

REACHING OUT—AND BACK†

THE HONORABLE PATRICIA A. HEMANN AND THE HONORABLE PATE. MORGENSTERN-CLARREN***

Like many good ideas, the Women's Leadership Lecture Series was born out of both creativity and desperation. Our story takes place in 1990 when we were partners in a large law firm—but we must first back up to the early 1980s.

In our experience, that time heralded the end of “law as a noble profession” and the beginning of the era of “law as a business.” Law firms started to grow rapidly. For the first time, a significant part of that growth came from persuading lawyers to move from one firm to another. The lawyers sought out for those transfers were the ones with a book of business. Financial rewards, which had always been based on the number of years of service to the firm, now followed those who had their own clients. The notion that firms were loyal to their partners, associates, and staff, and vice versa, began to unravel. And as it unraveled, it became imperative to have one's own clients.

Our firm was not immune to this change. The idea that it was enough to be a good lawyer, that business and success would follow, was lost. The impact was felt by all, but particularly by the women lawyers. Traditionally, when all large law firm lawyers were men, the older lawyers taught their male protégés how to bring in and maintain business by a process akin to osmosis. They took them to lunch, to visit clients, to court, to charitable events, and to play golf. They arranged for them to be appointed to boards of trustees where valuable contacts were made. In short, they created relationships that were strong and longstanding so that when the older lawyer retired, the younger man stepped effortlessly into his shoes and into the client billings. This system historically worked well for both the firms and the lawyers, but it fell apart when women came into law firms in large numbers.

Why? Many men were not willing to mentor women, feeling awkward or fearing that it would be misunderstood as something other than a business relationship. Others assumed that women could not be rainmakers due, it seemed, to some genetic defect. Another group of men

† The authors thank their families, and especially each other, for support and encouragement over the years.

* United States Magistrate Judge, Northern District of Ohio.

** United States Bankruptcy Judge, Northern District of Ohio.

did not want to invest the time because they felt that women were going to leave for family reasons. Some were willing to help but were not quite sure how to go about it. So—coming back to 1990—there we were, caught between the rock of having to bring in our own business and the hard place of having no idea how to do it and no one to mentor us.

There was yet another complicating factor: the “queen bee” school of thought. This was the notion that at any given firm, one woman would be crowned as “the successful woman” at the expense of all others. Under this scenario, the women would battle it out among themselves to see who could survive. There were five women partners in our firm at the time. Faced with a common problem, and committed to the progress of women as a group, we rejected the prevailing wisdom and determined to work together. Thus the idea born of desperation: the Women’s Leadership Lecture Series, designed to bring together the growing number of women business owners, advisors, and in-house counsel as possible sources of business and referrals. In other words, locked out of men’s clubs (both formal and informal), we decided to create our own version of a network.

We planned a series of lunches, each of which would showcase a prominent Ohio woman. We compiled a data bank of names culled from magazine and newspaper articles, adding our own friends and acquaintances. We featured as our inaugural speaker the first female Cuyahoga County Prosecutor, who is now serving in Congress. Having settled on a project and a plan, we (and our male partners) thought the next challenge would be to generate enough interest to fill a room. With our firm’s support, we sent out the invitations and held our collective breaths.

To our surprise and immense relief, the responses flooded in enthusiastically to what we believe was one of the first events of its kind. The day of the lunch, we reveled in the company of intelligent, accomplished women who also were looking for constructive ways to succeed in their chosen fields. We promised to continue the luncheons and did, each time being greeted with the same response. Many business relationships and personal friendships grew out of those events.

Soon we had the opportunity to share our idea with women at other firms across the country through a nationwide coalition of law firms with which our firm was affiliated. They adapted the concept to their own communities and enjoyed similar successes.

The idea of women lawyers coming together to share ideas and support each other’s efforts probably seems commonplace today; at least we hope it is not a startling idea. We can assure you that in 1990 it was a revolutionary concept.

We know that times have changed, and some ways for the better. When Judge Hemann was elected the first female editor-in-chief of her school’s law review in 1979, male colleagues criticized her for taking the opportunity from one of them who, someday, would have a family to support and needed that credential. Today, women routinely hold such

positions. Likewise, some (but by no means all) law firms have learned that women can successfully practice as part-time litigators when their children are young and still stay on a partnership track, a lesson taught by Judge Morgenstern-Clarren in 1981.

With some barriers down, women lawyers continue to have the challenge of taking charge of their careers and re-defining ways to make the progress they want. We have one suggestion for the next generation: Never assume that the established way of doing things is the only way, and never assume that any one individual can, or should, go it alone. Be yourself as you climb your chosen ladder—and keep extending a hand downward to those eager to follow you.

