarship program – among other educational efforts. As a result, the number of scholarships awarded was doubled to four. This year also saw the creation and implementation of the Education and Mentoring Initiative, a program that was undertaken to educate girls – primarily in the inner-city schools – about the practice of law. We saw a reinvigoration of the Moms 'n More group this year, re-named Moms in the Bar, including regular meetings and a tremendous network of support for so many women. AWL also had its first Diversity Committee meeting, and we are looking forward to the expansion of efforts towards increasing diversity within AWL under incoming President Mary Triggiano's tenure.

The focus of the **Honorable Mary E. Triggiano** in 2007-2008 was women's service to the community as peace keepers and healers. This was achieved by the continuation and expansion of the Education and Mentoring Initiative program. This project provides education about the law and legal careers to girls and young women in Milwaukee. Service to the community was also a focus of Judge Triggiano's articles in the AWL newsletters. Each month she recognized the efforts of various women judges, lawyers and law students who served as peace keepers and healers in the community.

**Margo Kirchner** chose the theme “Retain, Sustain, and Gain” for the 2008-2009 year, focusing her president's columns on the retention, sustenance and advancement of women in the legal profession. The newsletter included a new column of tips for practitioners from judges around the state. AWL also added a third workshop to the mentoring program on the realities of law practice, which was offered to law students and new practitioners. Despite a difficult economy, membership reached 426 under Margo's leadership. Another highlight was Women Judges' Night where the featured keynote speaker, Professor Catharine MacKinnon, spoke on the status of women's rights internationally.

### **Thirty-Five Year Anniversary**

In honor of the 35 year anniversary of AWL, **Catherine Ritterbusch** ensured that we took time to Reflect, Renew & Rejoice during her term in 2009-2010. At key events during the year, a special point was made to reflect and honor our founding members and past presidents. AWL also renewed its commitment to better meet the needs of its members with the formation of the Communications Committee. The committee conducted a comprehensive survey of the AWL membership to better determine the members' needs, which will be used for future planning. And, of course, we rejoiced at several events over the course of the year such as the Annual Meeting in September when the AWL Foundation gave \$10,000 in scholarships, the new “Spa Night” event and the annual Women Judges' Night.

AWL made significant updates and additions to the organization when **Sheila Heitzig** was president in 2010-2011. The focus for the year was based on the theme, "More Personal. More Professional." Early in the term the AWL Board conducted a strategic planning session to review the findings from a membership survey. As a result, AWL improved member services with updated communication options by expanding its social media presence, working on a new website and increasing opportunities for networking and mentoring at AWL events. AWL also enhanced its outreach to young and new attorneys in the legal community. During the year, members also saw the addition of a new discussion group for lawyers working in and with nonprofit organizations. Of special significance during this past year was the creation of the Founders Award. It is conferred for long standing commitment and dedication to AWL as well as to its mission and purpose of furthering the interests of women in the legal community and beyond. Diane Diel was the well-deserved recipient of the first Founders Award.

### **Adapting to Technology**

In her role as President during the 2011-2012 year, **Natalie Remington** helped move AWL into the technology age by transitioning the AWL newsletter to an electronic format (in lieu of the old paper format) and overseeing the launch of the AWL website. Natalie's goal in spearheading these changes was to increase member outreach. She also used her platform as President to foster a discussion of the ups and downs of the legal practice, both as experienced by new attorneys, as well as women in general.

During **Jennine Sonntag's** presidency in 2012-2013, AWL continued advancing its use of technology and social media to give members more convenient access to the organization. AWL adopted a system of online payment so that members could register for events and renew their memberships online. AWL's Facebook page really took off, and information and photos from events were posted often. An emphasis of Jennine's presidency was a call for increased visibility and the importance of sponsorship for women in addition to mentorship. To that end, a focus of the board that year was being assertive in nominating AWL members for awards.

**Jennifer Allen's** term in 2013-2014 was dedicated to reconnecting with the self and finding the confidence to be our own women in a world of men. Our keynote event, Women Judges' Night, honored Vel Phillips, a woman who found her voice amid the Civil Rights Era, opening doors not only for women but women of color. As an organization, we continued to grow with the technological demands of our members by switching to online newsletters and directories. We encouraged members also to register and pay for our events online.

**Laura Kwaterski's** term in 2014-2015 was focused on AWL's community service events and providing more networking opportunities to our members. AWL added additional networking events this year, including a networking event with Marquette University Law School students in the fall semester, and an additional volunteer event, a Hunger Task Force Food Sort. Additionally, participation in AWL's Community Outreach Committee's drive for victims of domestic violence doubled this year and resulted in the preparation of over 200 gift bags, which were distributed to women at local domestic violence shelters. Each hand-assembled gift bag contained donated supplies including shampoos, soap, lotion, and other essentials. Our premiere event, Women Judges' Night, featured the first female magistrate judge in the Eastern District of Wisconsin, the Honorable Patricia J. Gorence, a longtime AWL member and supporter. Judge Gorence was introduced at Women Judges' Night by the Honorable Pamela Pepper, who was recently appointed as the first female district court judge in the Eastern District of Wisconsin.

## A New Look at the Finances

**Caroline Spongberg** served as president from 2015-2016.

**Malinda Eskra** served as president from 2016-2017.

Various administrative changes were implemented during **Shannon Braun's** term in 2017-18. The AWL Board made substantive revisions to its Constitution, which would be voted on by AWL members at the Annual Meeting, and approved a complete restatement to its Bylaws. AWL transitioned its accounting to QuickBooks to make the bookkeeping more efficient and to automate online payments. The Board worked to significantly reduce expenses related to Women Judges' Night by relying more on online invitations and registration than on formal paper invites. AWL also adopted a policy, which would be implemented October 1, 2018, for eliminating dues for those members with "emeritus" status. An individual will qualify for emeritus status if he or she is older than 70 years of age as of October 1 for the year of membership AND he or she paid AWL dues for the previous two years prior to qualifying for emeritus status.

**Patricia Jenness** served as president from 2018-2019.

**Shauna Manion** served as president from 2019-2020.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, **Renee Ruffin Nawrocki's** term in 2020-21 focused on ensuring the safety and wellbeing of AWL's membership. With social distancing requirements in place, AWL's leadership adapted the organization's traditions and practices to continue promoting AWL's mission and meeting the needs of its members. During this year, AWL hosted many virtual events, including its first-ever virtual Annual Meeting. While we were unable to gather in person to honor women in the judiciary with our traditional Women Judges' Night event, AWL planned the *When There Are 9k Run/Walk* event. During the week of March 15, 2021, 240 individuals participated, honoring women judges and remembering the esteemed Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's achievements and contribution to the legal profession. Proceeds from the event benefitted the AWL Foundation's scholarship program for female law students attending Marquette University Law School and the University of Wisconsin Law School.