

THE DAILY RECORD

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GRAWA PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

GRAWA: A history of firsts

For those of us who had the pleasure of attending this year's Installation Dinner for the Greater Rochester Association for Women Attorneys, we were rewarded with the remarks of our keynote speaker and member, the Hon. Francis A. Affronti.

Rather than summarize my own remarks, I thought it fitting to share with you an excerpt from Justice Affronti's speech — which highlights our organization's history and the establishment of many firsts for women in our legal community:

"What began as a small group of far-sighted individuals with brilliant minds and ideas, they devoted themselves to breathing life into what GRAWA now epitomizes. Since becoming a member I am familiar with most of your leaders and original founders, many of whom I have witnessed in action not only within GRAWA, but in the courtroom as well. As such, I know their top notch abilities first hand which led me to conclude long ago that GRAWA has always been and is today, comprised of the brightest and the best.

"Since we are not always aware of the origin of organizations we support, I thought it was a relevant subject tonight. Importantly, too, the occasion is not often presented to commend those who sparked the dreams and fueled the flames for each of us to follow.

"These pioneers never sought recognition because that was not their style but they are entitled to be acknowledged for their extraordinary contributions, and for going above and beyond the call of duty. They, and those who followed, including each of you, are owed a deep debt of gratitude which is long over due.

"Therefore, taking a page from former President Elaine Cole's commentary celebrating GRAWA's 20th Anniversary, it is astounding, but not surprising, to recall with pride what GRAWA has achieved within and without the profession and will continue to attain, thus enabling it to maintain its monumental status of legal and community superiority.

"As many know, GRAWA was the brain child of former president, Marilyn O'Connor, who, in late 1981, along with Sherri Wood, and then-Monroe County Family Court Judge Donald Corbett, invited women attorneys to form this fledgling association. Personally, I was honored to follow Judge Corbett to the Family Court when I filled his seat in 1984, a court I believe is the most difficult and important in our state because it can forever change

for the better the lives and futures of children and families. In response to that invitation, about 50 of 150 local women admitted to practice came together and, in 1983, GRAWA became official, due mainly to the inventiveness of those chosen few.

"Looking back almost 30 years and knowing how fast time flies, we can all reflect and see how far each has progressed in all aspects of the law. What began with those select originators in 1981 has grown to approximately 215 dues paying members, including yours truly, indicative of GRAWA's meteoric rise and far-reaching success.

"GRAWA's by-laws were prepared by former President Catherine Foerster, setting in motion its influential preeminence, which has been the standard bearer for legal associations to model themselves after, not only in New York, but throughout the country as well.

"To me, GRAWA has always been an association of firsts because, from its infancy, it is truly mind-boggling when I consider the number of firsts which have accompanied its growth, beginning when Trudy Nowak

was elected your first president, and such an outstanding leader she was. She was followed by a line of successors which included some of the most highly skilled and admired attorneys and future jurists any legal association, and I mean any, can ever match. At the heart of GRAWA from its very beginning, and your most challenging goal as commanded by your mission statement, was and continues to be, the advancement of women not only in the law, but in society in general. You have today far surpassed this cherished principle but it will always be your driving force which shares equal billing with your commitment to the fair administration of justice.

"At the same time, GRAWA has never laxed in fundraising and legislative responsibilities on behalf of women and families. Significantly, the mentoring of new attorneys and evaluating judicial candidates are likely the most consequential charges GRAWA undertakes since they insure the quality of the profession and an impartial and esteemed judiciary. Tonight I also congratulate my colleague, Family Court Judge Gail Donofrio, recipient of the Hanna Cohn Mentoring Award. Because I know Gail well, and being familiar with everything Hanna stood for, I can



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emphatically say that Gail is certainly deserving of this tribute because she embodies the exceptional traits Hanna possessed.

"I, for one, am deeply indebted to GRAWA for instituting the Judicial Evaluation Committee in 1983, knowing that, at the time, your decision to evaluate men was somewhat contentious, especially since your primary mission of course, was to promote women in the law. However, ... your committee possessed a thorough understanding of the qualities required of the judiciary." ...

"Since joining GRAWA, I have observed many of the difficult tasks it has tackled in relentless pursuit of your mission, doing so while juggling busy professional and family lives. Although members still balance both law and family, each remains vigilant of GRAWA's obligation to enhance the profession, and GRAWA, in particular. Because of your tireless efforts, your accomplishments are unparalleled, bringing not only individual acclaim, but conquering GRAWA's mission which your founding members envisioned in 1981.

"From its genesis, GRAWA has always been at the forefront for advancing women in the law. Even before GRAWA, pioneering women made giant legal and then judicial strides which could never have been imagined when women lawyers first began practicing law. As early as 1962, some 20 years prior to GRAWA, another first occurred when attorney Carolyn Branch became the first female Judge elected to the Monroe County Family Court. How proud she would be today knowing what she did for those following in her footsteps, and the many challenges GRAWA itself has overcome. She and other trailblazers like her could never have dreamed how their landmark accomplishments, and those before them, who fought long and hard to attain such glory, impacted everyone here this evening.

"Following Judge Branch's judicial milestone, and in a more contemporary look back, the Hon. Elizabeth Pine also ascended to the Family Court, and then to the Supreme Court, now presiding as a distinguished member of the Appellate Division. She, too, is a shining example of how your mission demands excellence and she represents another first in your steadfast commitment to women. Similarly, since then, others have achieved judicial prominence with the Hon. Ann Pfeiffer and Hon. Patricia Marks becoming the first women elected to the Rochester City Court and the Monroe County Court, respectively.

"Although I mentioned her earlier, I applaud your very own Hon. Marilyn O'Connor, an original founder, who in 2001 likewise was elected as judge of the Family Court, accomplishing through her mighty determination what she and those in 1981 worked so diligently to acquire. GRAWA was her labor of love and her amazing contributions on its behalf gave impetus to its present splendor.

"Additionally, there are those who attained leadership roles not only within their respective law firms, but have reached the highest positions of president of both GRAWA and the MCBA, the latter up to then being mainly a male-dominated association.

"By hurdling these once insurmountable obstacles, the gigantic glass ceiling all women faced and were unable to crack, regardless of profession or occupation, not only cracked, but was completely penetrated with its shattered pieces falling to the floor. This would not have been possible but for the gigantic strides each of you have made. GRAWA's success stories are countless, but again, as I said, this is an association of firsts. In 1986, Beth Wilkens became the MCBA's first woman president, followed later by Merle Troeger and June Castellano, each serving as presidents of both associations. Additionally, in 2003, Past President Hon. Marian Payson became the first female federal magistrate, where she presides with dignity and fairness to all.

"These are just a few who made their dramatic mark in the law and the judiciary as others still grace the bench within their respective jurisdictions, some of whom are present tonight.

"These names are mentioned solely because they were first in taking women to heights they had never soared before, but each of you, and GRAWA as an association, share the identical title. Unquestionably, you are all first. As many know, GRAWA's history would not be complete without mentioning a woman no longer with us, but whose passion will always be GRAWA's guiding light as it moves ahead over the next thirty years and beyond.

"Especially for those of us who knew and worked with Hanna Cohn, former GRAWA president, she was indeed the energizer bunny, whose unwavering fervor for the rights of others, the downtrodden and the underprivileged, was unprecedented, the likes of which we may never see again. Just as GRAWA's fore-runners, Hanna was truly a visionary whose faithful allegiance to what she believed in was unrivaled, and whose staunch dedication to GRAWA is a primary reason why it sits atop the respected perch it enjoys today. She will forever remain in our memories.

"Little did those who came together in 1981 foresee what the culmination of their labors would lead to. I tend to compare GRAWA with the new testament parable of the mustard seed which is, as you know, the smallest of all seeds, yet grows into the largest of plants and becomes a tree. GRAWA, too, has blossomed after that small seed was implanted in the minds of your idealistic founders who never imagined that it would mature into the legal force of today.

"I found it timely tonight that your current president, Amy Schwartz, summed up my message to you when she said that GRAWA does much more than 'simply exist' because its perspective is unquestionably unique. There is certainly no ques-

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tion about that. She added that GRAWA 'is vital to our legal community, both male and female.' To that latter statement I can absolutely relate and I thank you for allowing me to be one of you as we pursue and accomplish our mission together."



Thank you to Justice Affronti for being our historian, as it is important to remember where we have come from in order to continue to build on the strength of those that preceded us. Furthermore, it may not be a first, but it is noteworthy to mention that

the following leaders of our local bar associations are all women: Susan Schultz Laluk, incoming president, MCBA; Elizabeth A. Wolford, incoming president, Foundation of the Monroe County Bar Association; and Karen Bailey Turner, president, Rochester Black Bar Association. Congratulations to each of them for their accomplishments.

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