

# Create Your Own Path

BY SHERRI L. DAHL

**H**ave you seen these statistics? According to a 2011 survey on retention and promotion of women in the nation's 200 largest law firms prepared by The National Association of Women Lawyers, women comprise: 5% of managing partners; 15% of equity partners; 25% of non-equity partners; 55% of staff attorneys; 34% of counsel; 47% of 1st and 2nd year associates; and 45.9% of all law school graduates.<sup>1</sup> Many reports, like this one, conclude that women are disadvantaged, lack sufficient opportunity for advancement to the highest levels of the largest firms, and focus on encouraging firms to implement concrete steps that will assist greater numbers of women lawyers to advance their careers. I applaud every firm that focuses on assisting women's advancement.

That said, we do women a dis-service when we focus only on what institutions and other people can do to help women up the career ladder. Instead, I want to tell young women "Look how far we have come!" and "You are the master of your own destiny — GO FOR IT!"

A quick Internet search indicates that there are 19 countries with women leading them as President or Prime Minister. Do you think those 19 women wasted their time thinking about how to get someone else to promote them? I'm going to guess "no". Let's quit focusing all of our attention on words like "bias" and "discrimination" that make women sound and feel like victims. When we describe women in firms as victims, facing daunting obstacles, and dismal statistics, we weaken them and we fail to inspire them to seek greatness.

I refuse to think of myself or any other woman attorney, today, as a victim. In the past, women were victimized. They were excluded from the practice of law, and when they were permitted to become licensed attorneys, firms were slow to hire them. Future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, after becoming an attorney, worked as a legal secretary because no

one would hire her for attorney work. Thankfully, those days are gone.

These days, issues regarding women's advancement are extremely complex — much too complex for complete coverage in this article. Today, the success of Women in Law can no longer be judged simply by the statistics of how many of us are in a particular position. Let's be honest. The vast majority of women (and men) today do not judge their success on whether they are the managing partner of their firm (or President of the United States), because they do not want that title. With that in mind, is it fair to take the statistic that 5% of managing partners are women and conclude that firms do not facilitate women becoming managing partners? I believe women who want to become managing partners of firms, or leaders of countries, can and will achieve those goals. Let's not forget that one sure fire way to become the managing partner of a firm is to start your own firm.

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I have never felt disadvantaged by my gender, thanks to the hard work of many women who fought for my opportunities. Unlike Abigail Adams in 1776, wife of future president John Adams, I do not live in an era where women are considered property of their fathers and husbands, unable to sign contracts, own property, keep earnings or have custody of children if divorced. No teacher ever told me that only boys need to learn long division, as was told to early women's rights advocate, Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906). I applaud Anthony's solution to the long division problem; she moved her chair directly behind the male teacher, where she could look over his shoulder and learn whatever he taught the boys. There was an obstacle and she went around it.

I was never deprived of a college education, as girls were in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1833, Oberlin became the first coeducational college. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, graduate schools slowly

began to admit women. In 1972, Congress passed Title IX of the Education Amendments, barring federally funded educational institutions from discriminating on the basis of sex and women's educational opportunities increased significantly.

Younger women may forget the transition in women's roles in the last few decades. One of my earliest memories, in 1973 when I was five, is of my father being angry with my mother for working at our church part-time. His mother lived 98 years and never worked outside the home. Even then, I was aware of the "women's liberation movement" and the Equal Rights Amendment that failed to pass. The late Chief Judge Anne Workman, of the DeKalb, Georgia Superior Court, gave a speech in 2008 reflecting on the advancement of women attorneys during her life. That speech describes well the status of women in the law when I was five. Judge Workman graduated from Emory Law School in 1972; ten percent of her class was female. A 2012 Catalyst Survey provides that in

1972 women were less than ten percent of law students nationwide. When Judge Workman joined the DeKalb Bar Association in 1973, she was the third woman to be a member of the organization and women were less than

four percent of attorneys nationwide. In 1973, my father never would have guessed that his daughter would become an attorney in a law firm with 1300 lawyers in 17 countries.

I am proud to work in a large global law firm. I suppose I don't feel sorry for women lawyers in large firms who haven't achieved more sooner, because I had to work so hard just to get in the door of the firm. I did not go to college directly after high school. I was in a hurry to work full-time and pay my own way. Young people want it all ... now. When I was 23, after being steadily promoted for five years, I hit a glass ceiling at my job. Gender did not create that glass ceiling. I wasn't college educated; they wouldn't promote me further without a degree. I started taking one college class at a time in the evenings. While I was in the college slow lane, between 1990 and 1994, across the U.S., women grew from 40% to an all-time high of 50% of their law school classes.

Finally, in the mid-nineties, it hit me: I control my destiny. I can change the path I am on. I can become one of those women going to law school. But I needed help, because in 1995, I was divorced with two children (ages 5 and 2) and living in the middle of the Mojave Desert. How does a person travel from the middle of the desert to where I am now on the 45<sup>th</sup> floor of the tallest building in the city? Not by waiting for someone else to advance them. Long story short, my mother moved in with me, taking care of my kids as I worked multiple jobs while attending college. I earned my bachelor's degree by age 29 and three years later a law degree. There was no cushy high-paying Summer Associate position for me; my jobs were hourly internships with the government and a small litigation boutique. Again, I never felt like being a woman reduced my opportunities. There wasn't time to feel sorry for myself. I knew then, as I know now, that many women paved the way for me, like Nettie Cronise Lutes, the first woman lawyer admitted to practice in Ohio in 1848.

Regardless of published statistics, when I look up the career ladder, I see many women in leadership positions in law firms, large and small. I see women sitting on the bench and leading businesses. Women today have more choices than ever and sometimes exercise their right to choose by electing not to travel the path of the most stressful job working the longest

hours. For example, my four closest female friends from law school all began at medium to large law firms; I clerked for a federal judge before joining a firm. Today, two of us remain at firms. Two work in-house at large companies. One no longer works as a lawyer. Each woman had her own reasons for choosing her path. Individual women define success differently. Women throughout history fought for our right to choose our destinies, whatever they may be. And there is more for us to do.

Despite the fact that my life philosophy focuses on women creating their own destiny, I admit that we cannot control everything. Sometimes we need help or luck. Judge Workman acknowledged that sometimes terrific career opportunities just come your way by sheer, blind luck. Oprah Winfrey says she doesn't believe in luck; she thinks luck is preparation meeting opportunity. I believe that some are made lucky because of the generosity of others.

There have been several men and women who have gone out of their way to help me advance. In our profession, particularly in a large firm, people at the top must reach out to those on the lower rungs and help them up — this is sponsorship. I probably wouldn't work in a large firm today if not for Judge William T. Bodoh's sponsorship. The Judge dramatically altered my future by hiring me as his law clerk. He and I met when I was in law school and he knew I was a single mother attending law

school the hard way (divorced, poor, and with children). He could have hired a person from an Ivy League institution or someone with better grades. Instead, he took a chance on me. I am forever in his debt. Not only did he help me individually, but he inspires me daily to help others advance themselves. A person can have a tremendous ripple effect on the future through one generous act.

When I come to work every day, despite the statistics, I don't think that I am disadvantaged or lacking opportunity. Quite the opposite, I feel lucky and a responsibility to create my own destiny, by making wise choices, building relationships, and helping others. Through the efforts of women hundreds of years ago, who fought for women's rights, we are in the door and have a place at the conference room table. Now, we create our own luck. And those who are already at the top have a duty to be agents of luck for others.



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<sup>1</sup> October 2011 Report of the Sixth Annual National Survey on Retention and Promotion of Women in Law Firms prepared by The National Association of Women Lawyers and The NAWL Foundation.

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